

A characterization of philosophical knowledge in ‘Chinese modernity’: philosophical studies in Chinese Universities and the Academy of Social Sciences

WAN JUNREN

Department of Philosophy, Tsinghua University, Beijing 100084, People’s Republic of China. E-mail: wan_jr8@263.net

The present state of the study of philosophy in China cannot be understood if the introduction of Western philosophy, including Marxism, in the early decades of the 20th century is ignored. During the first half of the past century, philosophy flourished at Peking University with a heavy emphasis on social and political theory, as well as at Tsinghua University, which focused more on professionalization of the discipline, logic, epistemology and the history of philosophy. From 1957 to 1979, philosophical studies suffered severely under an increasingly unfavourable political climate. It is only recently that departments of philosophy have been reconstructed, not only in Beijing but also in all major universities. Like their colleagues in other disciplines, many philosophers are nowadays struggling with the dichotomy between the old and the new, the Chinese and the Western tradition, and resisting an uncritical absorption of Western ideas. Finally, some observations are made on the lectures that Jürgen Habermas gave in China in 2001.

Preliminary remarks

In view of the complexity of the topic of this essay, I can only present my subjective understanding of some of the major issues in the study of philosophy in China. For instance, one complication is the very notion of philosophy. As an independent subject matter, philosophy was introduced into China from the West

during the period of the New Culture movement, which gained momentum after the student demonstration on Tian-an square of 4 May 1919 (and which therefore sometimes is called the May Fourth movement). Even if we discard the myth that China had no endogenous philosophy, only a composite of moral values and obligations, it must be admitted that, as a subject or a discipline of knowledge, philosophy indeed did not appear in the system of Chinese traditional knowledge. The word ‘philosophy’ (*zhexue*) was introduced into China from Japan and the same thing happened to the word ‘ethics’ (*lunlixue*). This does not mean that Chinese traditional culture had an inborn deficiency of ‘philo-sophia’, but it shows that it had a different way of pursuing wisdom.

The genealogy of modern Chinese philosophy: two main Philosophy Departments in the first half of the 20th century

Let us leave aside the problem of whether a separate discipline of philosophy can be distinguished in the Chinese tradition, because it has something to do with the identity and transformation of philosophy itself. In my view, a systematic approach to philosophical knowledge in Europe did not emerge until the so-called ‘epistemological turn’ in the 17th century. In ancient Greece and the Middle Ages, Western philosophy was more like a complete worldview or wisdom of survival; that is, a kind of thinking about the so-called ‘macrocosmos’ and ‘microcosmos’. This implies that the systematization of philosophy has been a product of modernity. It is very important to understand this point, as it will help us to grasp the specific context of the introduction of Western systematic philosophy in modern China.

At the beginning of the 20th century, China had its first enlightening movement of modern thinking, which was similar to the European Enlightenment. However, China’s New Culture movement began due to the pressure of modern Western civilization. It was not endogenous, which is probably true for most Asian nation-states, including Japan.

The introduction of a cultural enlightenment in China meant, in fact, that various Western ‘isms’ were assimilated. The presupposition was that modern Western knowledge was advanced and reasonable, and available in all kinds of ‘isms’ of philosophies and sciences, such as humanitarianism, evolutionism (Darwin and Spencer), realism, scientism and logical positivism (Bertrand Russell), Marxism and historical and dialectical materialism, American pragmatism, liberalism, guild socialism, anarchism and so on. The British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, and the American, John Dewey, came to China and made a great impression with their lectures. The logical positivism of Russell laid the foundation for epistemology in China, while Dewey’s pragmatism fostered a Chinese version of pragmatism. At the same time, due to the revolutionary

atmosphere of radical transformation in China and the success of the October Revolution in Russia, Marxist dialectical and historical materialism also became popular.

In addition to these external factors, which were instrumental in the emergence of philosophy as a separate subject in China, there were also favourable internal conditions. Quite a few Chinese philosophers, such as Yan Fu, Liang Qichao and Wang Guowei and, at a later stage, Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Zhang Shenfu, Hu Shi, Jin Yuelin and Feng Youlan had acquired a profound insight into Chinese and Western philosophy. Yan Fu was the first scholar who translated and annotated the classics of Western evolutionism. Wang Guowei was one of the earliest Chinese scholars studying the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao and Zhang Shenfu were the first to introduce Marx's historical and dialectical materialism in China (and they used it as a theoretical basis for their political action). Hu Shi was a student of Dewey and was instrumental in introducing his pragmatism in China. Jin Yuelin and Feng Youlan did not take a particular Western philosopher or 'ism' as their example, although both of them had studied philosophy at Columbia University and also travelled widely in Europe. They were highly interested in rationalism and logical positivism, which were very popular in Europe and the United States at that time, but they established their own independent philosophy. After their return to China, they taught in Chinese universities for many years and tried to incorporate concepts of Western philosophy in their study of Chinese traditional philosophy. Jin Yuelin's *Logic* (*Luojixue*, 1936), *On Tao* (*Lun dao*, 1940) and *On Knowledge* (*Zhishilun*, 1940, 1948) were acclaimed as the foundation works of modern Chinese logic. Feng Youlan's *Six Books of Zhenyuan* (*Zhenyuan liushu*), including *New Rationalism*, written during the 1930s and 1940s, were considered as representative of neo-Confucianism and neo-rationalism in modern China and became reference books for Western Sinologists.

When talking about Jin Yuelin and Feng Youlan, we need to mention the Philosophy Department of Tsinghua University. At the time when it was founded in 1926, it had only one professor, Jin Yuelin, and one student Shen Youding, but it expanded quickly with the arrival of Feng Youlan, Zhang Shenfu and other teachers, and became the most influential philosophy department in the universities of China at the beginning of the 1930s. Before the War of Resistance against the Japanese invasion, which began in 1937, Feng Youlan published *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhexue shi*) in two volumes (1931–34) which not only in China but, after its translation into English, also served as a textbook in the Western world for a long time.

During the 30 years from the 1920s to the beginning of the 1950s, the Philosophy Department of Tsinghua established a complete curriculum of philosophy – including metaphysics, logic, ethics or moral philosophy, the history

of Chinese and of Western philosophy – which was more or less similar to that of the philosophy departments of universities in Europe and the United States. Thanks to its excellent faculty and complete curriculum, it educated numerous philosophical scholars, who were later to play a vital role in research and education. For instance, Wang Hao, a student of Jin Yuelin and Shen Youding, became professor at Harvard University. The School of Chinese Classical Studies was one of the earliest schools that had a programme for graduate students. He Lin, Zhou Fucheng, Tang Junyi and others were trained in this programme and became well-known in the field of the history of philosophy, ethics and its history, and neo-Confucianism. The Department of Philosophy of Tsinghua was the most important place for philosophical studies in the first half of the 20th century in China, whether one looks at it from the perspective of the construction of systematic philosophy, the teaching of philosophy, or the originality of philosophical ideas.

At Peking University, the Philosophy Department chose a somewhat different course. It also had excellent philosophers, such as Xiong Wei, who had studied under Martin Heidegger, and Hong Qian, who for some time was a member of the Vienna Circle. Peking University had taken an active role in the May Fourth demonstration and was the motor of the New Culture movement. Hu Shi, also teaching at Peking University, was not only the pioneer who advocated the transformation of language and literature, using colloquial instead of classical Chinese, but also the first to introduce pragmatism in China. Moreover, the Philosophy Department at Peking was the cradle of Chinese Marxist philosophy. The philosophers Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu were not only among the earliest Marxists in China, but also the founders, organizers and early theorists of the Chinese Communist Party.

Discontinuity and metamorphosis: revolutionary discourse, ‘struggle philosophy’ and the poverty of philosophy

Soon after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, philosophy departments were founded in some larger universities, such as Fudan (Shanghai), Wuhan, Zhongshan (Guangzhou), Nanjing and the Renmin University of China (Beijing). In addition, the newly established Chinese Academy of Sciences set up a philosophy department as well as other humanities and social sciences departments. These were signs of a prosperous development although, in the 1950s, government interference was also increasing, notably in the Academy of Sciences, which closely followed the ideology of the Soviet Union. Later, the organizational structure changed and the Academy of Social Sciences

was founded and the department of philosophy was renamed the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Social Sciences.

Unfortunately, the favourable academic environment gradually disappeared as a result of various political movements, such as the Anti-Rightists campaign (1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958), the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), and the 'Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius' (1973–76). These political movements happened one after another, sometimes partly overlapping with each other, caused continued social and political turbulence, and ended with the decree of 'Recovering Order from Chaos' in 1979. Nowadays it is well known that the object of the Anti-Rightists campaign was to curtail the intellectuals, mainly in the universities. Its target was probably not knowledge itself, but the people who owned the power of knowledge and therefore the power to exert social criticism. Inevitably, further development of modern knowledge was hindered. Academic language was changed into the language of a political ideology and academic standards were replaced by political standards. Philosophy was a most unfortunate discipline in this process, as teachers and students had to give up their independence of mind and be subjected to 'thought reform', which implied that the basis of the discipline was destroyed. In the late 1950s, a great number of teachers and researchers of philosophy, including elderly ones, were obliged to study Russian in order to grasp the 'real' Marxism–Leninism as practised in the Soviet Union.

The consequences of the Cultural Revolution, lasting for ten years, were even more serious and destructive than that of the Anti-Rightists campaign, both in breadth and depth. The Cultural Revolution was announced to be a duel of life and death between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between Marxism and revisionism. Ironically, in an act of self-destruction, intellectuals took the initiative for starting the Cultural Revolution (at the instigation of certain political circles). Even more ironic, it was the Philosophy Department of Peking University, a birthplace of modern philosophical knowledge in China, which became the theoretical vanguard of the Cultural Revolution. On 25 May 1966, seven teachers of the Philosophy Department wrote the 'first wall poster' directed against the administrative establishment, but could not prevent the Department from becoming a 'severe disaster area' in the end. It was an irony with the flavour of postmodernity: the founders of the philosophy of the revolution ended as victims of the philosophy of the revolution!

The Cultural Revolution affected not only philosophy but also the whole of Chinese culture, both modern and traditional. During this period, Chinese philosophy changed into a kind of error-ridden demonism: no philosophical knowledge but revolutionary action, no logic and reason, but passion and crazy enthusiasm. The dialectical development of philosophical history was simplified into a struggle between materialism and idealism, dialectics and metaphysics,

which was further contracted to a relentless struggle between socialism and capitalism, revolution and counter-revolution. The already disintegrated academic system was completely destroyed. Philosophy was degraded into an ideological means of revolution and a weapon in the class struggle. Philosophical thinkers and theorists were regarded as ‘pests’, while laymen and even illiterates became ‘reliable revolutionary philosophers’. Philosophy was made into an enemy of knowledge and culture. It changed from the angel of loving wisdom into a demon fighting against wisdom; it helped opportunist plotters to come into power and it became the conspirator of social violence.

When the Cultural Revolution was abating, the bad luck of Chinese philosophy continued. In 1976, the ‘Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius’ directly served the political struggle within the Communist Party. As at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, philosophy became a political instrument once more. Under heavy political pressure, the original debate of depreciating or appreciating the legacy of Confucius became a criterion for judging whether a person was a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary. Some philosophers who had been supporters of Confucius even changed their former academic standpoint and suddenly expressed severe criticism of Confucius’ philosophy. ‘*Liang Xiao*’, literally meaning ‘two schools’, was the name of a group of philosophers from both Peking University and Tsinghua University, which became the principal philosophical mouthpiece in a political debate aimed at depicting Lin Biao as an admirer of Confucius. People still wonder why teachers of philosophy at Peking University and Tsinghua University became the main actors in the political game again.

The turmoil made China depart further and further away from the threshold of modernization. In the early 1960s, apart from the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, more than ten universities in China had established departments of philosophy; in addition, some philosophy institutes were founded by local academies of social sciences, and even many local Party schools and military academies had departments of philosophy. As a result of the Cultural Revolution, almost all of the philosophical institutes and departments were paralysed or became a ‘struggle instrument’ for the revolution. When the universities began to reconstruct their philosophy departments in the second half of the 1970s, the Philosophy Department of Peking University, which had once been famous for the study of the history of Western philosophy, could use only the simple textbook *A History of European Philosophy (Ouzhou zhexue shi)* of 1977, which was attributed to the ‘philosophical group of workers, farmers, soldiers and students’, although teachers of philosophy were the real authors. Simplified into a weapon of struggle and revolution, philosophy had sunk into extreme poverty.

Reconstruction and choice: Chinese philosophical knowledge during the past 25 years

When, in the late 1970s, the sequence of political turbulences finally subsided, it meant the end not only of the Cultural Revolution and of a period of romantic idealism and revolutionary enthusiasm which had produced chaos, but – looking at Chinese history over a longer duration – also of a hundred years of social upheaval, political conflict and war since the late 19th century, when China had started its process of modernization. China finally began to realize the real problems of its survival and development, understand the significance of modernization, and start the construction of Chinese modernity.

Again, teachers and researchers of philosophy played a crucial, but now constructive role. The end of the 1970s brought a kind of ‘thought enlightenment’ (*sixiang qimeng*), including a re-evaluation of humanism and a nationwide debate on ‘standards for judging the truth’ (*zhenli biao zhun*), which was triggered off by an article entitled ‘Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth’ (1978), written by Hu Fuming from the Philosophy Department of Nanjing University. The debate immediately received official support.

With the return of Deng Xiaoping to political power in 1979, China entered a period of social construction, stability and improved material conditions. The system of higher education profited from the new political climate and ‘rightist’ intellectuals, who had been persecuted in the various campaigns, were rehabilitated. Under these circumstances philosophical studies in the universities recovered rapidly. Philosophy departments in the following universities were reopened or established for the first time: Peking and Fudan (Shanghai); Zhongshan and Xiamen in the south; Wuhan, Nanjing and Zhejiang in the central south; Renmin University of China, Nankai, and Beijing Normal in the north; Jilin and Heilongjiang opened their philosophy departments somewhat later. In addition, specialized institutes for philosophical studies were established or reopened by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In the early 1980s, each of the major universities enrolled between 100 and 200 students of philosophy each year, which was unprecedented in the educational history of Chinese philosophy. Over the past 20 years, the number of philosophical periodicals and journals mainly publishing philosophical articles increased to more than 30.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the orientation of both the curriculum and the enrolment in the departments of philosophy changed. More emphasis was put on enrolling graduate students and more attention was paid to modern philosophy, especially contemporary Western philosophy, as well as ethics and social, cultural and political philosophy. Now, about 2000 graduate students are studying philosophy in China. The Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has been considerably expanded and now has more than 200 fellows, excluding

the part-time ones. The philosophy departments of Peking, Renmin, Fudan and Wuhan Universities have more than 40 faculty members. Tsinghua, where – in 1952 – almost all the departments of the humanities and social sciences had been sharply reduced or closed down, with the purpose of making Tsinghua a university specializing in technology and medical sciences, founded a School of Humanities and Social Sciences in 1993 and re-established a Department of Philosophy, which officially opened its doors in the spring of 2000. It has a young faculty of about 20 teachers and researchers, who mainly came from Peking, Shandong, Zhejiang and the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Some faculty members have a PhD from overseas. The former Philosophy Department of Tsinghua University had focused on logic, ethics, and theoretical originality based on a fusion of Chinese and Western philosophy. The re-established Philosophy Department is trying to recover this tradition and to continue it in a more comprehensive way, with special emphasis on applied ethics, comparative studies in morality and religion, philosophy of science and technology, ancient Greek philosophy, symbolic logic, cultural philosophy, and interdisciplinary studies. The department is publishing an annual journal, *Tsinghua Philosophical Almanac*, and three book-series, *Tsinghua Philosophical Studies*, *Tsinghua Philosophical Textbooks* and *Tsinghua Philosophical Translations*, all in Chinese.

Along with international trends in philosophy, Chinese philosophers have begun consciously to pursue their ‘localized knowledge’, wishing to establish their own academic style, which led to a further proliferation of academic journals, such as (apart from *Tsinghua Philosophical Almanac*), *The Gate of Philosophy* (Peking University), *Philosophical Review* (Wuhan University), *Modern Philosophy* (Zhongshan University), and so on, all in Chinese. In comparison with these activities, the state-sponsored Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has somewhat lagged behind recently.

The open-door policy of the government (from 1979) opened the door to the world outside, Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud were rediscovered, and analytic philosophy was taken up again as a subject, in particular by Hong Qian, who was presiding over the work of the Institute of Foreign Philosophy of Peking University. He and his collaborators published *Logic Empiricism* (*Luoji jingyan zhuyi*) in 1984, which was the first systematic work of its kind. Three years later, Tu Jiliang and some of his colleagues at the Institute of Philosophy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published *Analytic Philosophy and its Development in America* (*Fenxi zhexue jiqi zai Meiguo de fazhan*) in two volumes. A more general, early introduction into Western thought was *Modern Western Philosophy* (*Xiandai xifang zhexue*), written by Liu Fangtong and colleagues from the Philosophy Department of Fudan and published in 1981. It is an authoritative textbook, representative of the high level work that is being done at Fudan.

From the mid-1980s, philosophical studies began to pay more attention to

Chinese classical philosophy. One reason for this reorientation was certainly the 'infatuation with returning to Chinese culture' at that time, but, more importantly, Chinese scholars, after having indulged for some years in the study of Western philosophy, realized that the interests and goals of Western thought were rarely similar to those of Chinese philosophers. Much of what Western philosophy had to offer was considered 'irrational' or 'negative'. The critical attitude towards Western thought coincided with a strong desire for cultural localization and an attempt to pursue '*Chinese modernity*'. The translation of Western philosophical works was no longer considered a panacea for the development of modern Chinese philosophy, and philosophers turned to philosophical studies with a strong touch of traditional culture, such as neo-confucianism. 'Doing philosophy' now often means to base oneself on ancient and modern classical works of Chinese and Western philosophy, fusing past and current knowledge, relating philosophical theory to practice, and paying attention to both wisdom and methodology.

Quite a few talented scholars have emerged, specializing in phenomenology, in particular in comparative studies of Chinese and Western culture (for instance, Zhang Xianglong of Peking University) or social and political philosophy, focusing on neo-liberalism, communitarianism and new historicism. Then there are scholars working on Confucianism (for instance, Chen Lai at Peking), on applied ethics, such as the ethics of the sciences and technology, of gender, of international politics (for instance, at the Philosophy Department of Tsinghua), and of the economy (for example, at the Institute of Philosophy of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences). Maybe we cannot claim that a complete and mature framework of philosophical knowledge has been established, but we are successfully developing localized philosophical knowledge for exploring Chinese modernity.

Generally speaking, the new generation of philosophers in China is much closer to Western philosophy than their predecessors, such as Feng Youlan or Jin Yuelin. For instance, Zhang Xianglong, who received an American PhD degree and now teaches at the Philosophy Department of Peking University, has been renewing Confucianism by borrowing concepts and methods from Martin Heidegger's philosophy and hermeneutics. In his book *Heidegger's Thought and Chinese Logos (Heidegger de sixiang yu Zhongguo tiandao, 1996)* it is sometimes difficult to find out whether Confucius or Heidegger is being quoted or referred to. The author does not want to contrast the two philosophers, but he aims to let them have a dialogue about some issues involving the ultimate concerns of human beings. This is a model of 'doing philosophy' that is attractive to many philosophers of the younger generation. They often have a PhD from abroad and have access to the various philosophical trends discussed in an open society. They are different from each other to the extent that they differ in their preferences for Western philosophies: some preferring classical, others contemporary philosophy; some

preferring English-American analytical philosophy, others continental European thought; some are restricting themselves to modern philosophy, others are enchanted by postmodern trends.

As philosophical communication between 'home' and 'abroad' becomes increasingly extensive and sophisticated, young Chinese philosophers attempt to build bridges between old and new, Western and Chinese, local and global. They take a great interest in anything new that comes to the fore in the Western academic world. One example is the great success Jürgen Habermas had with his lectures in China in the spring of 2001. His visit had been expected for a long time, since the 1980s. He addressed audiences at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Tsinghua, Peking, Renmin and the Central Party School, all in Beijing, and at Fudan and East China Normal University in Shanghai. His topics were 'The intercultural discourse of human rights', 'On the pragmatic, ethical and moral meanings of practical reason', 'Three normative models of democracy', 'The European nation-state under the pressure of globalization', and 'Re-examination of the relationship between theory and praxis'. Some, if not all, of these lectures were translated from German and published in Chinese, for instance in *Cultural Studies (Wenhua yanjiu)*, No. 2 (2001), which also included his recent article 'Braucht Europa eine Verfassung?' (Does Europe Need a Constitution?).

The impact of Habermas's lectures can be compared to that of other Western philosophers who came to China on earlier occasions: Dewey and Russell in the 1920s, Sartre in the 1970s. After the visit of John Dewey, Chinese philosophers created their own variants of pragmatism and liberalism. Chinese neo-Confucianism and rationalist Confucianism greatly benefited from Bertrand Russell's philosophy, while in the early 1980s Chinese libertarianism was much indebted to Jean-Paul Sartre. It is quite likely that Habermas's visit to China will equally have a fundamental influence, although it is too early to anticipate its future dimension.

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About the author

Wan Junren is Professor of Ethics and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua University in Beijing, People's Republic of China. He is the author of numerous articles and more than ten books, among them *A History of Contemporary Western Ethics* (2 vols, 1990–92), *The Moral Dimension of Market Economy* (2000), *Ethical Discourse on Modernity* (2002), all in Chinese. He has also translated several books from English into Chinese, for instance John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*.