



# Studying Chinese Philosophy: Turn-of-the-Century's Challenges

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# Studying Chinese Philosophy: Turn-of-the-Century's Challenges

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At the beginning of this century, students of Chinese philosophy are indeed faced with quite a number of problems and challenges. This essay will discuss only one of these challenges, and it is indeed an old question: What is the content and scope of an exposition of Chinese philosophy? How is the history of Chinese philosophy similar or not to other scholarly approaches to the study of Chinese thought in general?

\* \* \*

The notion of “Chinese philosophy” was born in the twentieth century. Likewise, the current notion of “Chinese philosophy” as an academic field of study first appeared in the twentieth century. Today, after 100 years or so of development, the study of Chinese philosophy has already led to very substantial achievements. Yet, at this turn of the century, this academic discipline finds itself, in various ways and to various degrees, under attack from several quarters around the world. In view of these challenges, the need has arisen to reassess the identity of Chinese philosophy and to take up its defence anew. But, let us start from the beginning.

In 1917, Hu Shi (1891-1962) received his Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia University and began teaching at Peking University. The following year, he published “An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy.”<sup>2</sup> In

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1. We are most grateful to Professor Chen Lai for authorizing us to translate this text, published in “Philosophical Review” (*Zhexue Za-zhi*), Taipei, No. 31 (January 2000.) Special thanks are also due to Ms. Kao Chia Chi at the Socio-Cultural Research Center, Fu Jen University, for her many suggestions and to Professor Nicholas Koss, also at Fu Jen, for his editorial assistance.  
*Ed*

2. The first ever “History of Chinese Philosophy” was written in Japanese by the Japanese scholar Takase Takejūrō and published in Tokyo in 1911: *Shina tetsugaku shi*. In 1916, Xie Wuliang published in Shanghai the first “History of Chinese Philosophy” in Chinese and by a Chinese: *Zhongguo zhexue shi*. Later on, the two major works by Chinese were those quoted here by

his “Preface” to this book, Cai Yuanpei (1876-1940), then Chancellor of Peking University, emphasized that any historian of Chinese philosophy would have to deal with two major difficulties: sorting out genuine texts and forged materials; and, deciding on the mode of exposition. Regarding the latter, Cai Yuanpei wrote: “There has been no systematic recording of classical Chinese learning. All we have are very pedestrian accounts. If we wish to compose a systemic account of classical learning, the studies of Antiquity are of no help, and we have no other way but follow the criteria of histories of philosophy in the West. In other words, only those who have studied the history of western philosophy can determine the appropriate form of exposition.”<sup>3</sup>

The history of philosophy is “history” and, of course, it narrates the evolution of philosophy according to historical order. However, by “mode of exposition” Cai Yuanpei meant much more: decisions regarding content and scope, as well as the way Chinese materials should be sorted out according to the architectonics of western philosophy. Hence, in the very first pages of his book *Hu Shi* discussed the definition of philosophy: “So far there has been no fixed definition of philosophy, and, for the time being, I volunteer the following. Let us call philosophy any study that is a fundamental reflection on the important problems of human life and searches for a fundamental solution.” *Hu Shi* added: “Since the important problems of human life are many, there are also many kinds of philosophical questions,” and he mentioned the following six: cosmology, logics and epistemology, philosophy of life or ethics, philosophy of education, political philosophy, and philosophy of religion. Hence, “a history of philosophy is an exposition, according to historical periods and schools, of the various ways by which men have studied and solved the various philosophical problems.”<sup>4</sup> Central to *Hu Shi*’s definition of philosophy are the ultimate concerns of human life and, as such, it could very well stand on its own; yet, it was very difficult to distinguish it from the definition of religion. As to his definition of a history of philosophy, it emphasized the “narration,” it could be termed a narrative history of philosophy.

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Professor Chen Lai: *Hu Shi*’s “An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy - Antiquity” [*Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang*], Shanghai, 1918, and Feng Youlan’s “A History of Chinese Philosophy” [*Zhongguo zhexue shi*], Shanghai, 1930 & 1934. Feng’s two-volume book has been translated into English by Derk Bodde (Fung Yulan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. I, Beijing: Henri Veitch, 1937; Vols. I & II, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952-53.) *Ed.*

3. *Hu Shi*, “An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy” (in Chinese), Vol. I, p. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

Hu Shi also addressed the issue of Chinese philosophy and world philosophies:

One may roughly divide the various philosophies into two branches: eastern and western philosophies. Each branch can be further divided into two systems: Indian and Chinese in the East, Greek and Jewish in the West. At the initial stage, each system appeared quite independently; then, starting in the second century B.C. the Jewish system joined the Greek one, and the outcome was the philosophy of mediaeval Europe; meanwhile, the Indian system joined the Chinese one, and the outcome was the philosophy of mediaeval China. In modern times, the decline of Indian influence and the resurgence of Confucianism led to the development of modern Chinese philosophy over a period running from the eleventh century down to the present. Meanwhile, European thought progressively outgrew the influence of Judaism, leading to the development of modern European philosophy. Today, these two major branches, the Chinese and the western, have met and are influencing one another. It may be that, fifty or one hundred years from now, we will see the emergence of a world philosophy, but it is too early to tell.<sup>5</sup>

Hu Shi's statement on Indian philosophy joining the Chinese system is excessive; even though it is true that Chinese culture was influenced by India, his theory that there has been no longer an independent Indian philosophy is untenable. Actually, what merits attention is rather the fact that Hu Shi was writing in 1918, right at the time when the New Culture movement was at its peak in China. The merging of philosophies East and West he envisioned did not fit totally with the more radical views of the day, but later on it proved to be quite close to the East-meets-West theories of the post-May Fourth period.<sup>6</sup>

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Altogether Hu Shi did not discuss very much problems of methods. Actually, he was quite in the dark as to how a history of Chinese philosophy should be written, and did not probe deeply into the issues involved. Quite different was Feng Youlan (1895-1990) who published *A History of Chi-*

5. *Ibid*, p. 5.

6. The "May Fourth movement," named after student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919, was both "an anti-Japanese campaign and a vast modernization movement to build a new China through intellectual and social reforms" (Chow Tse-tung, *The May Fourth Movement Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967, p. 1.) Both Cai Yuanpei and Hu Shi played a leading role in this pivotal, and controversial, landmark of modern Chinese history. *Ed*

*nese Philosophy* in the early 30s. Clearly enough, the superiority of this work over Hu Shi's lay first of all in Feng's awareness of these matters.

In his opening sentence, Feng Youlan wrote: "Originally, philosophy is a western word. Whoever wishes to expound the history of Chinese philosophy must take as one of his first tasks the selection and exposition of those fields of study in Chinese history which can be called philosophy in the sense of this term in the West." However classical this principle may sound, its concrete application proved to be extremely complex. Feng Youlan, again: "Before setting to work, I must first be clear about the meaning of the word philosophy. This word has had a long history in the West and philosophers have not agreed on one definition of philosophy. For the sake of convenience, let us first describe what is generally considered to be the content of philosophy; knowing this content, we will be able to grasp what philosophy is all about, and there will be no need to further inquire about a formal definition of the word philosophy itself."<sup>7</sup> Then, noting that philosophy in the West has comprised three major fields of study (a theory of the world, a theory of life, a theory of knowledge), Feng commented: "From Plato to the late Middle Ages these three disciplines have been prevalent, and they have remained quite important in modern times. To put it briefly, we have here the content of philosophy."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, he added that these three major disciplines could be subdivided: "a theory of the world" into *ontology* (a study of the substance of "being" and of the essentials of "reality") and *cosmology* (a study of the apparition of the world, of its history and of its final home-coming); "a theory of life" into *psychology* and *ethics*; "a theory of knowledge" into *epistemology* and *logics*. Unlike Hu Shi, Feng Youlan did not mention the philosophy of religion, political philosophy and the philosophy of education – a sign, probably, that he was less influenced by John Dewey than Hu Shi was.<sup>9</sup>

Now that the content of "philosophy" had been made clear, it was possible to decide on a criterion for selecting the materials of a history of Chi-

7 Feng Youlan, "A History of Chinese Philosophy" (in Chinese), Vol. I, p. 1. In this and the following notes, Professor Chen Lai quotes Feng's "Introduction" in the original Chinese. Later on, together with Derk Bodde, Feng wrote another "Introduction" for the English translation. *Ed*

8 *Ibid*, p. 2.

9. Both Hu Shi and Feng Youlan did their graduate work at Columbia University, where J. Dewey was teaching. Feng, however, moved closer and closer to the views of R.B. Perry, W.P. Montague, W.B. Pitkin and other "neorealists" who were mainly based at Columbia and Harvard. See: Jerome B. Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance Liberalism in the Chinese Revolution, 1917-1937*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1970; Michel C. Masson, *Philosophy and Tradition The Interpretation of China's Philosophical Past Fung Yu-lan, 1939-1949*, Taipei-Paris, Ricci Institute, 1985 *Ed*.

nese philosophy. "This 'content' has already determined the scope of philosophy and indicated the questions pertaining to philosophy. Among the ancient texts, only those which deal with such questions and contain discussions falling within the above-mentioned scope constitute material for the history of philosophy."<sup>10</sup> This is a quite straightforward answer, but does it totally solve the problem at hand: the selection of materials for a "history of Chinese philosophy"?

Feng Youlan continued:

From my own understanding of the content of philosophy outlined above, it is clear that the subject matter of 'philosophy' in the West has been roughly similar to that of what, in China, was called "learning of the mystery" in the third and fourth centuries, the "learning of the Way" in the 11th-17th centuries and "learning of moral principles" in the 17th-19th centuries. [...] The study of the Way of Heaven was roughly similar to the cosmology of western philosophy, as was their study of human nature to the philosophy of life in the West. As for the study of methodology found in western philosophy, it has been pursued during the founding period of Chinese intellectual history, but was abandoned from the 11th century on. Admittedly, we could argue that, then, the study of moral principles had its own methodology (the "method of self-cultivation"), but actually this methodology was not aimed at acquiring knowledge, but at moral improvement.<sup>11</sup>

This argument is also quite sound. According to Feng, "philosophy" in the West and the "learning of moral principles" in China are roughly similar; and, indeed, there are in the old learning of moral principles a number of elements that are by and large similar to western cosmology and philosophy of life. Meanwhile, he also points out that there are other elements in the learning of moral principles that do not correspond to the content of western "philosophy," and this is particularly true of the "method of self-cultivation" dear to the Chinese tradition.

As Feng Youlan saw it, we have two options. The first is to hold to the standards of western "philosophy" and, quite rigorously, extract whatever in the Chinese learning of moral principles may correspond to that standard; then, consider these extractions as being "Chinese philosophy", study them and make them the stuff of "the history of Chinese philosophy." The second option would be to take the whole array of the Chinese learning of moral principles as one's only object, study it and compose a "history of the Chinese learning of moral principles." One could even go one step

10. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

further and write a “history of the learning of moral principles in the West,” according to Chinese standards. Of course, Feng Youlan chose the first option, because in the twentieth century Chinese scholarship was of a piece with that of the rest of the world or, one could say, because this was the century of the western “connection.” Regarding the inadvisability of the second option, he explained:

In principle, this second option is quite feasible. But, the fact is that modern learning originated in the West, and above all, the modern sciences. If among all the disciplines in the history of China and of the West we identify one element as learning of the moral principles, we will find it quite difficult to determine its exact standing and role among the other modern disciplines. But, if we identify this common element as philosophy, there is no problem. And, in fact, in recent years books have appeared on the history of Chinese philosophy, but none on the history of the learning of moral principles in the West. Accordingly, in the following pages, I use only the terms “Chinese philosophy” and “Chinese philosophers.” “Chinese philosophy” means that discipline in China (or a given part of a given discipline) that can be termed philosophy according to the western usage of the word. Likewise, “Chinese philosophers” means that sort of scholars in China who can be called philosophers according to the understanding of the term in the West.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, in this discussion the question “How to write a history of Chinese philosophy?” is connected to the question of the standing and legitimacy of Chinese philosophy as an academic discipline. Hence, with his formulation, Feng Youlan made it clear that the question of whether or not to set up a discipline called “Chinese philosophy” brings us to another question, “Should we set up a discipline called ‘Philosophy’?” Then, ultimately, this question takes us to the question: “Should we bring in as a whole the academic structure and branches of learning of the modern West?” Clearly enough, we are no longer dealing only with the question of how to write a history of Chinese philosophy.

Let’s go back to the preceding question regarding the learning of moral principles in China: how to negotiate the disparity between the Chinese understanding of philosophy and the western one? Since Feng Youlan has noted that “methodology” means epistemology in the West, but refers to the theory of self-cultivation in China, the question arises: are all the sayings on methods of self-cultivation in the Chinese learning of moral princi-

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8.

ples to be taken as the objects of research on and exposition of “Chinese philosophy”? On this issue, Feng has provided no clear answer. He only wrote:

Because of their special emphasis on human affairs, Chinese philosophers' study of cosmology and ontology has been quite sketchy; whereas philosophy in the West has fully developed all the afore-mentioned disciplines, the fact is that Chinese philosophy was not able to be that thorough. Nevertheless, since Chinese philosophers put the emphasis on the way of inner sagehood, they were quite thorough in their exposition of methods of self-cultivation. It may be that the latter cannot be called philosophy, but the fact is that, in this regard, China has indeed made quite a contribution.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand, Feng Youlan thus admits that “it may be that this cannot be called philosophy,” but on the other hand, in his *A History of Chinese Philosophy* he has much to say about methods of self-cultivation. In other words, even though some of the contents of the learning of moral principles may have been no correspondent topic in western philosophy, they still could be entered in a history of Chinese philosophy.

As we go on, we may actually add a third option to Feng Youlan's two. We need not follow the strict prescriptions of philosophy in the western sense; instead, we may simply take the Chinese learning of moral principles as being “Chinese philosophy.” We may add that, after Feng Youlan, this has been the method of scholars engaged in the study of the history of Chinese philosophy. On the one hand, at the theoretical level, they have taken as their standard the contents of western philosophy; while, on the other hand, in practice, they have actually adopted the scope of the Chinese learning of moral principles. Besides, twentieth century scholars have never expressed any strong desire to fully solve these theoretical issues.

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In the late 30s, another scholar, Zhang Dainian (1909- ) wrote “An Outline of Chinese Philosophy.” On the very first page of his “Preface,” he too discussed the definition of philosophy and Chinese philosophy:

Definitions of philosophy in the West are legion, to the extent that each philosopher has his own definition. Actually, each one of these defini-

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

tions is only that of one given school, not of philosophy in general. As a way of summarizing all these views of philosophy, we could say that philosophy is the discipline that studies and discusses the ultimate principles of the world and human life, and the method for understanding those principles.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, for Zhang Dainian also, the world, human life and methods of knowing are the hallmarks of philosophy.

Zhang Dainian goes on: “Since Antiquity, China has never had a term corresponding completely to the meaning of today’s ‘philosophy’.” Meanwhile, he remarked that the old “learning” before the second century B.C. and the “learning of the various schools of thought” in the following centuries are, by and large, similar to today’s “philosophy”; the expression “learning of mystery” in the third and fourth centuries had roughly the same meaning as to-day’s “philosophy”; likewise, from the eleventh century onwards, the “learning of the Way,” “the learning of principle,” or the “learning of moral principles” were quite close to that of “philosophy” today in content. However, the “learning of mystery” or the “learning of the Way” had their own territories: each expression designates one given school of philosophy or one given type of philosophy. As such, those terms “were not similar to today’s ‘philosophy’, that is, they were not a general appellation. And, actually there has never been in the past a general term covering, say, both the ‘learning of mystery’ and the ‘learning of the Way’.”<sup>15</sup>

Zhang Dainian, then, volunteered the following: “Could these various “learnings” in the course of Chinese history be all together called “philosophy”? May we not call “philosophy” ancient Chinese reflections and theories on the world and human life? On this issue, we have to examine our own view of that one word “philosophy.” If “philosophy” designates only western philosophy or if western philosophy is considered to be the only type of philosophy, then the fields of study that differ from the approach and method of western philosophy belong to another discipline, they are not philosophy. Hence, since the basic approach of Chinese thought is actually different from that of the West, Chinese learning may certainly not be called “philosophy.” At this point, Zhang Dainian, who does not approve of this view, raised a very important point:

14. Zhang Dainian, “An Outline of Chinese Philosophy” [*Zhongguo zhexue dagang*], Beijing: China Academy of Social Sciences, 1982, p. 1. A more recent work by Zhang Dainian has just been translated into English by Edmund Ryden: Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts of Chinese Philosophy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. *Ed.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

We can take “philosophy” as a generic term, not restricted to western philosophy. In other words, we could say that it is a category of learning, of which western philosophy is one specific instance; the generic name of this category of learning is “philosophy.” In this way, we may call “philosophy” anything bearing resemblance to western philosophy and that can fit in this category. With this understanding of philosophy, nothing prevents us from calling philosophy the thoughts and theories of the ancient Chinese regarding the world and human life. Chinese philosophy and western philosophy may not be similar in their basic approaches; yet, regarding topics and objects of study as well as its standing among the other fields of learning, Chinese philosophy is equivalent to western philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of his “Introduction,” Zhang Dainian also noted the difference between general and special philosophies. Philosophy of history, political philosophy or aesthetics, all belong to special philosophy; general philosophy does not include special philosophy, but specializes in cosmology and ontology, theory of life and epistemology. In Zhang’s “Outline of Chinese philosophy,” the term “Chinese philosophy” refers only to general philosophy, and there is no mention of the various special philosophies in China. However, exactly like Feng Youlan, in his study of Chinese philosophy, Zhang Dainian was unable strictly and thoroughly to apply the standards of western general philosophy. As he saw it, Chinese philosophers have covered five branches of learning, with their respective objects: the Way of Heaven; the Way of man; the extension of knowledge; self-cultivation; and, political affairs. Of these five branches of learning, Zhang added, the former three correspond to the theory of the world, theory of life and methodology of western philosophy; the remaining two (self-cultivation and political affairs) can be taken as special philosophy lying outside the scope of general philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Thus, according to this division, the theories of self-cultivation must not be mentioned as “Chinese philosophy”, but Zhang Dainian also held the view that one characteristic of Chinese philosophy was “the unity of the true and the good”, that is to say: Chinese philosophy has never divorced the search for the True from the pursuit of the Good. For him, the extension of knowledge and self-cultivation were inseparable; the quest for the True was identical with the quest for the Good.<sup>18</sup> This statement, however, amounts to saying that the theories on the extension of knowledge and those on self-cultivation should not

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

be separated – making it impossible to regard the theories of self-cultivation as “special philosophy” and banish them outside the scope of “Chinese philosophy.”

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To sum up, it is clear that Zhang Dainian’s formulations have validity and invite further elaboration. In the wake of the large-scale introduction of western culture in the nineteenth century, Japanese scholars have created a new word out of two Chinese characters (*tetsu-gaku*, in Japanese pronunciation) to translate the foreign word *philosophy* and our countrymen have adopted this translation (*zhe-xue*, in Chinese pronunciation.)<sup>19</sup> This is how the notion of “Chinese philosophy” came into being. In the modern cultural development of China, the overall trend has been the wholesale adoption of the academic classification from the West; China acquired a modernized academic framework by borrowing these new academic categories: philosophy, literature, history, law, political science, etc. The adoption of these academic categories had a four-fold role. Firstly, the bifurcations on the map of western learning could provide a coherent understanding of the contents of that learning; secondly, it was then easier to introduce the western educational system and, on the basis of these new categories, to set up the academic organisation of the modern Chinese university education; thirdly, this new division of labour would connect China with the world and underwrite the development of contemporary Chinese culture; fourthly, the new academic system would allow Chinese to categorize and put in order their traditional culture and world of learning.

Be that as it may, compared with the other new disciplines set up in modern times, the notion of “Chinese philosophy” proved to be an embarrassment. Exactly as indicated by the three authors quoted above, the most important issue is not whether or not Chinese antiquity had the word “philosophy”, but rather the fact that, among the various divisions of the old academic set-up, there was no independent system exactly corresponding to “philosophy” in the West. Admittedly, the Chinese learning of moral principles constituted a theoretical system covering the reflections of

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19. Japanese scholar Nishi Amane (1829-1897) made up the new word. Then, Chinese diplomat and reformer Huang Zunxian (1848-1905) quoted it in his 1890 book, “A History of Japan” [*Riben guozhi*], in which he described the various departments at Japan’s first modern university. Starting in 1902, an increasing number of translations from the Japanese or essays, by Chinese students in Japan, introduced “philosophy” to intellectuals in China. *Ed*

ancient thinkers about the universe, human life and the mind; yet, the questions under discussion were not identical to those debated by western philosophy. This is true, for example, of those questions debated so meticulously time and again, between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries (for instance, what was the role of regular practices such as studying the Classics or meditation?) – all questions that are different from those of western philosophy. This is a point which, apparently, our three authors have overlooked. For Feng Youlan, once the content of philosophy had been determined, you knew what the philosophical problems were. Likewise, according to Zhang Dainian, Chinese and western philosophies differed in their approach, but they shared the same questions and objects. However, the fact is that both China and the West have theoretical systems regarding the universe and human life, but the key problems that structure those systems are different. In the case of Mainland China, given the intellectual climate of the period between 1950-1980, the Marxist view of the history of philosophy was that the basic problems were common, and this assumption constituted quite an impediment for those doing research on Chinese philosophy. While, admittedly, the impact of such views has been progressively phased out since the early 1980s, there has been neither thorough discussion nor consensus in academic circles as to whether there had been questions common to Chinese philosophy and western philosophy. Meanwhile, philosophical circles in the West have long refused to regard Chinese philosophy as philosophy; for them, Chinese philosophy has not debated the issues discussed in western philosophy, hence it belongs only to the study of ideas or religion. This view is essentially a display of cultural Euro-centrism: on the assumption that the questions studied by western philosophy are *the* “philosophical” questions, one decides whether non-western cultures have philosophy or not.

The ancient Chinese learning of moral principles and western “philosophy” differ in scope. If we take as our norm the scope of western “philosophy,” proceed to carve out a part of the old learning of moral principles, and call this part “Chinese philosophy,” not only do we subvert the integrity of the old set-up, but also there are necessary aspects of this set-up that are left out of “Chinese philosophy.”

I am not saying that those circumstances of Chinese culture are beyond remedy. Zhang Dainian gives us a clue: we ought to regard philosophy as we regard culture. In other words, “philosophy” is a universal: it is the general term for the theories and reflections on the universe and human life in any nation around the world, be it in the West (“western philosophy”), in India (“Indian philosophy”), in China (“Chinese philosophy”), etc. In this

sense, western philosophy is only one particular example of philosophy, not its standard. Hence, the word “philosophy” ought not be taken in the peculiar sense traditional in the West; instead, it ought to be an all-embracing, general notion belonging to the many cultures of the world.

In this way, the Chinese learning of moral principles *is* Chinese philosophy. Admittedly, its scope and the questions it pursues are somewhat different from those of western philosophy, but these differences, far from jeopardizing its status as Chinese philosophy, do manifest that philosophy is a unity of universal and particular. Accordingly, one main task for non-western philosophers is to develop a comprehensive notion of “philosophy,” promote it around the world, and thus destructure the West-centred posture in the interpretation of the notion of “philosophy.” Only then, will it be possible truly to promote a supra-cultural philosophical dialogue and develop humankind’s philosophical wisdom in the twenty-first century. Should to-morrow’s understanding of philosophy remain controlled by the European tradition or, even worse, by the “British and North American analytical” tradition, thus making it impossible to express the humanistic wisdom and value orientation of philosophy, then the prospects for mankind in the twenty-first century will not look better than in the twentieth.

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From the early 1930s on, researchers on Chinese philosophy have contributed very little, of a theoretical or methodological nature, regarding the above-mentioned issues. Meanwhile, in their actual work, they have basically assimilated the scope of “Chinese philosophy” to the old learning of moral principles; in other words, their delimitation of the scope of Chinese philosophy was not strictly done according to the topics of western philosophy. Yet, they did not realize that they should discuss the division of labour between the “history of Chinese philosophy” and the “intellectual history of China” or other disciplines dealing with thought and culture. Consequently, for quite a long period, and especially in Chinese-language literature, the distinction has been blurred between research on the history of Chinese philosophy and research on the intellectual history of China. As a trend, the latter was overshadowed by the former; being closely assimilated to the history of philosophy, intellectual history could not display its own identity. For instance, while in the 50s the Research Bureau on Chinese Intellectual History (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) published a “General Intellectual History of China”<sup>20</sup> that was quite strong

on political and economic aspects, in the 80s its "History of Neo-Confucianism in Song-Ming Times (XI-XVIIth centuries)"<sup>21</sup> clearly reflected the history-of-philosophy approach.

Be that as it may, since the early 80s, the scope of the history of Chinese philosophy has become more and more blurred, as research on thought found itself influenced by the development of social history, socio-intellectual history and cultural history. As professional researchers in the history of Chinese philosophy were on the brink of "getting lost", it became necessary once again to tackle the basic issue of the scope of Chinese philosophy. The reasons for doing so were new. Whereas in the 30s Feng Youlan's definitions tended to confine or reduce Chinese philosophy to the scope of western philosophy, since the early 80s, that one discipline "Chinese philosophy" was under much pressure to widen its scope. The trend was no longer the assimilation of intellectual history to the history of philosophy; now, the history of philosophy was being drawn into intellectual history and other historical disciplines. The outcome was a confused division of labour between the various research fields dealing with thought and culture. Admittedly, we are not saying that this is a very critical situation or that it is everywhere the same; yet, this situation does constitute quite a challenge for the study of Chinese philosophy.

In the United States, in the 60s and 70s, the leading research on Chinese philosophy or on Chinese thought would emphasize thought and notions, but, in the 80s this approach came under attack and had to give way to a social history-oriented study of thought and culture. Since, in the United States, research dealing with Chinese philosophy is done in East Asian or History departments, not in Philosophy departments, the influence of historical and social sciences came as no surprise, and many of the scholars born after the war turned to the new approach. Their main preoccupation was no longer to grasp ideas, notions or propositions as such; instead, by placing thought in its social and cultural environment, they would attempt to identify the organic link between thought and society, so that their study of ideas further displayed the approach of historical sciences, and not that of philosophy. Their aim was to understand the concrete connections between ideas and society in a given period, not how thinkers in all periods of history had reflected on and probed into the permanent topics regarding the universe, human life and the mind. Basically, we have here two differ-

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20. *Zhongguo sixiang tongshu*

21. *Song-Ming lixue shi*

ent categories of inquiry, the former belonging to the study of history, whereas the latter is what the history of philosophy dedicates itself to.

This trend among scholars in the United States had very little impact on scholars in China, who had long tasted the sweetness and bitterness of historical materialism, but it exerted considerable influence in Japan. Under the leadership of Tôkyô University, the “Tôkyô School” decisively turned toward this type of research and, in the early 90s, with the approval of the Ministry of Education, the old-styled “Research Bureau on Chinese Philosophy” at Tôkyô University was renamed “Research Bureau for Chinese Intellectual and Cultural Studies” and the scope of research was widened and extended to all aspects of Chinese culture. Likewise, the “Chinese Philosophy Society” at Tôkyô University was renamed the “Research Society on Chinese Society and Culture”. As a matter of fact, Chinese philosophy has been the discipline with the longest tradition at the University of Tôkyô and the “Chinese Philosophy Society” had long been the principal organization doing research on China at the University, but today “Chinese philosophy” has already vanished at this institution. This new orientation at Tôkyô University has undoubtedly influenced and will continue to influence academic circles in Japan. The status of “Chinese philosophy” as a discipline will necessarily be modified in other universities, principally at public universities, and the outcome will be a rapid downsizing of research on Chinese philosophy.

These days, admittedly, the study of Chinese philosophy continues to develop around the world. In the United States and in Europe, there is a gradual increase in the number of scholars, with a background in philosophy or theology, who are still engaged, and quite successfully, in the study of the philosophical aspects of Chinese thought. Yet, the challenge from the fields of intellectual history or intellectual and cultural studies is beyond dispute. In Japan, and first of all in private universities, there are still a good number of schools that list “Eastern Philosophies” as one discipline, but the latter includes an increasing number of non-philosophical topics (History of Taoist Religion or Taoist Liturgies, etc.)

As a matter of fact, East or West, this has long been the trend in sinological research. In Europe, sinology has traditionally emphasized philology, theatre and novels, or popular customs as represented by the Taoist religion; little attention was paid to thought and philosophy. In Japan, the founder of the “Kyôto School,” Kano Naoki (1868-1947), was greatly influenced by the textual criticism of eighteenth century China; for him, the history of scholarship was to be regarded as the history of philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Since, in his view,

the “history of scholarship” included philology and historical criticism as well as research on the traditional study of Confucian classics, his “History of Chinese Philosophy” devotes much space to the various approaches to the study of the Confucian classics in the course of history. In Kano’s view, the history of Chinese philosophy should include all the thinkers of Antiquity, Neo-Confucianism, and philological and historical research on the Classics.<sup>23</sup> Later on, Kano’s disciple Kojima Yûma replaced “history of Chinese philosophy” with “intellectual history of China”, on the assumption that a discipline calling itself “history of Chinese philosophy” would violate the integrality of Chinese thought. Under the influence of E. Durkheim’s sociology, Kojima entered the history of scholarship and the history of the study of the Classics into the overall framework of the history of social thought. For him, thought should be approached from the viewpoint of the social sciences dealing with politics, economy, law, and morals.<sup>24</sup> And today, writes Sakade Yoshinobu, for the students at the Research Bureau on the History of Chinese Philosophy, Kyôto University, topics in “Chinese philosophy” not only include the study of the Classics, Confucianism, Taoist and Buddhist religions, but also traditional medicine, agronomy, astronomy, mathematics, and other scientific and technical subjects. This trend, Sakade comments, is prevalent in the educational world of Japan.<sup>25</sup> In other words, fewer and fewer are the Japanese universities that still know of an independent discipline called the study of Chinese philosophy. They have progressively turned toward the much broader notion of the study of Chinese culture.

Clearly enough, since the early 90s, European sinology and Chinese studies in the United States, as well as the “Tôkyô School” and the “Kyôto School” in Japan have progressively converged. Everywhere, the study of Chinese thought is identified with social history, cultural studies, and not with philosophy. Three main causes account for this trend which affects research on the philosophical aspects of Chinese thought. First, the appearance of new patterns of academic research that, as a rule, strive to chal-

22. The term “Kyôto School” first applied to Japan’s leading group of philosophers around Nishida Kitarô (1870-1945) at Kyôto University. Later on, the term was extended to the Liberal Arts section of the same university, especially to scholars engaged in sinological research. Here, Chen Lai refers to these scholars. *Ed*

23. Kano Noaki, “History of Chinese Philosophy” [*Chûgoku tetsugakushi*], 1967, p. 4-11.

24. Kojima Yûma, “Chinese Intellectual History” [*Chûgoku shisôshi*], 1968, p. 1

25. Sakade Yoshinobu, “The Academic Standing of the Study of Chinese Philosophy in Japan” [*Nihon Chûgoku tetsugaku kenkyûteki gakumon no kakuritsû*], in. “Minutes of the Chinese Literature Society at Kansai University” [*Kansai Daigaku Chûgoku bungakukai kiyô*], No. 19, p. 6.

lenge tradition. Second, researchers in Chinese philosophy are in excess, and it is necessary to redistribute properly their capabilities. Third, Chinese philosophy is a field of study comparatively more difficult than others; the study of the realm of metaphysics is more complex than that of the world around us! Besides, we may add, around the planet interest for philosophy is on the wane; philosophical work is increasingly under the impact of social sciences, and, among the latter, historical sciences constitute the most serious temptation and challenge. Those worldwide transformations in the area of research have a serious impact on the academic exchange between Chinese and foreign scholars in the field of Chinese thought and culture, thereby influencing the study of the history of Chinese philosophy in our country.

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Obviously, a study of Chinese culture as a whole, or even of Chinese thought for that matter, would be unbalanced if it devoted excessive energy to the study of Chinese philosophy. We ought to promote the study of the many other aspects of Chinese culture; religion, sciences, geomantic methods, popular customs, are all topics that require further study. To achieve this, however, there is no need to widen the connotation of “Chinese philosophy” (thereby sacrificing the notion of Chinese philosophy as a discipline.) One may very well do research on Chinese philosophy and, at the same time, study other aspects of Chinese culture, without having to forsake the notion of “Chinese philosophy.” Indeed, students of Chinese philosophical thought must give due consideration to the links between thought and society, but the study of those links need not be their main task; given a right division of labour, this study should be left to other specialized departments or become the object of joint programs. Moreover, this plea for an urgent development of research in the many areas of Chinese culture does not amount to saying that there is no longer a need to study the notions, propositions, ideas and systems of Chinese philosophy. In this regard, recent works in foreign languages, such as Roger T. Ames’ and David L. Hall’s studies of philosophy in ancient Chinese thought, are all too rare.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, it is necessary to rearticulate clearly the main assignment of each discipline: “history of Chinese philosophy,” “intellectual his-

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26. See, for instance, David L. Hall & Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, New York: New York State University, 1987; translated into Chinese in 1996: *Kongzi zhexue swi* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s Press.) Ed

tory of China," "history of Chinese scholarship," "history of Chinese culture." Let us say that, in terms of scope, culture is wider than scholarship, scholarship wider than thought, and thought is wider than philosophy. (1) *Chinese philosophy* specifically denotes the organized system of theoretical reflections and notions developed by ancient Chinese thinkers, regarding the universe, human life, the mind and knowledge. In the realm of cultural superstructure, philosophy is the activity most remote from social actuality. Its relation to the economic foundation of society is indirect or indistinct, and maybe it is quite difficult to determine that relation. (2) The main realm of *Chinese intellectual history*, then, is extra-philosophical; it focuses on what does not belong to general philosophy: the content of political, social, historical ideas, and trends of thought in society at large. Since the links between these ideas and the social and economic basis are relatively direct, intellectual history not only studies ideas, but also the complex interrelation and interplay between these ideas and the structure and environment of one given society and culture (including politics, economy), with a view to understanding the organic connections at work through society during that period. (3) The *history of Chinese scholarship* must embrace all types of areas of learning that ought not to be the main concern of intellectual historians: pre-modern sciences, study of the Confucian Classics, geomancy, philology, historical criticism, traditional lexicography. (4) Much broader, of course, is research on the *history of Chinese culture*. Besides covering extensive ground, it is not limited to studying the ideas and writings of theoreticians; it also covers folk customs, popular religion, general attitudes etc. In conclusion, Chinese philosophy fits better among philosophical disciplines; Chinese intellectual history, among historical disciplines; and, the history of Chinese scholarship, in arts and literature (except for the area of traditional science and techniques that should be entrusted to specialists of the history of sciences.) As for the inter-disciplinary study of Chinese culture as a whole, a research centre or a special committee should organize it. Admittedly, broad programs on "Chinese thought and culture" make sense in foreign universities that can allow only so much room for Chinese studies. Yet, even then, one needs to be aware of the specificities of the various fields under the umbrella of "thought and culture"; it is extremely important to understand that these various fields require different types of intellectual tools. Lastly, it is similarly important to bear in mind that the agendas are not the same, that the researcher in philosophy is mainly concerned with assessing humanistic values, whereas historians are looking for historical evidence.

A specialist in the history of Chinese philosophy may, indeed, concur-

rently study intellectual history or the history of scholarship. After all, in traditional China, fields of learning overlapped and were never rigorously divided. Besides, there are, of course, intersections between these three categories of “history” and, anyhow, many specialized research topics necessarily bring the specialist onto someone else’s turf. Be that as it may, a clear understanding of this division of labour will allow scholars to be clear about their main tasks and prevent unnecessary arguments. Meanwhile, it should be clear that we do not intend to build barbed wire fences between these three categories of “history”; this division of labour should rather allow and encourage cooperative research. Inter-disciplinary research centres on Chinese culture must specially promote and organize research on those borderline topics that are often passed over by the specialist.

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