

Searching for the Way. Theory of Knowledge in Pre-modern and Modern China.

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In *Searching for the Way. Theory of Knowledge in Pre-modern and Modern China*, Jana S. Rosker investigates the development of ontological and epistemological theories in China, from the early philosophical fundamentals of the period of the Warring States to the contemporary period. Rosker deals with the development of Chinese theories of how knowledge is gained and transmitted in order to attain ultimate wisdom, where wisdom is understood to pertain to the domain of morality in the Chinese holistic view of man and the cosmos. Given the discrepancy between the object of knowledge and the subject of comprehension, this investigation more particularly deals with such problems as the possibility or impossibility to attain correct knowledge of a given object - and thus the possibility or impossibility to attain a complete understanding of the way (*dao*); the relationship between this knowledge and wisdom on the one hand and morality on the other; the possibility or impossibility of language to function as a conveyer of knowledge; and the relationship between knowledge (*zhi*) and action (*xing*).

In this investigation the author engages in the discussion on the criteria that define a logical tradition, that is, a tradition of rational inquiry, and the number of such logical traditions that can be discerned. This discussion is also part of the Chinese philosophical debate, as the modern Chinese Marxist philosopher Feng Qi (1915-1995) claimed that, with the exception of the Mohist classic *Mo jing*, which includes some well-developed formal logical treatises, “it is

generally acknowledged that Chinese philosophy was primarily focused on ethics.”¹ With this claim, Feng agrees with the common Western opinion that this characteristic of Chinese philosophy places the Chinese tradition in contrast to the European and the Indian traditions which are characterized by the accentuation of formal logic.² Indeed, this fundamental difference between the Chinese tradition on the one hand and the European and Indian traditions on the other made some scholars claim that only two traditions of rational inquiry can be differentiated: the Western and the Indian.³ The difference between the Chinese and Western approaches to these problems can be summarized in the following: whereas in

¹ Feng Qi, *Zhongguo gudai zhexuede luiji fazhan* (The Logical Development of Ancient Chinese Philosophy) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1983), pt. 1, pp.43-44; after Rosker, *Searching for the Way*, p.287. Cf; Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, vol. 7, pt. 1, of *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.265: “In a scientific context the crucial notion is that of proof and of the art of plausible reasoning. The art of formal proof was little developed in China by comparison with Greece... One unique feature of intellectual life in Greece was precisely the demand for formal proof in formal contexts... In China, such rigid rationalism remained a marginal phenomenon.”

² On this, see F. Staal, “The Independence of Rationality from Literacy,” *European Journal of Sociology* 30 (1989): 308, and J. Kurtz, “Matching Names and Actualities: Translation and the Discovery of ‘Chinese Logic,’” in *Mapping Meanings. The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China*, ed. M. Lackner and N. Vittinghoff (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), pp. 492, 495.

³ For the possible influence of Indian philosophy on Greek philosophy see R. Garbe, *The Philosophy of Ancient India* (Chicago: Open Court, 1897), pp.36-46; G.P. Conger, “Did India Influence early Greek Philosophies?” *Philosophy East and West* 2 (2) (1952): 103, 105, 107, 109-110.

Western discourse, the external world (or objective reality) was conceived as to a great extent independent from the subject of comprehension, the Chinese theories of knowledge can generally be called ‘relational epistemologies,’ that is epistemologies in which there is a holistic relation between the object of knowledge and the subject of comprehension.

In the first chapter, “Chinese Philosophy and Chinese Epistemology - Uncovering a Hidden Relationship” (pp.1-37), Rosker argues that four basic epistemological trends can be differentiated in the philosophy of the Warring States period. A first trend is the one represented by Confucius and Mozi. For them, language is normative and reality is subject to language. Therefore, language can express reality and is a normative instrument for gaining knowledge. A second trend is represented by Laozi and Xunzi. For them, language cannot express reality. Hence, it cannot be used as a conveyor of knowledge. Mengzi also formulated a critique to the Confucian interpretation of language. “Mengzi argued that language did not represent an innate system which contained the essence of proper social norms that enabled people to live in a harmonic society” (p.15). As this is the case for Laozi, his moral epistemology was solely based on introspection. The Nomenalists (*xingming jia*) based their theories on isomorphic assumptions, the Neo-Mohists based them on linguistic relativism. They constitute a third trend. Zhuangzi’s philosophy, finally, can be named ‘radical relativism’.

It has been argued that “Rationality and argumentation arise when a thinker seriously contemplates the pervasiveness of the possibility that he may be wrong, that he needs reasons and arguments to support the validity of his views.”⁴ In other words, the peculiar Chinese connection between Confucian and Neo-Confucian orthodoxy on the one hand, and the political milieu on the other was not favorable for the development of formal logic. This problem is discussed in the second chapter, “The Decline of Tradition - Despotism and the

⁴ Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, p.261.

Escape into Inwardness” (pp.39-113). Here, Rosker meticulously delineates how, against the political background of the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties, Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) so-called ‘Rationalist’ (*lixue*) variant of Neo-Confucian thought stifled philosophical inquiry, and how the creative philosophers of the so-called ‘Idealist’ (*xinxue*) school, influenced by Daoist and Buddhist concepts, evolved in a direction that was increasingly disconnected from political and social life and focussed on introspection. Consequently, the latter philosophers connected with the philosophies of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Mengzi. Chan Buddhism also developed along these lines. This tendency towards introspection, naturally, also implied that the traditional connection between knowledge (*zhi*) and action (*xing*) was broken.

Toward the end of this chapter, Rosker gives due attention to the Qing philosopher Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) as a key figure in the transition to ‘Chinese modernity’. The dawn of the Qing Dynasty, which saw the arrival of Western thinking represented by the Jesuits, caused Chinese philosophers, who were confronted by the rule of the Manchus and the breakdown of Han sovereignty, to question Neo-Confucian thinking as such. In this context, Wang Fuzhi can be seen as a precursor of Chinese materialist philosophies who reconnected knowledge and action - a connection that was later to become crucial in the formulation of Maoist theory.

The main focus of the book is on the modern/contemporary period. To this period is dedicated the third chapter, “Chinese Modernity - The Era of Spiritual and Political Transitions” (pp.115-318), that is, the era starting with the Opium War and the introduction of European philosophical ideas to China. It is especially in this chapter that the importance of the different logical traditions referred to above becomes relevant: it is shown how modern and contemporary Chinese theorists, confronted by European theories, had to choose between discarding the Chinese tradition in favour of European knowledge (the so-called *quanpan xihua pai*) and attempt to fuse both traditions – for example, Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and Tan Sitong (1865-1898) - or accentuate the complementary

character of both traditions – for example, Feng Youlan (1895-1990), Zhang Dainan (1909-2004), and Mou Zongsan (1909-1995). Especially, the synthesis of qualitative (*xingzhi*) and quantitative (*liangzhi*) understanding of Xiong Shili (1885-1968) – the plural epistemology (*duoyuan renshilun*) of Zhang Dongsun (1886-1973), and the Chinese ‘Marxism’ of Feng Qi (1915-1995) are given considerable attention. Rosker succeeds in showing how the different philosophers of the modern/contemporary period are indebted to the fundamentals of epistemology of the Warring States period, how they build on concepts of Neo-Confucianism and Chan, and how they integrated concepts of European and American philosophies in their theories. In this respect, for example, Hu Shi’s (1891-1962) pursuit of Westernization and the establishment of the analytical foundations for Chinese systems through a correct scientific methodology is shown to be one of the first theoretical attempts to rediscover the significance of ancient Chinese logic, especially in its Mohist and Nomenalist variants.⁵ In the same line, there is a discussion, for example, of Zhang Dongsun with respect to his connection to the investigation of ancient Chinese theories of language.

In *Searching for the Way*, the main aim of which is to explore and elucidate the rise and growth of modern Chinese epistemology, the history of this epistemology is depicted as a creative tradition that, confronted by non-indigenous concepts and methods, eventually

⁵ For ideas on the reconnection to Mohist logic see also Iwo Amelung, “Naming Physics: The Strife to delineate a Field of Modern Science in Late Imperial China,” in Lackner and Vittinghoff, *Mapping Meanings*, pp.395-397, 403 n 88, and J. Kurtz, “Matching Names and Actualities,” pp. 482-483, 490, 493-497. For connections with Xunzi, see J. Kurtz, *ibid.*, pp.480, 496-497.

reaffirms itself in its holistic approach of the relationship between man and heaven, and the concept of the way (*dao*) that underlies and defines this relationship.

Overall, this book is based on a thorough reading of the philosophical works of the different theorists discussed - including some lesser-known modern and contemporary Chinese philosophers, as well as of the relevant Chinese and Western studies in the field. In its unique accentuation of ontological and epistemological issues, *Searching for the Way* promises to become a standard work for Western Sinology and comparative cultural studies for the years to come.