

Before and After Comparative Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of comparative philosophy and points to a transition toward post-comparative philosophy. It is argued that, theoretically speaking, comparative philosophy was created by making a distinction between Western and non-Western philosophy and then re-entering this distinction into one of its sides, namely non-Western philosophy. Historically speaking, comparative philosophy was preceded by Orientalist academic disciplines such as Indology and Sinology founded in the 19th century, as well as by the establishment of disciplines like “Chinese Philosophy” in non-Western countries. With the emergence of the field of comparative philosophy in the 20th century, two camps developed: one focusing on difference and the other on sameness. Post-comparative philosophy, it is argued, moves beyond difference and sameness and engages in diverse philosophical endeavours by employing sources from various traditions without constituting a specific field based on culturalist distinctions.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, post-comparative philosophy, Chinese philosophy, orientalism

Pred primerjalno filozofijo in po njej

Izvleček

Članek sledi zgodovini primerjalne filozofije in kaže v smeri prehoda proti postprimerjalni filozofiji. V članku zagovarjam trditev, da je, v teoretskem smislu, stvarjenje primerjalne filozofije vzniknilo iz vzpostavitve razlike med zahodno in nezahodno filozofijo, ki so ji sledili ponovni vstopi v eno izmed strani, ki jih je to razlikovanje vzpostavilo, namreč v nezahodno filozofijo. Z zgodovinskega stališča je primerjalna filozofija sledila orientalističnim akademskim disciplinam 19. stoletja, kot sta indologija in sinologija, ter osnovanju disciplin, kot je »kitajska filozofija« v nezahodnih deželah. S pojavom področja primerjalne filozofije v 20. stoletju sta se oblikovala dva tabora: medtem ko se je eden osredotočal na razlike, se je drugi osredotočal na enakosti. Avtor zagovarja stališče, da se postprimerjalna filozofija giblje onkraj razlik in enakosti ter se posveča različnim filozofskim podvigom, poslužujoč se virov iz različnih tradicij, ne da bi pri tem tvorila posebno področje, utemeljeno na kulturalističnih razlikovanjih.

Ključne besede: primerjalna filozofija, postprimerjalna filozofija, kitajska filozofija, orientalizem

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Introduction: The Re-Entry of Comparative Philosophy into Philosophy

Comparative philosophy—here understood in a narrow sense as an academic sub-discipline comparing non-Western and Western philosophy—is rather new.¹ Prior to it, academic philosophy in the Western hemisphere had been thoroughly Eurocentric. The historical designations of “classical”, “medieval”, “early modern”, “modern”, or “contemporary” did not need to be geographically or culturally specified—they all referred to European philosophy (including, in the case of “contemporary”, its Anglo-American extensions). The Eurocentric conception of academic philosophy went along with certain implicit linguistic expectations: philosophy needed to be done, it seemed, in Greek or Latin, or French or German, or English. Anything resembling philosophy, but written in, let’s say Chinese, Sanskrit, or Arabic tended to look at first sight suspiciously more like “religion” or “literature” than philosophy.

Moreover, because of its apparent historical, geographical, and linguistic continuity, the term “philosophy” was commonly used only in the singular. While, along with globalization and secularization, a pluralistic concept of multiple and not mutually reducible religions emerged, among which European religion (i.e. Christianity) was only one of many, the concept of philosophy remained “monolithic”. Even today, while there is an *Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (Juergensmeyer 2006) in the plural, its philosophical counterpart is titled in the singular: *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (Garfield and Edelglass 2011).

Comparative philosophy set out to cross some boundaries—while it kept the grammatical singular in its name signalling some sort of ultimate cohesion of everything it endeavoured to compare. Like its well-established academic cousin “comparative literature”, comparative philosophy wanted to globalize and multiply the disciplinary canon of texts worthy to be read and of sources worthy to be studied. Similar to comparative literature, it did so by simultaneously challenging and confirming the Eurocentric standards of its discipline. Yes, there was literature and philosophy beyond the geographical and linguistic borders where “we” used to locate it. But this literature or philosophy was understood as literature or philosophy *in comparison with* the traditional canon, or at least with the methodological, exegetic, and conceptual tools by which this canon had been established. Philosophy ought to become more pluralistic, but its ultimate integrity, its wholeness, its grammatical singular, was preserved.

1 For a critical discussion of the East-West axis that has traditionally dominated comparative philosophy at the exclusion of other possible distinctions such as, for instance, North-South, see Škof (2008).

The very act of comparison differentiated Western and non-Western philosophy from one another (it made philosophy plural) *and* tied it together (it retained philosophy in the singular).² The disciplinary inclusion cemented at the same time an exclusion: comparative philosophy was both the same (also studying philosophy) and different from (but studying the ‘other’ philosophy) what previously had been just philosophy. Using the terminology of the systems theorist Niklas Luhmann and the logician George Spencer Brown, the creation of comparative philosophy can be described as a case of making a distinction and then *re-entering* this distinction into *one side* of the distinction. Philosophy distinguished between Western and non-Western philosophy. This very distinction was then re-entered into the discourse on the side of non-Western philosophy in the form of “comparative philosophy”. Comparative philosophy has been a philosophical sub-discipline concerned with the difference and sameness of non-Western philosophy in comparison with Western philosophy. In Western philosophy, however, such comparisons or distinctions remained quite peripheral.

The history of all hitherto existing comparative philosophy is the history of the struggle between difference and sameness. This struggle resulted from a re-entry of the distinction between Western and non-Western philosophy into philosophy. The point of post-comparative philosophy is not to “resolve” the struggle of comparative philosophy, but to move beyond it.

Before Comparative Philosophy: Orientalist Studies and Chinese Philosophy

The distinction between Western and non-Western philosophy that academic philosophy re-entered into itself to create comparative philosophy did not come out of nowhere. In Western academia, it had already been employed within a

2 Some of the earliest detailed outlines and conceptualizations of comparative philosophy were proposed by Paul Masson-Oursel (see Masson-Oursel 1911; 1923). In a programmatic essay, Masson-Oursel emphasized the encompassing and unitary nature of comparative philosophy by defining it as “the general examination of the ways in which human beings of all races and cultures reflect upon their actions and act upon their reflections” (Masson-Oursel 1951, 6). Within such an ultimately singular “general examination” comparisons were to be “as much concerned with differences as with resemblances” (*ibid.*, 9).

The concept of “intercultural philosophy” often shares the idea of “diversity within unity” with Masson-Oursel’s understanding of comparative philosophy. One of the proponents of intercultural philosophy, Ram Adhar Mall (see Mall 2000) stresses that “an intercultural philosophical orientation pleads for unity without uniformity” (Mall 2016, 69) and that, while endorsing “plurality, diversity, and difference as values”, it does not take these “as deviations from unity and uniformity” (*ibid.*, 71).

wider framework of East-West distinctions in various “Orientalist” disciplines. In non-Western academia, it had been a, if not *the*, major conceptual tool to modernize traditional scholarship.

a) Orientalism

Comparative philosophy had gained increased attention in the West in the wake of a rising “identity politics” since the 1970s. This political trend, with its emphasis on the *other* of White European masculinity, made comparative philosophy more visible. Along with more appreciation, more career and publication prospects opened up, including opportunities for the author of this paper. However, predecessors of comparative philosophy had already been around for more than a century. Along with imperialism and globalization, the “East” was systematically studied so that it could be rationally understood and managed. Various academic disciplines were established to chart and track the East, beginning with Egyptology and Assyriology but soon extending to Indology, Sinology (which will be my main focus here, given my personal academic background³), and Japanology (see Said 1978; Zurndorfer 1995).

The historical fact that non-Western philosophy made its way into Western academic philosophy by means of a detour via Orientalist studies is quite significant. The previous housing and nurturing of non-Western philosophy in Orientalist academic contexts “alienated” it from “regular” philosophy in at least three closely interrelated ways:

“Culturalism”

The design of Orientalism in the form of academic disciplines such as Indology or Sinology suggested the existence of some sort of overarching entity—e.g., India or China—that could be explored by studying its language(s), history, geography, anthropology, religion(s), art(s), philosophy, etc. Congregated within an Orientalist frame, all these widely diverse and complex subjects were taken to address a larger cultural framework. China’s specific geography, its rivers and plains, for instance, was understood as a natural condition giving rise to a specific “hydraulic civilization” which in turn gave rise to a specific political system of “oriental despotism” (Wittvogel 1931). Alternatively, China’s specific religious and philosophical traditions—Confucianism and Daoism—could be seen as decisive factors shaping the Chinese worldview, *la pensée chinoise* (Granet 1934), and

3 I studied and taught at a Sinology department before becoming a comparative philosopher at a philosophy department in 2000.

thereby Chinese society, or *la civilisation chinoise*, as a whole (Granet 1929). From an Orientalist point of view, anything “Chinese” was significant as a contributor to an encompassing “Chineseness”.

Culturalist essentialism was not an exclusive feature of Orientalism. It reflected the rise of nationalism in 19th century Europe. Numerous newly founded European nation states had emerged out of the declining or dissolving monarchies and empires. They needed an ideological foundation which was typically provided by culturalist narratives. The new nation states traced and (re-)established their own distinctive languages, literatures, histories, ethnicities, and so on to make political sense and gain legitimacy. At times, philosophy, too, could be drawn on to propose a certain national—e.g., German or French—“spirit”. However, non-Western philosophies lent themselves to a greater extent than their Western counterparts to the promotion of culturalist ideas. European philosophy was generally seen as rooted in ancient Greece and Rome and thus more often than not regarded as a shared European heritage rather than a specific expression of national peculiarities. Housed in various oriental disciplines, “Eastern” philosophies, in contrast, seemed to be different: each of these oriental philosophies was seen as embedded in a particular Eastern civilization.

Linguistics

By the 19th century, many European philosophers were academic professionals, but not all of them. Some, like Friedrich Nietzsche, had their home in related fields, like the Classics, while others, like Søren Kierkegaard, had only loose connections with institutionalized academia. And yet they were typically trained in academic philosophy, either formally or autodidactically. The same cannot be said about most Europeans who “produced” Eastern philosophy at the time. Most of them were Orientalists and trained in foreign languages. If studying German philosophy, one was likely to be a philosopher, and not a Germanist. But if studying Chinese philosophy, one was likely to be a Sinologist and not a philosopher.

The essential precondition for non-Western philosophy to be noticed in Europe was the availability of key texts. These texts had to be translated by Indologists, Sinologists, etc. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Sinologists were typically either self-taught linguists, like Abel Rémusat (1788–1832) or Stanislas Julien (1797–1873), or had a background in Christian missionary work (e.g., James Legge 1815–1897, Richard Wilhelm 1873–1930) and/or the diplomatic service (e.g., Herbert A. Giles, 1845–1935) that had taken them to China for extended periods of time. In the 19th century, people (almost exclusively men) were mostly sent to

the Far East by a church, state, or company—and not by a university or academic exchange program that enabled philosophers to travel.

European philosophers in the 19th century were often able to read Greek, Latin, and French and thus did not have to (exclusively) use translations of European classics for accessing their sources. If reading, for instance, Chinese philosophical texts, however, they relied on translations by Sinologists who typically shared the culturalist approach of all Orientalist disciplines. These translations tended to look somewhat pedestrian in comparison with European philosophical classics. They seemed to lack a theoretically consistent conceptual architecture and stringent terminology. Instead, they often resembled, in style or vocabulary, religious treatises, edifying literature, or inspirational poetry. The Orientalist background of their 19th century translators contributed to the emergence of separate categories to classify—and market—Chinese philosophical texts in differentiation from “normal” philosophy. Rather than philosophy, they represented “oriental wisdom”, or an “Eastern spirituality” which, more recently, could be labelled “new age”, or, in German, *Esoterik*.

Intellectual “Trade”

Chinese philosophical texts had already been translated and made available to European intellectuals before the establishment of academic Orientalism in the 19th century. In 1687 a compilation of Confucian texts had been published in Latin by the printer Daniel Horthemels in Paris under the title *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive, Scientia Sinensis Latine Exposita (Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese, or, Chinese Knowledge Explained in Latin)*. The principal translators were Philippe Couplet (1623–1693), Christian Herdtrich (1625–1684), Prospero Intorcetta (1625–1696), and Francis Rougemont (1624–1676). All of them had been Jesuit missionaries in China. The early European reception of Chinese philosophy by philosophers like Leibniz (1646–1716) was based on works like these. They differed from later 19th century Orientalist productions by being more explicitly labelled as “philosophy” and written in the “scientific” language and style of scholarly Latin that limited their accessibility to highly educated elites.

Importantly, the Jesuits translators were “by trade” not mediators of things Oriental to Europe, but harbingers of the “universal (Christian) Truth” to the world. While, like the later Orientalists, they also translated and explained Chinese texts for European readers, their *mission* was not mediation, but conversion and the unification of humankind and human knowledge under a Christian umbrella. This is to say, they did not primarily aim at offering “Chineseness” to a European public, but to show how God was also present among the heathen. In short, they were

more concerned with the spirit of the Lord than with the “Chinese spirit”. They were not yet Orientalists, but, if anything of that order, “Occidentalists”. Accordingly, when a Christian European philosopher like Leibniz read their translations, he could be fascinated with a certain foreignness of Chinese philosophy, but also, and perhaps even more so, with what seemed to be striking similarities with his own Christianity-based metaphysics (see Perkins 2007). The Jesuit missionaries functioned for Leibniz not merely as cultural transmitters (which they also were, of course), but crucially as facilitators of divine reason.

In Orientalist Sinology in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the rationale for translating Chinese philosophy for a European audience changed. Even if many Sinologists still had a missionary (now often Protestant) background, doing Sinology was not merely a way of working in God’s vineyard, but increasingly an intellectual trade in oriental culture—a sort of academic *Kolonialwarenhandel* (colonial goods trade). An academic profession specializing in this trade was established and it could claim a sort of monopoly. One of the goods it offered was Chinese philosophy.

b) Chinese Philosophy

Before comparative philosophy became known in the West, not only Orientalists but also philosophers in non-Western regions had already thought and written comparatively. The emergence of modern Chinese philosophy is one example of the “pre-history” of comparative philosophy in Asia. Virtually all major modern Chinese philosophers, from Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) to Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990), Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), and Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–2021) or Du Weiming 杜維明 (b. 1940) focused intensely on East-West distinctions—strikingly different from most of their counterparts in contemporary Western philosophy, who typically did not bother too much comparing themselves with “the East”.

Liang Qichao, one of the most influential Chinese intellectuals of the early 20th century, translated works by Locke, Hume, Bentham and other European philosophers into Chinese. However, this did not make him a Chinese “Occidentalist”, a kind of reverse Orientalist. Instead, he was at the forefront of the project of preserving Chinese cultural heritage by modernizing it. His translations of Western philosophers had, at least in part, the function of enabling him to relate the Chinese tradition to the contemporary world. He was a professor of “National Studies” (*guo xue* 國學), i.e., Chinese Studies, at Tsinghua University in Beijing, one of the first Western-style higher education institutions in China. Clearly, National

Studies was aimed to help transform China from a premodern empire into a modern nation state like those that had taken shape in Europe in the preceding decades.

Like Liang Qichao, many other leading Chinese academic philosophers in the first half of the 20th century intensely studied and sometimes also translated Western philosophy. They re-constructed Chinese intellectual history in accordance with the categories, concepts, and historical frameworks of modern academia, including, importantly, the concept of philosophy itself, which did not exist as such within the Chinese tradition. The neologism *zhexue* 哲學 for “philosophy” had found its way into Chinese via the Japanese language only toward the end of the 19th century (Makeham 2012a).

Liang Shuming published his first major work *Dong Xi Wenhua Ji Qi Zhexue* 東西文化及其哲學 (*Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies*) in 1921. At the same time, Feng Youlan was a PhD student at Columbia University in New York working on a philosophy dissertation entitled “A Comparative Study of Life Ideals”. It dealt with philosophical East-West differences, just like Liang’s monograph. “Chinese Philosophy” emerged in China from the start as a comparative endeavour. The professionals shaping the discipline through their writing, teaching, and institutionalizing it at universities were practically without exception trained in or deeply acquainted with Western philosophy. Otherwise, it could be argued, they would not have been able to “reinvent” their indigenous intellectual traditions in the form of academic philosophy.

This “creation” of Chinese philosophy by Chinese academic philosophers during the first part of the 20th century combined at least three methodological means—and all of them were thoroughly comparative. First, histories of Chinese philosophy were produced in analogy to histories of Western philosophy. Like the concept of philosophy, the genre of “history of philosophy” was imported via Japan. As John Makeham writes:

Japanese scholars had already produced a number of general histories of Chinese philosophy. Their model for the writing of general histories was provided by nineteenth-century publications by German scholars such as Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761–1819), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Heinrich Ritter (1791–1869), Albert Schwegler (1819–1857), Albert Stöckl (1823–1895), and Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915), among others. (Makeham 2012b, 166)

To have a national philosophy, its history needed to be recounted. The first history of Chinese philosophy by a Chinese author was Xie Wuliang’s 謝無量

(1884–1964) *Zhongguo Zhaxue Shi* 中國哲學史 (*History of Chinese Philosophy*) published in 1916 (ibid.). More influential were, for instance Hu Shi's 胡適 (1891–1962) *Zhongguo Zhaxue Shi Dagang* 中國哲學史大綱 (*Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*) published in 1919 (only the first volume on early China was published), and Feng Youlan's monumental *Zhongguo Zhaxue Shi* 中國哲學史 (*History of Chinese Philosophy*) published 1934 in two volumes. Like Feng Youlan, Hu Shi had studied philosophy at Columbia University in New York. He applied the “genetic method” of his teacher John Dewey in writing his history, and was also strongly influenced by Wilhelm Windelband. Feng Youlan's numerous accounts of the history of Chinese philosophy written between the 1930s and 1980s followed European models as well, including Marxist dialectical materialism in the works produced after 1949 (see Moeller and Sun 2017).

Second, along with applying modern Western academic frameworks to reconstruct a history of Chinese philosophy out of the Chinese textual heritage, Western philosophical notions and methods were introduced. Hu Shi, for instance, published a study titled *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China* in 1922 (in English language). Here, he wrote:

Now that China has come into contact with the other thought-systems of the world, it has seemed to some that the lack of methodology in modern Chinese philosophy can now be supplied by introducing into China the philosophical and scientific methods which have developed in the Western world from the time of Aristotle to this day. (Hu 1922, 20)

The introduction of Western “philosophical and scientific” methods into China meant for Hu and many other Chinese philosophers in the early 20th century to reinterpret Chinese texts in terms of Western conceptual frameworks like “logic”, “metaphysics”, or “ontology”.

Third, the creation of Chinese philosophy through comparative means was not restricted to historical reconstructions and reinterpretations of ancient texts. Equally important, if not more so, was the construction of new philosophical systems, comparable in complexity, intricacy, and abstraction to the great philosophical systems of modern European thinkers from Descartes to Kant and beyond. Feng Youlan, for instance, developed a whole “New Metaphysics” (*Xin Lixue* 新理學) during the 1930s and 1940s (see Moeller 2000) in relation to Western metaphysical systems—especially Platonism and New Realism—but on the basis of Confucian, Daoist, and, especially Neo-Confucian ideas. Mou Zongsan followed suit, but on the Western side he relied more on Kant and Heidegger while on the Chinese side he drew more from Buddhist vocabulary than Feng before him.

Without exception, all Chinese philosophy of the 20th and 21st centuries integrates traditional Chinese ideas and language with Western philosophical methods and concepts. It is thus essentially comparative.

Unlike the Orientalist predecessors of comparative philosophy in the West, modern Chinese philosophers were neither linguists nor cultural mediators. They were neither engaged in “European” or “Western Studies” nor were they experts in any particular foreign language. By all accounts, neither Feng Youlan nor Mou Zongsan spoke any Western language fluently. Their specialization was in philosophy. Accordingly, they primarily addressed a narrow academic audience. Unlike in the West, where the Orientalists appealed to a larger public market for “Eastern wisdom”, contemporary Chinese philosophers mainly operated within the circles of a scholarly elite. The texts they produced were highly technical and as impenetrable for non-professionals as, for instance, texts by Hegel or Kant are to the average German reader. The point of doing academic Chinese philosophy in a comparative way was not to make foreign ideas and texts palatable for a domestic audience, but to refine and improve the Chinese intellectual tradition so that it would become truly “scientific” philosophy that was up to the highest international academic standards.

The asymmetry between a modern, imperialist, and colonizing West and an economically, technologically, and militarily subjugated East produced an asymmetry between the Western and Eastern predecessors of comparative philosophy. The Western Orientalists were cultural mediators who established an intellectual trade in the gap between the East and West where they could flourish by offering their exotic wares. The Chinese philosophers, however, were first of all national modernists partaking in the larger effort of developing their country to enable it to emerge from social and intellectual backwardness. For them, the point of the comparison was not to “exploit” a difference for the sake of establishing an academic profession, but to cope with, and eventually overcome the asymmetric nature of that very difference. For Chinese philosophers, Chinese philosophy had to be done in a comparative manner to raise it to a level where the comparison no longer hurt.

In their effort to renew Chinese philosophy, Chinese philosophers adopted and internalized the culturalist distinction between the East and West that constituted Orientalism. A major aim of doing Chinese philosophy in a comparative way was to recuperate the “spirit” of “Chinese culture” in distinction from “Western culture”. From the perspective of Chinese philosophy, comparisons were not simply an exploration of intriguing differences or coming to know a fascinating other. Instead, understanding philosophical differences was regarded as central to the effort of rebuilding China and of establishing it in its own right on the global stage. Chinese philosophy was eventually about rediscovering the Chinese *identity*.

The affirmation of Chinese identity via Chinese philosophy was seen as a crucial step toward the ultimate goal of enabling China to meet the West on an equal footing. In a programmatic essay titled “Chinese Philosophy and a Future World Philosophy” published in 1948, Feng Youlan stated:

It seems to me that the future world philosophy must be more rationalistic than the traditional Chinese philosophy and more mystical than the traditional Western philosophy. Only a union of rationalism and mysticism will make a philosophy worthy of the one world of the future. (Feng 1948, 545)

This quote refers to *the* Western and *the* Chinese philosophy as two clearly distinguishable and respectively coherent traditions. Each has its complementary strengths and weaknesses: Western philosophy is strong on rationalism but weak on mysticism, and the opposite is the case for Chinese philosophy. Compared in this way, the cultures and spirits of China and the West, encapsulated and contained in their philosophies, are prepared for their eventual amalgamation into a singular future world philosophy. Through comparison, Feng Youlan’s modern Chinese philosophy is intended to pave the way for a united global civilization where an emancipated China joins the West on a level playing field.

A very similar kind of “identity politics” by means of philosophy comes to the fore in the so-called New Confucian Manifesto. This text was originally published in 1958 under the rather convoluted but informative title *Wei zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan*—*women dui zhongguo xueshu yanjiu ji zhongguo wenhua yu shijie wenhua qiantu zhi gongtong renshi* 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言 – 我們對中國學術研究及中國文化與世界文化前途之共同認識 (*Manifesto on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World: Our Joint Understanding of Sinological Study and Chinese Culture with Respect to the Future Prospects of World Culture*). The authors include Carsun Chang (Zhang Junmai 張君勱 1886–1969), Tang Chun-I (Tang Junyi 唐君毅 1909–1978), Mou Tsung-san (Mou Zongsan), and Hsu Fo-kuan (Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 1904–1982). In an Orientalist manner, the essay proposes a substantial distinction between Chinese and Western cultures. Western civilization is characterized in terms of rationality and technology, whereas Chinese culture is seen as rooted in morality and a unique spirituality. The West is encouraged to learn from Chinese culture to improve itself ethically and spiritually, just as China is supposed to adopt Western science and democratic politics to develop. It is stipulated that in this way a united world civilization can emerge. Like Feng Youlan, the authors of the New Confucian Manifesto do not regard East-West comparisons as a mere sub-discipline in academic philosophy. For them, the rise of the Chinese nation and the future of a global civilization depends on it.

Comparative Philosophy

After Orientalism and Chinese philosophy came comparative philosophy: East-West philosophical comparisons as academic philosophy rather than as a part of Orientalist studies, and also distinct from a Chinese academic discourse intended to modernize the Chinese intellectual tradition. Arguably, the founding of the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 1936 can be regarded as the beginning of institutionalized comparative philosophy in this context. The department was led by Charles A. Moore (1901–1967) and Wing-tsit Chan 陳榮捷 (1901–1994), both comparative philosophers. The hosting of the East-West Philosophers' Conference Series, first held in 1939, and the founding of the academic journal *Philosophy East and West* in 1951 by the department were further milestones in the history of comparative philosophy.⁴ Among others, graduates from the department took on pivotal roles in spreading comparative philosophy, primarily in North America, but increasingly also globally. They are still a minority, but comparative philosophers are now found in philosophy departments all over the world, and there are multiple professional associations in the field, multiple journals, and numerous conferences. Although the non-Western element in comparative philosophy is by no means limited to Chinese philosophy, I will focus on it here given the mentioned limits of my expertise.

As outlined at the beginning of this essay, comparative philosophy resembles a Gordian knot: An increasingly tighter discursive loop created by the perpetual re-entry of a distinction (between Western and non-Western philosophy) into itself. This operation generated two opposing poles—with a large continuum in-between: One pole highlighted the distinction-element of the comparison and, accordingly, emphasized difference. The other pole contradicted this emphasis and insisted on its opposite: sameness.

a) Difference

Seen from the camp of comparative philosophers closer to the difference pole (to which I once belonged) non-Western philosophy was relevant by virtue of being *not* European. What really mattered and fascinated about it was how it was something else, something other than “we”. And yet, its alterity was discovered by *us*. Its difference *made sense to us*; we gave it its philosophical validity. Precisely by being different, non-Western philosophy became *like* our philosophy something that *we* (including myself), too, could think and write about. It allowed us to

4 On the first issue of this journal see Škof (2008).

become a philosopher, albeit—and thankfully—in a “distinctive” and “innovative” way. Different, different! But thereby the same.

Representatives of the “difference camp” include Roger T. Ames (b. 1947) and David L. Hall (1937–2001), as well as François Jullien (b. 1951). Toward the end of the last century, Roger Ames, at the time a philosophy professor at the University of Hawai‘i, and David Hall, philosophy professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, published four major monographs that reshaped the field in little more than a decade: *Thinking Through Confucius* (1987); *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narrative of Chinese and Western Culture* (1995); *Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (1998), and *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (1999). Two “philosophical translations” of core early Chinese texts representing the Confucian and the Daoist traditions followed soon after: *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (2001) and *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation: Making This Life Significant* (2003).

Roger Ames’ academic background is in Chinese philosophy, and especially in Confucian thought. David Hall was an American pragmatist, a student of Richard Rorty, and had a keen interest in the philosophy of Alfred N. Whitehead. The titles of their monographs outline the scope of their ideas pretty well: they juxtaposed Chinese and Western culture and this meant, exactly as the Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the verb “juxtapose”, they “compared them or contrasted them to create an interesting effect”.⁵ The comparisons were mainly contrastive, pointing out, for instance, differences between transcendence (West) and immanence (East), or between selfhood as individuality (West) and selfhood as commonality (East). However, the monograph on Dewey and Confucius in particular also highlighted similarities. Confucian and American pragmatism, Ames and Hall hoped, could converge to generate a political and ethical framework for a global multicultural future within which Eastern and Western cultures could harmoniously coexist.

Since the 1980s François Jullien, who at the same time has been holding positions at several prestigious academic institutions in France, has published dozens of treatises of various length comparing Chinese and Western philosophy. He is regarded as a major living French philosopher, and, as I could personally observe before the pandemic, his books fill shelves in the philosophy sections of Parisian bookstores, right next to postmodernist superstars like Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault. His writings have been widely translated and often published by intellectually ‘hip’ publishers like, for instance, Merve Verlag in Berlin or Passagen

5 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/juxtapose>.

Verlag in Vienna. In this way, Jullien has influenced the perception of Chinese and Asian philosophy in the German-speaking world in recent decades much more than any German Orientalist. While his influence on English-language comparative philosophy is not as strong as in French- or German-speaking countries, it is still remarkable. A dozen or so of his books have been translated into English, including *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* by Zone Books in New York (2000; originally published as *Le Détour et l'Accès. Stratégies du sens en Chine, en Grèce* by Grasset in Paris in 1995) and *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking* by University of Hawaii Press (2004; originally published as *Traité de l'efficacité* by Grasset in Paris in 1997).

Like Roger Ames and David Hall, François Jullien contrasts Chinese and Western philosophy. Writing in a more French than Anglo-American style, his language is quite poetic and allusive. He characterizes Chinese thought through notions such as “efficacy”, “blandness”, or “nourishment”. Still, most core distinctions between Western and Chinese philosophy drawn by Ames and Hall, such as the distinctions between transcendence and immanence and between an individual and a communal self, also play prominent roles in Jullien’s works.

Some European Sinologists reacted with some hostility to Jullien’s public success, accusing him of major scholarly inaccuracies and falsehoods. The Swiss Sinologist Jean-François Billeter, for example, wrote a whole book on the philosopher entitled *Contre François Jullien (Against François Jullien 2006)*. As Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2014) has outlined, the debate between Jullien and Billeter and their respective allies represents a clash between the more traditional Orientalist treatment of Chinese philosophy by philological means, and a philosophical approach that tries to “mine” non-Western philosophy—in this case from China—to expand existing philosophical frameworks. While the Orientalist Billeter wants to understand and describe “China”, or rather, specific Chinese texts as accurately as possible, the philosopher Jullien wants to re-enter new conceptual distinctions (between Western and Chinese philosophy) into philosophy to (if I may paraphrase the Merriam-Webster online dictionary again) “create interesting philosophical effects”.

b) Sameness

The second camp in comparative philosophy highlighted the similarity element when comparing Western and non-Western philosophy and, accordingly, emphasized sameness. From this perspective, non-Western philosophy is significant because it confirms that there is no ultimate other to philosophy. While non-Western thought might at first appear foreign, it eventually turns out to be concerned with

universal truth—as all philosophy must be. Human thought, the human ethos, and human hopes and aspirations can transcend contingencies. Seen in this way, non-Western philosophy matters precisely because of its sameness with Western philosophy. The reduction of the alterity of the other proves the commonality of humankind. It confirms the old Platonic truth—the form, or idea, is one and the same, while its concrete manifestations can be diverse. *E pluribus unum*: Out of diversity—Western and non-Western—philosophical unity emerges: Same, Same! But out of difference.

Representatives of this camp include Heiner Roetz (born 1950) and Edward Slingerland (born 1968). Technically, Heiner Roetz was still an Orientalist, as he was employed as a professor of Chinese History and Philosophy at the Ruhr-University in Bochum, Germany. However, his work is thoroughly influenced by his academic background in Karl-Otto Apel's discourse ethics (*Diskursethik*), the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and, via discourse ethics and critical theory, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Most of Roetz' publications have been based on these theoretical approaches, and therefore they belong more squarely in the field of philosophy rather than Chinese Studies. In line with widely practiced methodologies in German academic philosophy, Roetz' works mostly focus on conceptual analysis, the reconstruction of the historical development of systems of thought, and the formulation of normative claims.

Heiner Roetz' major work is the monograph *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age* (1994; originally published as *Die chinesische Ethik der Achsenzeit. Eine Rekonstruktion des Durchbruchs zu postkonventionellem Denken* in 1992). Here, as well as in many of his subsequent essays, Roetz argues vehemently and explicitly against the “difference camp” in comparative philosophy represented by Roger Ames and others (including the “Bonner Schule” at the Sinology Department of the University of Bonn to which I also belonged; see Moeller 2002). According to Roetz, early Chinese Confucian thinkers (Confucius and, especially, Mengzi) were in effect already Enlightenment philosophers. They broke with the cultural and religious traditions they were born into and, similar to modern Western thinkers more than two millennia after them, discovered or developed universally valid ethical principles based on reason. Importantly, Confucius and Mencius also expressed insights into the autonomy of human individuals and their human rights. Roetz categorically rejects any substantial differences between Chinese and Western metaphysics and concepts of selfhood. Despite certain historical and cultural differences on the surface, Roetz argues, early Chinese philosophers did not think differently from their later Western counterparts. This claim is central to Roetz' understanding of philosophy as primarily tasked with the establishment of universal ethical norms. Comparative philosophy, for him, participates in this

endeavour by locating the emergence of universal ethical insights in different cultural and historical environments.

Edward Slingerland is Distinguished University Scholar and Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He is a student of Philip J. Ivanhoe (born 1954), another influential representative of comparative philosophy. In a more explicit manner than his teacher, Slingerland devoted himself to critiquing Roger Ames, François Jullien, and others (including myself, see Slingerland 2011; Moeller 2011) whom he rightly or not associates with the view that Chinese philosophy differs in fundamental ways from Western philosophy. He published numerous works detailing his critiques, culminating in the monograph *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (2018).

The main point of *Mind and Body in Early China* is to refute the idea, ascribed to the above-mentioned comparative philosophers, that early Chinese philosophy was “holistic” by not operating with a significant conceptual mind-body distinction. Slingerland employs statistical methods of the digital humanities to prove this point empirically. Similar to Heiner Roetz before him, Slingerland, too, wishes to show certain universal characteristics of the human mind beyond any cultural or historical contingencies. The difference between the two is that Roetz argues from a Kantian background and conceives of the human mind in terms of the philosophical concept of reason (*Vernunft*), while Slingerland operates with a contemporary Anglo-American concept of cognition based on (the philosophy of) psychology. Within the contexts of their respective culturally, historically, and linguistically shaped academic discourses, both argue that the mind (reason for Roetz, cognition for Slingerland) is universal. As for Roetz, the purpose of comparative studies is for Slingerland to detect such universality beneath the appearance of peculiarity.⁶ For both, the claim to universality is ethically significant. Slingerland uses the notion of “Orientalism” that occurs in the subtitle of his book with rhetorical undertones. This is meant to slight the “difference camp” in comparative philosophy by implying that it promotes an immoral Orientalist othering of non-Western philosophy.

As noted above, most comparative philosophers fall somewhere in between the two poles and the camps associated with them. The re-entry of the distinction between Western and non-Western philosophy on the side of the latter allowed the transition from Oriental Studies to comparative philosophy in Western, and now global, academia. This field has been characterized first by an emphasis on

6 Slingerland’s data-based argument appears to me similar to a potential empirical study which shows that, let’s say, the sculptures by Michelangelo and the ancient Greeks are substantially the same because they are all made of stone. Such a conclusion is certainly warranted, but the question of its significance remains.

difference, and then, by way of contradiction, by stressing sameness. To move beyond the “code” of difference/sameness in dealing with Western and non-Western philosophy is to move toward post-comparative philosophy.

Toward Post-Comparative Philosophy and Beyond⁷

This essay is written during the time of the 2022 Olympics in Beijing. One of the stars of the games is Eileen Gu (Gu Ailing 谷爱凌), an 18-year-old woman competing for China who won the gold medal in “big air” freestyle skiing. Gu’s father is American, her mother is Chinese, and she grew up in the U.S.A. She is thus one of the many people of this world with a mixed ethnic background, and yet, to compete at the Olympics she has to choose one nation. Unavoidably, especially in the current political climate, her decision to compete for China created considerable controversy (see Rolfe 2022). In a way, the nation-based rationale of the Olympics resembles the Western/non-Western distinction of comparative philosophy. In order to ‘count’, a philosophy has to be assigned to a specific national or cultural region—and this assignment then permeates all further discussions.

According to media reports, however, Eileen Gu does not really identify with any one nation: When in America, she has said, she’s American; and when in China, Chinese (see Ma 2022). Moreover, when speaking to the media she needs no translators, as her Chinese is just as perfectly fluent as her English. Neither nationally nor linguistically is she “in-between”, but always “there”. She neither relies on nor is a mediator. Instead, she is first a freestyle skier, and second, by virtue of this, an international media celebrity. What matters for her as an athlete is her performance, and this is measured only by the criteria of her sport. Seen from this perspective, her persona resembles post-comparative philosophy: it’s all about what she does in her area of expertise, and the national or cultural ascriptions that go along with this are contingent. We know Eileen Gu is great at her sport, and if she’s American or Chinese, Western or non-Western, then this is just a matter of being forced to make such a distinction by a social institution that no longer makes total sense.

Eileen Gu skies without an unambiguous sense of national belonging. She is neither a symbol of difference (between essential Chineseness and Americanness) nor of sameness (she does not make being Chinese like being American). Somewhat similarly, post-comparative philosophy neither focusses on differences between non-Western and Western philosophies nor on their sameness. It makes an

7 The title of this section connects with Katheran and Weber (2021).

argument or develops an idea in any philosophical sub-discipline by building on more than one philosophical tradition. Let there be many Eileen Gus in all kinds of sports, and many post-comparative philosophers in in all kinds of philosophies!⁸

Theoretically speaking, post-comparative philosophy does not orient itself to the re-entry of the distinction between non-Western and Western philosophy into philosophy. It is not a specific philosophical field. It can be done in any philosophical field simply by employing both Western and non-Western texts or concepts. Unlike Orientalist studies, post-comparative philosophy is neither culturalist nor is it philology—and yet it may freely use both historical and philological methods. Since it is not culturalist, it rejects the labels “intercultural”, “cross-cultural”, or “transcultural philosophy” as unfortunate.⁹ Unlike “Chinese philosophy” once was, post-comparative philosophy is not about tracing the spirit of a civilization, and yet it may well point out peculiar specifics of Chinese philosophical thought hardly found elsewhere.¹⁰ Post-comparative philosophy does not work toward a united

8 An anonymous reviewer is afraid that by regarding the cultural background of a philosophy as contingent—as in Eileen Gu’s case in sports—one may ignore, for instance, “the original philosophical argumentations and resolutions of Chinese thought”. The point of post-comparative philosophy is not at all to ignore the non-philosophical contexts of any philosophical work or idea, but it suspects that generic categories such as “Chinese” or “Chinese thought” may be too broad to be really useful. We may have to use such labels professionally (I often say that my field is “Chinese philosophy”) in order to “compete” academically, just as Eileen Gu has to adopt a nationality to compete at the Olympics—but these national labels are supplied by the social system in which we operate, and they are not inherent in what we are actually doing (in sports or philosophy).

9 The differentiation between these labels is not always clear and they are sometimes used interchangeably. Generally speaking, intercultural philosophy emphasizes philosophical dialogue between philosophies from different cultures while cross-cultural philosophy aims at doing philosophy beyond the boundaries of one particular culture so that two or more culturally different perspectives come to the fore. Transcultural philosophy shares similar aims and stresses the need to extend philosophical reflections through various cultures. Contemporary intercultural, cross-cultural, and, especially, transcultural approaches commonly reject cultural “reifications”. Ram Adhar Mall states that intercultural philosophical thinking rejects the idea of “a total purity of a culture” (Mall 2016, 69). Vytis Silius notes that the transcultural approach focuses on the “dynamic (transitional, transforming) elements of cultures and people” (Silius 2020, 274). However, all three concepts indicate, at least by name, a significant relationship between culture and philosophy (however these terms may be defined) that is somehow central to their approach. A post-comparative approach, while not rejecting on principle the use of the word “culture”, does not propose, or moves beyond, any privileged connection between philosophy and culture. In short, it does not assume that what it says philosophically is at the same time also “culturally” meaningful.

10 Post-comparative philosophy may be criticized for ignoring a substantial link between cultures or civilizations, and philosophy. Jana Rošker (2020, 306) poses a question indicating such a critique: “Can we really think of knowledge (or philosophy) completely separated from the particular discrete culture in which it was created? Is this, on the other hand, truly something we should wish for?” Post-comparative does not argue for such a separation, but it tends to find the notion of “culture” (however dynamic or hybrid it may be) often too broad to be particularly useful.

global philosophy in the future, which is unlikely to ever evolve in a pluralistic and diverse world society. Post-comparative philosophy is thus also not “world philosophy”. It rejects this label as unfortunate, too, because, like “world music” it suggests a prime focus on non-Western, or “folklorist” sources.

As I argued elsewhere (Moeller 2018), Roger Ames can be regarded not only as a major representative of comparative philosophy, but also as a pioneer in post-comparative philosophy. This is also the case for his late co-author and New Confucian ally Henry Rosemont Jr. Both Ames and Rosemont renewed traditional Confucian philosophy in a productive, and often contrastive, dialogue with Western philosophy to develop a contemporary Confucian role ethics. A Confucian role ethics is *not* primarily comparative. Unlike his joint publications with David Hall, Roger Ames single-authored *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (2011) is neither mainly about delineating major differences between Chinese and Western philosophy nor about revealing potential “universal” features of Confucianism (of course not, given Ames’ rejection of universalism). Instead, it is about formulating a role ethics for today, generated out of the study of Confucian texts and culture, as an alternative to the currently dominating, utilitarian, deontological, or virtue ethics. As opposed to the latter, which are often primarily derived from Western sources, a Confucian role ethics is decidedly post-comparative because it is rooted, in part, in Confucianism.

Henry Rosemont’s New Confucian treatise *Against Individualism* (2015) is also post-comparative. Here, Rosemont says:

But even if we [Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont] are both interpretively mistaken in attributing an ethics of roles to the early Confucians it would not alter my basic position about the importance of challenging individualism and advancing an ethic of roles, for I could simply re-title this work: *“Role Ethics: A Different Approach to Moral Philosophy Based on a Creative Misunderstanding of Early Confucian Writings.”* (Rosemont 2015, 9)

Rosemont’s version of a Confucian role ethics targets modern individualism—a general philosophical framework which he regards as responsible for what he believes to be a thoroughly unjust Western society today. Evidently, Rosemont’s intention is neither to “get Confucianism right” by finding out how it essentially differs from “the West”, nor to unearth any spirit of “Chinese civilization”. Instead, he uses his reading of Confucianism to build a powerful moral and political argument that philosophically counters current social ills.

In my own work, I used a post-comparative approach for quite different purposes. In my book *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amoralism* (2009) I combined Daoist ideas from the *Zhuangzi* with, for instance, critiques of morality by the contemporary

German social theorist Niklas Luhmann. But I did not wish to highlight any deeper parallels between the two, and even less to hint at any universal principles. Instead, I wanted to follow Ames' and Rosemont's example and apply certain inspirations from early Chinese philosophy in discussing a current philosophical theme. Similarly, in our recent book *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity* (2021), Paul D'Ambrosio and I present a critique of contemporary human identity formation that is partly derived from our takes on Daoist philosophy.

I am not referring to my own books here as models of post-comparative philosophy. They are but two among many other very dissimilar examples written by others. Because post-comparative philosophy is *not* a philosophical sub-discipline it cannot be defined in specific terms or identified by specific methods. As has already been pointed out by Ralph Weber, it mixes methods (Kahteran and Weber 2021, 215).¹¹ I embrace Weber's definition of post-comparative philosophy as amounting

to just doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of but making no claim of "correct exposition", and instead just addressing hitherto unsolved problems and possibly raising issues that have never been considered before, anywhere. (ibid., 214)

In short, an argument is made because one hopes it is a "good argument", and not because it is, "say, from within Indian philosophy" (ibid., 215).¹²

11 As a mix of methods, post-comparative philosophy is not, as an anonymous reviewer of this essay assumed, "a pursuit of *new* methods and conclusions" (my emphasis). Given its heterogeneous nature, post-comparative philosophy also has no claim to be, as the same reviewer assumed, to "be necessarily superior" to comparative philosophy. It comes after comparative philosophy because it no longer emphasizes comparisons, but it does not claim that comparisons are generally "inferior" to the various methods post-comparative philosophy may employ.

12 Not to aim at "correct expositions", or, like Rosemont, to allow "creative misunderstandings" does not mean, as an anonymous reviewer has assumed, that "anyone can say anything, and without restraints." As Weber says, the aim is to make a good argument—and "anything" is not necessarily a good argument. If someone makes a post-comparative argument on a contemporary issue employing ideas generated by reading, say Plato or Confucius, the main aim is to get the contemporary argument right, and not Plato or Confucius. The same reviewer also stipulates that in this way, post-comparative philosophers may, for instance, "ignore the way Eastern culture perceives its own ideas". But what is "Eastern culture"? Who represents it? Is my take on Hegel privileged over a Hegel scholar from India or China simply because Hegel belongs to "my own culture"? Of course, post-comparative philosophy should try to understand the sources it works with in their respective historical and linguistic context (or any other context that may matter)—this typically makes for a much more nuanced understanding—but this does not mean that this context has to be "personally" shared by the philosopher. To the contrary, to privilege the way a "culture perceives its own ideas" may run the risk of ending up in cultural chauvinism, or even nationalism.

To reiterate: post-comparative philosophy is different from comparative philosophy by not being definable as a field, by not using any specific method, and by not applying the code difference/sameness. Therefore, if successfully practiced the need for the label “post-comparative philosophy” will disappear. We can then eventually discard the term, since it will no longer be unusual or special to utilize sources stemming from diverse traditions. Moreover, since many philosophers will do this, each in their particular ways, it will not be considered a unique method in need of a generic qualification.

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