Introduction

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It is with considerable pleasure that, at the request of our special issue editor, Yuan Jinmei, I sit down to write this introduction. Over the years, I together with my collaborators in comparative philosophy have made the argument that the kind of strict philosophical transcendence assumed in classical Greek ontology has little relevance for the classical Chinese philosophers. Jinmei has organized this issue of *International Communication of Chinese Culture* on this theme of transcendence, inviting contributions from a cohort of her professional colleagues. The fact that many if not most of the contributors are her colleagues at Creighton University speaks to the quality of the intellectual engagement and the collegiality she enjoys at this distinguished institution.

This issue begins with a dialogue in which Yuan Jinmei reflects on some of the basic cosmological assumptions that in general terms distinguish the Chinese philosophical tradition from the history of Western philosophy. Along the way, Jinmei asks questions and receives substantive answers about the history of the idea of transcendence as it has evolved within the Western philosophical narrative from her Philosophy Department colleagues, Jeanne Schuler and Patrick Murray. In addition to this opening dialogue, the special issue contains a series of essays that engage the topic of whether or not the notion of strict philosophical transcendence is relevant to the process cosmology that provides the classical Chinese philosophical canons their interpretive context. These essays take us in several different directions, but they all return to the issue of interpretive context. In order to take the Chinese philosophical narrative on its own terms and to allow it to speak with its own voice, we must locate it within its own cosmological assumptions, within its own worldview, within its own commonsense. Let me begin here by introducing these essays, and

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then conclude by adding a few of my own thoughts to the topics raised in the dialogue between Jinmei and her colleagues.

The first essay is a contribution by my dear friend Yu Jiyuan, whom we all lost too soon at his premature passing in 2016. With his usual intellectual generosity, Jiyuan worries that in insisting on such a stark contrast between classical Chinese and Greek philosophy, I am not giving sufficient attention to their commonalities—a fair criticism indeed. Differences identified in comparative philosophy rarely conclude with an “either-or.” Jiyuan then provides a thorough and penetrating rehearsal of the notion of *tian* 天 as it occurs in the *Analects*, allowing that it should by all means be clearly distinguished from any version of the Judeo-Christian conception of God, but also asking whether or not an exclusively immanent reading of this protean idea can do it justice.

Sor-hoon Tan takes on philosophical legitimacy of the seemingly oxymoronic notion introduced by Mou Zongsan of “immanent-transcendence” (*neizaichaoyue* 內在超越). Tan finds the key to Mou’s concept of “immanent-transcendence” in his insistence—*contra* Kant—that in the Confucian tradition human beings are capable of intellectual intuition, and that such intuition gives them access to transcendence, thereby rendering it immanent. Mou’s idealism (where the ideal is the metaphysical moral mind) seeks to trump Kant by turning from epistemology to moral practice, thereby locating ultimate reality in values rather than in facts, in a shared cosmic moral metaphysics rather than in a metaphysics of morals.

In his essay on Xunzi, Kurtis Hagen continues to justify his signature constructivist reading of this pre-Qin philosopher, defending this interpretation against those several contemporary commentators who would ascribe to Xunzi a transcendental universalism. He focuses on Aaron Stalnaker who in his interpretation of the use of the term “pattern” (*li* 理), as an example, would claim that “Xunzi thinks there is only one fundamental, overarching pattern to reality, and thus one right Way” (Stalnaker 2004, p. 66). What is really at stake here is the fundamental contradiction between Hagen’s ascribing to Xunzi an open-ended philosophical pluralism in which human beings play an important, creative role in making the cosmos meaningful, and Stalnaker’s attributing a closed realist dogmatism to Xunzi in which human beings can at best “make manifest” a single and self-sufficient transcendent reality.

Andrew Colvin does a masterful job in engaging the several arguments posited by Methodist Theological University’s Jang Wang-Shik, who would contest the Hall and Ames hypothesis that in the classical Chinese texts there is no appeal to strict philosophical transcendence. Colvin uses informal logic to restate the different elements in Jang’s critique. In this summary of Jang’s reservations then, Hall and Ames are guilty of the fallacies of equivocation, overstating the obvious, suppressing evidence to the contrary, and wishful thinking. While Jang’s concern over categorical “either-or” generalizations is always a good idea, at the end of the day, his several arguments for transcendence in his interpretation of pre-Qin Confucian philosophy lean him heavily in the direction of defending what seems to be a faint but still visible specter of Christian theology.

Jinmei Yuan in her own essay takes this occasion of reflecting on the issue of transcendence to suggest a Daoist alternative to an Aristotelian logic grounded in

the Law of Identity that gives us a world composed of discrete and independent “things.” Appealing to the Cantor–Husserlian conception of set-theory, especially as it entails the “lived experience” of the intentional “I,” Yuan is able to formulate a way of coming to know the relationship between particular elements and general terms that respects the role of subjectivity in the process. Yuan argues that the logic of Husserl enables him to discover the world of consciousness, with the “I” being in this world and thus being able to know it. The holistic logic of the Daoist thinkers shares with Husserl the continuity between the “I” and the world, but rather than asserting its intentionality, takes the “I” as an empty set, thereby construing the “I” and the world as an inseparable oneness. Indeed, for the Daoists, it is the embodying of this ever transforming oneness that they would understand as “knowing *dao*.”

In his essay on cross-cultural pedagogy, Richard White begins by rehearsing the singular importance of transcendental thinking in the evolution of the Western philosophical narrative. Whatever meaning we might derive from the belief in transcendentalism, if in teaching world religions we uncritically project this familiar assumption onto alternative traditions, we would be participating in an unfortunate instance of cultural reductionism. White, in attempting to take Daoism on its own terms, is able to extract out of this philosophical tradition values that might serve as an alternative to those assumed in the kind of transcendental universalism we would associate with monotheism. Pluralistic, relational values such as humility, frugality, compassion, responsiveness, equanimity and temperance are made explicit in the kind of Daoist contextualism we find in the *Dao De Jing*, and in practice might take us in the direction of an achieved diversity in which we not only differ *from* each other, but by activating these differences, we come to differ *for* each other.

Jerold Abrams tells the story of the evolution of the wall drawings in the 492 Mogao caves at the Chinese Dunhuang end of the Silk Road. These cave murals are a living story not only because they were painted across the centuries to chronicle in images the evolving history of Chinese Buddhism, but also a living story in the sense that, when we return to the original conditions under which they were composed, they were literally intended to come to life as moving pictures in the flickering of torch and candle light. The cinematic vitality of the imagery can again be grasped when we locate the cave art in the interpretive context within which its story takes place. The holographic process cosmology signified by the character *tian* 天 (“nature naturing”) denotes both that “only becoming is,” and that this metamorphic becoming is always being construed from one unique focal perspective or another.

Nathan James Peterson uses the *Cover* books series written in the 1990s by contemporary Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei, Xu Bing, and Zeng Xiaojun to illustrate the *chaoyan* 超驗 kind of transcendence that can in fact be quite properly associated with the always evolving, always hybridic Chinese culture. Having lived abroad for an extensive period, Ai and his fellow travelers in the *Cover* books translate the experimental ideas of modern and contemporary foreign artists into Chinese to bring their international experience in all of its parts back to China as a challenge to those forces of ossification that would render the production of art null and vacuous. In the huge influence these cosmopolitan artists are having on shaping practices in China today, these often subversive sojourners walking their own way defy all of

the binaries that would separate theory from practice, domestic from foreign, traditional from contemporary, thought from feelings, and the ethical from the aesthetic.

Returning to the dialogue that Yuan Jinmei has with her colleagues Schuler and Murray, she begins as a good philosopher should by defining her terms. What then is the backstory to Yuan Jinmei's analysis of the term *chaoyue* 超越 that was created as a translation of the Western term "transcendence?" As Jinmei suggests this translation connotes "a process involving an action performed by a particular subject." While such a translation captures in some degree the etymology of "transcendence" as "to climb beyond" in the sense of rising above something to a higher state, it seems to have little to do with the closed self-sufficiency of strict philosophical transcendence. The source and complexity of the continuing confusion regarding this issue of "transcendence" and its relevance to Chinese philosophy is not only the ambiguities of the polysemous term "transcendence" itself, but how this term is presently being deployed within Chinese scholarship itself.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the structures and curricula of Western education were imported wholesale into the East-Asian academy, allowing Asian scholars access to the apparatus of new knowledge production, but at a cost to their own identity. China, along with the other East-Asian cultures, enamored of and overwhelmed by Western modernity, constructed a new conceptual vocabulary from the classical Chinese texts. This vocabulary would enable these traditions to synchronize their own cultural past and their aspirations for the future with the foreign concepts defining of Western modernity. The effect of this phenomenon is that while East Asian scholars certainly continue to speak and write in their own vernacular languages, these languages themselves have been transformed in important degree by their encounter with the conceptual structure of a dominating Western modernity.

This history is still very much with us as Western modernity continues to be the language through which East-Asian traditions are being conceptualized and theorized not simply abroad, but within their own academy. Indeed, the Cambridge rhetorician I.A. Richards, aware of this translingual event as early as 1932, observed that trying to understand China on its own terms has "a practical urgency as well as a theoretic interest" because

... before long there will be nobody studying Mencius into whose mind philosophical and other ideas and methods of Western origin have not made their way. Western notions are penetrating steadily into Chinese, and the Chinese scholar of the near future will not be intellectually much nearer Mencius than any Western pupil of Aristotle and Kant (Richards 1932, p. 9).

But is this really true? Perhaps Richards's concerns here require qualification. If we appeal to the examples of the Chinese appropriation of Buddhism and other earlier waves of "Western learning," including most recently Marxism, we can say that the transformative influence these importations have had on Confucian thinking is certainly significant. But we also witness a process whereby, to use the language of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the vocabulary of these initially alien traditions has been "domesticated" to become a distinctively Chinese version of the original. This same domesticating process has been taking place with the Chinese appropriation of the

vocabulary of Western modernity as it continues to be transformed into a distinctively Confucian modernity.

The metamorphosis of Western transcendent universalism into a distinctively Chinese *chaoyue* and *pubian* thinking are just two examples among many that can illustrate this point.¹ These terms created explicitly to express a Western conceptual vocabulary have, over time and unconsciously perhaps, been retrofitted to express a persistent Chinese worldview. Although *pubian* 普遍 is specifically a translation of the Western idea of “universal” as a timeless and unchanging truth, it has come to mean “pervasive, common, shared” in the way it has been deployed. Again, *chaoyue* 超越 as a specific translation of “transcendence” as an external, exclusive, independent, universal, and self-sufficient standard has come to mean the outer limits of an inside, rather than this notion of strict, philosophical transcendence. The kind of transcendent universalism foundational in the Western philosophical narrative has been deployed within the contemporary Chinese context to express holistic and inclusive *chaoyue* 超越 and *pubian* 普遍 thinking. Where transcendent universalism in Plato, for example, rationalizes the human experience by reducing the many to the one, Confucian *chaoyue* and *pubian* thinking references the aesthetic sensibility captured by Tang Junyi 唐君毅 in his notion of *yiduobufen* 一多不分, “the inseparability of one and many,” where everything is relevant to anything, and anything to everything.

Just to be clear on what I am calling “*chaoyue* and *pubian* thinking,” Tang Junyi introduces this cosmological postulate derived from the *Book of Changes* he calls *yiduobufenguan* 一多不分觀 that we might summarize as “one is many, many one” (Tang 1991, pp. 16–17). It is, simply put, the assumption that in the compositing of any “one,” there is implicated within it the contextualizing “many.” Tang would insist that this protean expression is a distinctive, generic feature of the Chinese processual cosmology locating our persons, for example, as vital and specific foci that have implicated within each of us a boundless field of relations. Importantly, *yiduobufen* is another way of describing the doctrine of intrinsic, constitutive relationality we would contrast with second-order external relations that obtain among the kind of discrete individuals or things assumed in a substance ontology. This *yiduobufen* proposition can be read in many different ways, as it speaks at once to the inseparability of the one and the many, to the continuity between particular identity and context, to the co-presence of uniqueness and multivalence, to the mutuality of continuity and multiplicity, to the inclusiveness of integrity and integration, to the dynamics of a shared harmony emerging out of relational tensions, to the expression of the specific details in the totality of the effect, and so on.

Cosmologically, this proposition of the inseparability of one and many is an alternative principle of individuation that stands in contrast to a classical Greek

¹ Other examples that immediately come to mind are *bentilun* 本體論 as a translation of “ontology,” that far from meaning “substance” or “essence,” has come to reference generic traits of experience. Another most interesting term is *wenhua* 文化 as a translation of “culture” that in Chinese refers to a human contrapuntal relationship with the environment without being freighted with the original strong teleological assumptions built into the metaphor of “culture” (agriculture, horticulture).

essentialism. It is an alternative to the Platonic one-behind-the-many ontology that presupposes some self-same, reduplicated, identical characteristic is defining of all members of a particular class, and that assumes some one-behind-the-many transcendent realm of universal principles to be defining of our reality. *Yiduobufen* also restates in a different language the focus-field conception of persons as “human becomings,” where each self-conscious person, and each impulse in the life of each person, has implicated within it the boundless “many.” This defining feature of Chinese natural cosmology is fundamental to our understanding of the relationally-constituted, focus-field conception of persons captured in Mencius as “the myriad things of the world are all implicated here in me” (Mencius 7A4).²

Another important point to make with respect to the history of Western philosophy is the relatively recent and yet persistent revolution against foundationalist assumptions such as this notion of strict philosophical transcendence. Indeed, the continuing internal critique within the Western philosophical narrative itself that began in the late nineteenth century is a rejection of this transcendentalism in all of its difference forms: “logocentrism” and the “language of presence” (Derrida), “ontotheological thinking” (Heidegger), “the myth of the given” (Sellars), “God is dead” (Nietzsche), the “transcendental pretense” (Solomon), “the philosophical fallacy” (Dewey), “the block universe” (James), and so on. This critique is a rejection of the ontological disparity underlying the reality/appearance distinction and all of the exclusive dualistic categories that follow from it: objective/subjective, mind/body, God/world, literal/metaphorical, substance/attribute, good/evil, true/false, and so on. Responding to the concern about treating transcendence as a categorical “either-or” distinction, in making the argument that strict philosophical transcendence has little relevance for Chinese philosophy, we are not asserting that this tradition is missing out on something important, but rather that Chinese philosophy did not make a wrong turn. Said another way, do we want to wish on the Chinese philosophical tradition an assumption that we ourselves have determined to be an entrenched Western fallacy?

Perhaps the most interesting phenomenon in comparative philosophy today is that within the contemporary Western narrative, the process language being developed to replace the now discredited transcendent universalism is in important degree resonant with the vocabulary of Confucian philosophy. In place of a Cartesian rationalism that privileges the precision of clear and distinct ideas in its quest for objective certainty, vocabularies of process, change, particularity, metaphor, creative advance, and indeed productive vagueness have come increasingly into vogue. Simply put, an important direction in contemporary Western philosophy is the attempt to think processually and to cultivate the practical wisdom needed for philosophy to be relevant to an always changing world order. And the good news for comparative philosophy is that these recent developments in mainstream Anglo-European philosophy are themselves giving rise to an interpretive vocabulary that promises a more productive dialogue with a Chinese philosophical tradition that since its earliest records has never denied change or process.

² Translation is my own.

As the closing lines of this introduction, I am sure that I am speaking on behalf of all of the authors when I say that the work in this special issue is a dedication to Dr. Daniel J. Semrad (1949-2021). Dr. Semrad, with his passion for Asian wisdom, was working on his paper about transcendence and Zhuangzi until the end of his life. Although his paper was unfinished, as a generous donor to Eastern Philosophy programs at Creighton University and across the US, Dr. Semrad's impact and his practice of Dao are included in this special issue.

I also want to express our gratitude to MC Raterman, a former Creighton philosophy major, and current Master's student at Cornell University. As an assistant editor, MC Raterman's hard work and contributions to this special issue are highly appreciated by every author here.

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