

INTRODUCTION

In the more than twenty years since the start of economic reforms in 1978, the People's Republic of China has become a full partner in the era of globalization. Recently, for example, it has gained World Trade Organization (WTO) status and received permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) recognition from the United States. The dramatic economic and social changes that have ushered in the era of globalization, have also been accompanied by a virtual renaissance in the study of philosophy in China. Philosophers have once again taken up the challenge of thinking critically about society and its future development. Earlier in this century, Chinese reformers claimed that modernization required abandoning traditional beliefs and practices and embracing Western methods and values. But is this also to be China's philosophical response to the challenge of globalization? Philosophers are now asking themselves: Have traditional ways of thinking endured? Have they been replaced by Western approaches and priorities? Alternatively, has there been a synthesis of Eastern and Western perspectives? Is there any continuity between the more than two thousand year old Chinese philosophical tradition and current philosophical trends? If so, what is the nature of such continuities and what may they contribute to the development of a genuinely global conversation about philosophy?

This book is designed to contribute to this conversation by presenting essays by some of the leading philosophers of modern China, on both their own traditions and their impressions of influential contemporary Western philosophers, and by offering the reactions and comments of prominent Western philosophers, all of them committed to expanding the horizons of philosophical inquiry globally. Before giving readers a brief outline of their essays, it may be useful to provide you with a sketch of the historical context in which philosophy is done in today's China. Seen in this context, the rapid development of contemporary philosophy in China is almost as astonishing as China's extraordinary, but more familiar economic and social development.

AN OVERVIEW OF PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA SINCE
ECONOMIC REFORM (1978 TO PRESENT)

Philosophy in China suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), where mindless conformity was king. The slogan “philosophy must serve politics” plunged philosophy into darkness for many years. Philosophers were caught in a storm of ideological struggles and often had to write a justification of whatever the party in power’s policy happened to be. Furthermore, the philosophical field was completely isolated from more recent developments in other countries. Marxism was only one of several Western ideologies that had entered China earlier, but it had been given an authoritative position. In the Marxist method of analysis, philosophical traditions (either Chinese or Western) were classified simplistically as either materialist or idealist, with the former being good and the latter bad. The history of philosophy was viewed as an eternal struggle between these two trends. China’s great intellectual tradition had indeed fallen on hard times. Then on May 11, 1978, the *Guangming Daily’s* article “Practice Is the Only Criterion for Testing the Truth” sparked a national debate about the standard of truth. This was a landmark for the movement of intellectual freedom and a breakthrough for social change. A main goal of this controversial article was to discredit dogmatism and to promote the idea that practice is the only and ultimate authority. This pragmatic view (more Deweyan than Rortyeian in spirit) was based on Deng Xiaoping’s commitment to results rather than to ideological purity. His famous quotation: “White or black, if it catches mice, it is a good cat” became the official justification not just for policy, but also for China’s intellectual life. Economically, of course, Deng’s approach sparked the transition away from a planned economy and toward a free market. But it also had a profound effect on academic research, leading to increased freedom of expression. This has increasingly emancipated philosophy from political and ideological bondage. Philosophers no longer are required to employ Marxist methodology as a tool.

As the old ideology lost ground, Western culture invaded all areas of life. The focus of philosophical debate moved from the criterion of truth to the problem of alienation versus humanism. This debate was over the legacy of the Cultural Revolution in the past, how to understand Western culture in the present, and how to realize the value, rights, dignity, and freedom of human beings. There was intense philosophical turmoil around issues of “culture” (*wenhua*), focused on two concerns: (a) The relationship between tradition and modernity: Is tradition compatible with modernity? Does the process of modernity mean one has to resist tradition? What role, if any, does tradition play in assisting the transition to modernity? (b) The relationship between Chinese and Western cultures: What are the differences between them? How can one absorb the outstanding cultural achievements of all countries and at the same time resist the corrosive influence of some aspects of capitalism?

This “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*) replays the perennial Chinese battle over the old and the new, conservatism and change. For example, more than two thousand years ago, the Mohists had fought in favor of technological innovation and social reform against the Confucian reverence for tradition and honor. In the 1980–89 period, however, Chinese intellectuals now desperately tried to discover China’s distinctive identity in the world, and to find a way to combat the alienating and dehumanizing aspects of modern societies. During this time intellectual life was flourishing together with a rise of cultural self-consciousness.

One important event was the “River Elegy,” a controversial, interpretive, six-part television series on Chinese cultural roots and ethos, on tradition and modernity, straightforwardly attacking the historical, mythological, and social foundations of China—the legends of the Yellow River, the Great Wall and the Dragon. This documentary, watched by 70 million Chinese, regarded these venerable legends as an albatross. It blamed the river and a reverence for what it represented for China’s failure to enter the modern world. While the Europeans were sailing the high seas and discovering the world and its riches, China had paddled along the silted Yellow River, hardly venturing out of sight of land. The high seas symbolized the open, dynamic, and exploratory spirit of the West, while the Yellow River symbolized the closed, stagnant, and insular mentality of China. Similarly, the Great Wall, a symbol of historical continuity, was seen as a manifestation of close-minded conservatism. The Dragon, a symbol of the all-powerful emperor who ruled China by virtue of the Mandate of Heaven, was condemned for legitimating an outmoded imperial authoritarianism. The message of the *River Elegy* evoked memories of the May Fourth movement of 1919 in its intertwining of nationalism (patriotism) and iconoclasm (antitraditionalism). But it also provoked even more difficult questioning: If Chinese intellectuals in China proper are so thoroughly disgusted with Chinese culture, does this mean that they have voluntarily forfeited their right to have any distinctive Chineseness? This was a hard conclusion for many Chinese to accept.

The economic reforms had enriched people and enlarged their views of the world. They started to adopt Western slogans, symbols, and styles. In sharp contrast to the Cultural Revolution, students were quoting Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson to back up their demand for democracy. Many Chinese intellectuals took a great interest in Western philosophical currents and attempted to introduce them into their research and writings. Many Western philosophical books and articles were translated into Chinese. Continental European philosophy had a particular appeal to reflective minds in China at this time. Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger became very popular on every university campus—a phenomena that came to be known as “Sartre fever,” or “Nietzsche fever.” Together they inspired the students’ call for “self-liberation” and their hope that the promotion of Western beliefs would provide a way to construct a new vision of personal individuality. This cultural movement partially contributed to the June 4, 1989 student movement, some of whose leaders were philosophers and authors.

Despite the brief backlash after the June 4 incident, Chinese philosophers today are flourishing in the climate of diversity and prosperity that economic reform has created. Here are some numbers: before economic reform, all of China had only four philosophical journals; now there are over sixty academic journals in philosophy. There have also been at least one thousand Western philosophical books and over a thousand articles translated into Chinese since the economic reforms. While publications are still censored by the government, and discussing some social problems can lead to reprisals, many people from cabdrivers to college professors apparently feel quite free to speak their views. The inclusion of China in the global telecommunication network has contributed to the opening of Chinese society and has transformed Chinese academic research. Never before have Chinese academics been able to reach out so easily and become so well acquainted with Western philosophical perspectives. It is a revolution by e-mail, websites, fax machines, and direct-dial telephone calls.

There is no single current that can encompass the diversity characteristic of the current atmosphere. The superficial aspects of "the Western fever" have cooled down. The slogan "Back To Philosophy Itself" captures the latest trend. It seeks to focus on academic and rigorously philosophical activities. There are scholars studying and writing about Western philosophy, while many other philosophers in China are making a considerable effort to modernize, while also preserving, the millennia-old heritage of Chinese thought. The latter, hoping to restore and deepen what they see as a distinctive wisdom tradition, blend a Confucian ethos with a respect for the achievements of modern science and capitalist markets.

AN OVERVIEW OF OUR CONVERSATIONS

With that historical context in mind, here is a map of the terrain upon which our philosophical conversations will proceed. The six exchanges have been divided into two parts: Part One: "Reflecting on Chinese Philosophical Tradition," and Part Two: "Bringing Chinese Philosophy into the Global Discourse." Those in the first part feature contemporary Chinese philosophers reflecting primarily on China's intellectual tradition and its possible contributions to philosophical conversation in an era of globalization. Those in the second part allow the reader to eavesdrop on Chinese philosophers critically appropriating the work of major Western philosophers in order to understand their own tradition from different global perspectives. In both parts, each Chinese perspective is given a critical response, usually by a prominent Western philosopher whose work or field of inquiry is addressed in the lead essay. Thus, each set is an invitation to conversation, rather than a transcript of a conversation that has already been completed.

The first of these consists in an exchange between Zhang Dainian and Kwong-loi Shun on the presence or absence of "axiology" or value-theory in representative works of pre-modern Chinese philosophy. Zhang Dainian's magisterial

survey not only discovers a robust discussion of axiology running throughout that history, but also seeks to develop a typology that will locate ancient Chinese philosophers within the range of contemporary axiological discourse and facilitate an evaluation of their relative strengths and weaknesses. Kwong-loi Shun, however, warns that such a project runs the risk of distorting a genuine understanding of these works. Given the absence in the ancient texts of any clear equivalent to the modern meaning of “value” (*jiazhi*), Shun is skeptical of construing their richly evaluative discourses as a contribution to value-theory.

Besides the specific merits of their debate over the presence or absence of axiology in premodern Chinese philosophy, Zhang and Shun model many of the challenges that must be faced if the old East-West “dialogue” about Chinese philosophy is to be transformed into a genuinely open and collaborative conversation. Zhang has mastered modern Western value-theory, and seeks to apply it to Chinese classical philosophy. As Shun suggests, such an approach seems to assume that contemporary Western philosophy must set the terms of the dialogue, and that Chinese scholars can make their contribution by reconstructing their tradition within the Western paradigm. The risks of distorted interpretation that he emphasizes suggest that this approach has not yet reached the level of either cross-cultural dialogue or collaborative conversation. On the other hand, all conversations, however haltingly proceeding, must begin somewhere. Shun’s attempt to deepen the reader’s appreciation of the otherness of the ancient texts and traditions succeeds only by challenging the modern conventions of analytic discourse within which Zhang has laid out his lucid and perhaps all too familiar picture of Chinese “axiology.”

The second philosophical conversation, between Zhao Dunhua and Stephen Davis, concerns analyses of the historical origins of not only Chinese religion but also theories of religion in general. As Davis points out, Zhao’s paper indirectly testifies to the extent that philosophy of religion in China is now liberated from Marxist dogma, particularly the evolutionary view of the origins of religion, presupposed by Marx, among others, and later canonized in the writings of Frederick Engels. Contrary to this “Progressive Theory,” Zhao argues that the worship of the “Lord on High (*Shangdi*)” and “Heaven (*Tian*)” (characteristic of the Shang and Zhou dynasties respectively) cannot be explained as evolving from “lower” forms of religiousness, such as, ancestor worship, animism, shamanism, or polytheism. Indeed, subsequent to the Shang and Zhou dynasties the pattern of development is just the opposite: “polytheism” apparently emerges from “monotheism” as the “Lord on High” and “Heaven” become increasingly vague, impersonal, and removed from the existential concerns of ordinary Chinese people.

While Zhao’s argument is constructed painstakingly from the data of Chinese history, he does situate it in the context of philosophical theories developed to explain the origins of religion generally. At this point, his differences with Davis become apparent. Davis does not dispute Zhao’s interpretation of

Chinese religion, but he does warn that such an interpretation does not warrant the hypothesis of an original, universal monotheism that Father Wilhelm Schmidt, for example, had memorably proposed in opposition to the reigning evolutionary theories of religion in the 1920s. Whatever their remaining differences, Zhao and Davis are agreed that the philosophy of religion can no longer be identified with speculative explanations of the origins of religion, especially those motivated by apologetics seeking either to subvert religious faith and practice or to justify them rationally. Such tacit agreements make a genuinely philosophical conversation about religion both possible and necessary.

The third set features a discussion of the theory of human nature found in the writings of the most famous Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi. Chen Lai attempts a painstaking reconstruction of Zhu's reflections on the relationship between the heavenly principle (*li*) animating all things and the physical endowment (*qi*) specific to each individual. Chen asserts that Zhu's reflections are an advance beyond the teachings of his philosophical forebears, the Cheng brothers, and seeks to establish the basic coherence and adequacy of Zhu's position, particularly with reference to the question of how to explain the evil that human beings do, assuming that Mencius was correct in asserting the essential goodness of humanity. Chen's reconstruction is particularly helpful in articulating the cosmological presuppositions of Zhu's perspective on human nature, and how it might illuminate certain vexing problems in moral psychology, such as accounting for the unstable mixture of good and evil in human emotions.

Bryan Van Norden offers a very useful complement to Chen's reconstruction, for he helps readers not already conversant with the debates among Neo-Confucians to understand what is at stake in Zhu's reflections, and why they still matter. While Van Norden takes issue with Chen's estimate of Zhu's originality beyond the teachings of the Cheng brothers, his contribution lies in noting the differences between the entire school of Neo-Confucianism (*Dao xue*) and what is and isn't actually said in the classic texts. Van Norden challenges the reader to think through the Way of moral self-cultivation proposed by the tradition as a whole. The metaphysical disputes over the relationship of "*li*" and "*qi*," he persuasively argues, have profound ethical significance, not only for understanding what kinds of moral demands can reasonably be made of human beings, but also for highlighting precisely what must be cultivated in human nature, and with what resources, if one is seriously concerned to become a moral person. Van Norden thus illuminates the very different strategies that might emerge were Zhu's program of self-cultivation to be followed, as in the "School of Li," rather than that offered by Lu Xiangshan and later developed by Wang Yangming, as in the "School of Mind." The reader thus is invited to participate in a conversation on how the practice of self-cultivation might be enhanced by a philosophical understanding of human nature, both in general and as it is emergent in the strengths and weaknesses of each living person.

The fourth set, featuring Wan Junren and Alasdair MacIntyre, allows us to observe a conversation already well launched by two philosophers who have learned much from each other. The ostensible topic is further reflections on the divergences and convergences between Confucian and Aristotelian theories of virtue, with Wan tending more and more to emphasize divergence and MacIntyre convergence. Wan's interpretation of the otherness of Confucian tradition is couched to a great extent in the categories that MacIntyre developed in *After Virtue*. Only now his conversation partner MacIntyre, less a Marxist and more a Thomist in his interpretation of Aristotle, is committed to exploring the ways in which both perspectives on virtue make universal claims that are not only internally consistent, but also rationally compelling for all serious students of moral philosophy.

Thus, Wan contrasts Confucian virtue theory with the Aristotelian by asserting that the former's core is constituted by a normative pattern of cosmically ordered social relationships carrying deontological obligations, such that virtue can never be reducible to an individual's personal pursuit of any teleological end, however objective, or conceptualized apart from the social practices in which they are embedded as part of a specific community's moral tradition. MacIntyre, in turn, not only refuses to accept Wan's characterization of Aristotelian virtue theory, as if it were simply the point of departure for modern Western moral rationalism; but he also challenges Wan's interpretation of Confucian ethics, emphasizing the centrality of ritual propriety (*li*) in self-cultivation, although claiming that this social practice requires a rather different account of the relationship of individual autonomy and the achievement of exemplary moral character, than that provided by Wan. Understanding the differences between these two interlocutors requires as much thoughtful attention to what is not said, as to what they actually choose to address in each other's theories. Both are deeply committed to the comparative study of moral philosophies, and both help readers to appreciate the ways in which cultural differences, giving rise to different ontological presuppositions and epistemological commitments, will inevitably come to the foreground as the conversation gets more intense as well as more productive.

The fifth set offers us a chance to imagine how a conversation comparing epistemological commitments might proceed. Kelly James Clark and Liu Zongkun seek to compare Zhuangzi's and Alvin Plantinga's philosophies on how a natural knowledge of, on the one hand, Dao, and on the other hand, God, is possible. While conceding that such a comparison may at first seem strange, Clark and Liu argue that Zhuangzi and Plantinga share a common adversary in the classical foundationalism, identified with René Descartes and David Hume, and epitomized in the ethics of belief formulated by W. K. Clifford. In order to make this comparison work, Zhuangzi's criticisms of Confucian "rationalism" must be interpreted, not as warranting epistemological skepticism and moral relativism, but as tantamount to a form of "perspectivism" that allows what may be known

naturally about the Dao to count as genuine “knowledge” capable of guiding a person’s efforts at self-cultivation. Similarly, Plantinga’s philosophical dissent against classical foundationalism is understood as a form of Christian apologetics, a philosophical defense of the beliefs of the reformed tradition in Protestantism, asserting that such beliefs, though unprovable on rationalist assumptions, are nevertheless rational and can be regarded as true knowledge by those who adhere to them.

While Clark and Liu are content merely to suggest the fruitfulness of such a comparison, Plantinga seems more concerned to defend his own position, by expressing some reservations about just how closely Zhuangzi can be made to agree with him. Plantinga, in short, sees more skepticism in Zhuangzi than Clark and Liu allow, and worries that Zhuangzi, in the end, may actually agree with classical foundationalism that the “unsettle-ability” of disputes about the nature of Ultimate Reality means that no one can claim to have any genuine knowledge of it. Nevertheless, in defending as genuine the knowledge of God that reformed Christians profess, Plantinga would seem required to accept similar claims from Daoists and other non-Christians, and for similar reasons. Thus, though comparative philosophy inevitably raises epistemological questions, substantively diverging claims about Ultimate Reality, for example, the nature of Dao and God, are not likely to be resolved by appeal to any one epistemology or another.

The final set, an exchange between Zhang Xianglong and Merold Westphal on how understanding what Laozi and Zhuangzi meant by Dao can be deepened through an appreciation of Heidegger’s theory of language (*Sprache*), goes beyond conversation toward modeling a collaborative philosophical inquiry. Zhang and Westphal discover that they are in deep agreement on many things. Zhang’s reconstruction of the meanings of Dao, and how they are used in Lao-Zhuang thought—contrary to standard interpretations—to convey the nonrepresentational, nonconceptual nature of “Dao-language,” that is, the “great speech” of the Dao beyond the “petty speech” of ordinary work a day language, all this is accepted by Westphal. They also agree as to the relevance of Heidegger for understanding Dao-language, and the constructive role that his later works may play in rethinking philosophical Daoism. Both believe that a proper understanding of Dao-language is necessary to correct “skeptical and relativist” interpretations of Lao-Zhuang thought, which tend to legitimate “intuitionism” and “mysticism” as the only possible approaches to the Dao. They imply that leaving the field only to skeptical relativists and mystics is to force philosophical Daoism to commit intellectual suicide.

They disagree only on what Westphal concedes is a relatively unimportant question, namely, whether the later Heidegger’s theory of language is already present in his earlier *Being and Time*. With that much consensus, what is left to talk about? At this point, Westphal introduces another perspective, that of Augustine of Hippo, claiming that Augustine (and orthodox Christianity gener-

ally), also held a nonrepresentational view of “God-language,” similar to the view shared by the later Heidegger and Lao-Zhuang thought. The major difference, according to Westphal, is that Augustine’s God is capable of “speech-acts,” indeed that these are pictured in the Bible as the primordial pattern of God’s dealing with the world that God created through his Word. The Dao, in Westphal’s view, may call us beyond the reach of language, but the Dao may not be understood as someone calling. Thus, the reader is left to imagine a future conversation in which Zhang might either clarify the Dao’s impersonal nature, especially in its superior moral wisdom, or might modify it in ways that make it more congruent with what Westphal (and Augustine) find so compelling about the personal nature of God.

Thus, the exchange between Zhang and Westphal, along with the preceding two sets, take us around full circle to certain basic questions animating the first part of this collection: What is it that humanity must value as constituting the core of a good life? How is our quest for wisdom about these things related to our religious inklings about Shangdi, Tian, Dao, and God? And, finally, what in our natures should be cultivated, and how, so that we might find in ourselves a greater integrity between our inner dispositions and what life itself requires of us. The passion for philosophical reflection that we see represented in these conversations has been one of the important ingredients in Chinese mentality throughout Chinese history. An average educated Chinese person has had an interest in (or at least has felt he ought to have an interest in) philosophy from classical Confucian times to the contemporary revolutionary period. Confucius’ saying, “if one learns without thinking one will be bewildered,” is still a widely held belief. This volume has brought together leading scholars to further the conversation between the Western and Chinese philosophical traditions. Consistent with China’s traditional respect for philosophical reflection, contemporary Chinese philosophers display a remarkable openness, in which they rigorously study and make use of Western philosophy. By the same token, the history of Western philosophy yields impressive precedents of openness to learning and incorporating ideas from eastern traditions. Gottfried Leibniz, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger, and many other Western philosophers were inspired by traditional Chinese thought. The underlying question animating the English language publication of this volume is: Can contemporary Western philosophers also benefit from contemporary Chinese philosophy? In exploring the possibilities for mutual intellectual enrichment, this book presents philosophical inquiry in a global context and creates a new style, which opens new possibilities for intriguing and meaningful philosophical exchange. The flourishing of philosophy in China deserves to attract the attention of modern speculative and critical minds more keenly than ever before.