



# Philosopher Li Zehou

Proceedings from the online conference in memory of  
Li Zehou held on November 2, 2022, the first anniversary  
of his passing

Edited by  
**Maja Maria  
Kosec**

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Philosopher Li Zehou – Proceedings from the Online Conference in Memory of Li Zehou Held on November 2, 2022, the First Anniversary of his Passing  
Ljubljana 2022

Editor: Maja Maria Kosec

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## **Li Zehou, the philosopher**

In his lifetime, Li Zehou has been one of China's most prominent philosophers, transforming Confucian philosophy into a resource for positive change. He has reinterpreted the tradition from earliest times down to the present day, from a critical rereading of the *Analects* to formulating his own aesthetic theory. In this effort, he has been inspired by Marx and Kant, but he is not a Marxist or a Kantian. And he is not a Confucian either. Li Zehou is an original. He is philosopher Li Zehou.

Roger T. Ames

## **Master Li, the Beauty of Life, and the Ethics of Becoming Human (Obituary)**

Last year, in the early morning of the third of November, I received a shocking message from my friend and colleague Li Chenyang. He wrote to me in an e-mail that Professor Li Zehou, one of the most important people in the last years of my life, had passed away during the night. Although we did not have a very close personal relationship, having met only a few times in his later years, I was closely connected to him through my professional work, especially in 2018-2020, a time when I wrote my two books on his philosophy and ethics. During those years, I was intensely connected to his ideas and his deep reflections of vivid, unceasing life. Every day I lived with his spirit practically from morning till night, and his ideas of becoming human, sedimentation, subjectality, emotion-based substance, relationalism, and many others accompanied me in my dreams until slowly and gradually, step by step, they became a permanent part of my own soul.

I learned of his passing, therefore, I was devastated. I had hoped to see him once more to give him my best wishes for a long life and good health, but death was quicker. And of course, this great loss is not my own. Not only me, the whole world has lost a great thinker, a lucid theorist and an innovative philosopher. Just like his philosophy, he was always completely open and vividly curious as a person. At the same time, he was firm and uncompromising about his convictions and beliefs. Therefore, he always followed his very own path, a way that was unique and therefore often a little lonely.

Now, looking back at Li Zehou's own long and winding path, we quickly realize that creating and walking such a path is anything but easy. It requires not only strength and courage, intellect and creativity, but also a subtle but powerful sensibility informed by an eternal longing for beauty that is never quite fulfilled. Li's philosophy, among others, has shown us that beauty is not just the ultimate realm of our human values, nor is it limited to the ultimate realm of our humanness and our humanity. It also offers us autonomy and liberation from estrangement. With his ideas, Li offers us the certainty that we ourselves possess our freedom, not only in terms of free choices, but also in a broader and much more complex sense of such individual free will, which can only be fully realized through the full recognition and implementation of our social responsibility.

This freedom, which in reality is based on constraints and on enriching obligations, further reinforces the sense of belonging in a multitude of differences. Viewed from a broader intercultural perspective, Li's way of thinking points to a common human path, regardless of

differences in our individual preferences, cultures, languages, and traditions. His philosophical thought, which is thoroughly reflected in his particular intellectual path, reminds us of our belonging to humanity. With his insightful explanations and sharp theoretical syntheses, Li makes us appreciate the complex, rich, and diverse intellectual heritage that his ancient homeland, Chinese culture, can offer our globalized world.

His contributions to the new global ethics are of paramount importance, especially in today's world, which is in dire need of new intercultural dialogues and transcultural solidarity. There are strong foundations for such transcultural solidarity and intercultural exchange in Li Zehou's theory, for he has created it not only for himself, and not only for Chinese or Americans, but for all humanity. The powerful beauty of his ideas is irresistible, and they will continue to influence people in their search for our common humanness. Their inner strength is based on Li Zehou's intimate experience with impermanence on the one hand, and on his sincere belief in the enduring eternity and immortality of beauty on the other. For everyone who has met him, everyone who has had the opportunity to plunge into the deep pools of his spiritual vastness, has learned that the beauty of the human spirit can always overcome death. Professor Li understood this from an early age.

Li Zehou was twelve years old when his father died. That year, as he wandered in the highlands, he was met by the astonishing sight of a meadow covered with splendidly blooming yellow mountain flowers. Overwhelmed by the beauty of the moment, he suddenly became aware of his own mortality. He wondered what meaning this beauty had, for it seemed meaningless, fleeting, and empty. Afterwards, young Li experienced a kind of existential crisis that led him to skip school for three days.

After this decisive moment, his interests, which were already very broad, gradually focused on philosophical questions and later increasingly on aesthetics. Through the study of aesthetics, he hoped to find answers to the eternal questions of how we perceive and evaluate beauty and what it means to humanity. Ultimately, it was philosophy, and aesthetics in particular, that helped him understand that as an individual he would always be deeply affected by the laws of social development; even though individual life is tragic, it was easier to understand that it is the laws of the common development of human communities that elevate human purpose to the level of the sublime. It was probably also due to this brief but decisive experience that his later philosophy never left the realm of human life, and that his theory proceeded from the fundamental fact that "human being is alive."

Li Zehou will always remain alive. He will live on through his immortal ideas. I have always tried to make his works known in my native Slovenia. Therefore, to celebrate our

friendship, I would like to conclude with a Slovenian poem that I translated with the help of my friend and colleague Wang Keping. It was written five years before Li Zehou was born by a young Slovenian poet named Srečko Kosovel. Although Kosovel died in 1926 at the early age of 22, he will live on through his work. The same is true for my beloved and respected master Li Zehou. For them there is no death.

哦，沒有死亡，沒有死亡！  
只有太深的沉寂。  
就像在绿色的，广袤森林里。  
你只是走了  
你只是變得默然无语  
你只是成为自己  
孑然一身，无影无形  
哦，因為沒有死亡，沒有死亡！  
你只是陨落，只是陨落  
你飘飘落入  
无限的蓝色深渊里。

Jana S. Rošker

**REMEMBERING LI ZEHOU - A Commemorative Conference**  
**November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022**  
**UTC 7:00– 20:00 (7:00 AM – 8:00 PM)**

**PROGRAM:**

UTC TIME	Local time	Name	Title
07:00 - 07:15	21:00-21:15 (Nov 1 <sup>st</sup> )	Roger Ames	Welcome address and introduction
07:15 – 07:30	8:15-8:30	Jana Rošker	Li Zehou obituary
<b>07:30 – 9:00</b>		<b>PANEL 1</b>	<b>Chair: Jana Rošker</b>
07:30-07:45	15:30-15:45	Li Chenyang	A Deep Harmony Account of Justice
07:45-08:00	20:45-21:00	Wu Xiaoming	The <i>Du</i> Beyond the Limits of <i>Du</i> and Finding the <i>Du</i> in the <i>Du</i> without Limits
08:00-08:15	16:00-16:15	Jordan Martin	Sedimentation and Gene-Culture Coevolution
08:15-09:00			Q & A
<b>09:00-10:20</b>		<b>PANEL 2</b>	<b>Chair: Dawid Rogacz</b>
09:00-09:15	17:15-17:30	Jia Jinhua	Li Zehou on the Distinction and Interaction between Ethics and Morality
09:15-09:30	17:30-17:45	Wang Keping	A New Alternative to the How-to-live Concern
09:30-09:45	recording	David Elstein	Autonomy and the Nature of Ruist Morality: Li Zehou and Mou Zongsan
09:45-10:20			Q & A
<b>10:20–11:50</b>		<b>PANEL 3</b>	<b>Chair: Maja Kosec</b>
10:20-10:35	11:20-11:35	Jana Rošker	A Neo-Marxian Dialogue on the Subject-Object Relation: Li Zehou and Adorno
10:35-10:50	11:35-11:50	Gregor Paul	Philosophy of Beauty as an Ethics of Freedom: From Kant to Li Zehou
10:50-11:05	11:50-12:05	Karl-Heinz Pohl	Chinese Aesthetics and Li Zehou’s Major Contributions
11:05-11:50			Q & A
<b>11:50-13:20</b>		<b>PANEL 4</b>	<b>Chair: Karl-Heinz Pohl</b>
11:50-12:05	12:50-13:05	Dawid Rogacz	Li Zehou: A Postmarxist Yogācārin?
12:05-12:20	12:05-12:20	Michael Nylan	Li Zehou, the Voracious Pupil and Radical Conservative
12:20-12:35	07:20-07:35	Robert A. Carleo III	“Emotion as Substance”: A Concrete Humanist Moral Framework
12:35-13:20			Q & A

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<b>13:20-15:10</b>		<b>Breakfast, lunch or dinner break</b>	
<b>15:10-16:30</b>		Cultural program	Becoming Human (video recording of a theater performance with introduction)
<b>16:30-18:00</b>		<b>PANEL 5</b>	<b>Chair: Jan Vrhovski</b>
16:30-16:45	11:30-11:45	Paul D'Ambrosio	Li Zehou in the Tradition of Masters and Commentators
16:45-17:00	17:45-18:00	Maja M. Kosec	The Origins of Chinese Culture and the Question of Shamanism: Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan
17:00-17:15	11:00-11:15	Sydney Morrow	I Demand a Recount! Li Zehou's Reading of Kant's Philosophy of Mathematics
17:15-18:00			Q&A
<b>18:00-19:30</b>		<b>PANEL 6</b>	<b>Chair: Paul D'Ambrosio</b>
18:00-18:15	13:00-13:15	Andrew Lambert	Li Zehou and Political philosophy: Li's response to liberalism
18:15-18:30	18:15-18:30	Rafal Banka	Historical Perspective and Situated Cognition: Towards New Aesthetics?
18:30-18:45	13:30-13:45	Tani Barlow	Instinct and Modern Yellow Men, or the Impossible Figure of Woman in Li Zehou's Philosophy
18:45-19:00			Q & A
<b>19:30-20:00</b>	<b>20:30-21:00</b> <b>09:30-10:00</b>	<b>CLOSING REMARKS by Jana S. Rošker and Roger T. Ames</b>	

## Abstracts

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### INSTINCT AND THE MODERN YELLOW MAN, OR THE IMPOSSIBLE FIGURE OF WOMAN IN LI ZEHOU'S PHILOSOPHY

**Tani Barlow**

I situate Li Zehou in instinct theory dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century arguing that Li contributes to an evolutionary teleology which Li Shicen, Kang Youwei, Lu Xun and others established. But instead of instinctual drivers, primarily sexual selection and struggle of the fittest, Li displaces physiology replacing it with a thesis about the practical genius of the Chinese people. In Chinese instinct is 本能 and in physiological terms not only are instinct and life conceptually bound, even animals live in societies. Being animals ourselves we live in societies to manage instinctual life. Here I carefully examines Li Zehou's conception of instinct and argue that he substituted cultural "instinct" for pleasure for physiology. The essay argues that not only did this combine incompatible elements, Li's work made it impossible to conceptualize a subject for woman. This is not a matter of *inattention*. Li "impossibilized" feminism but more troubling than that he collapsed sexual physiology into a modern, humanist figure of racialized Man.

**»EMOTION AS SUBSTANCE«: A CONCRETE HUMANIST MORAL FRAMEWORK**

**Robert A. Carleo III**

Li Zehou's theory of "emotion as substance" is often misunderstood—partly due to its peculiar conceptions of both emotion and substance. This paper clarifies the principal meaning of this theory: that concrete, lived and felt relations constitute the source and grounds of human reason, values, and ways of life. This insight and theoretical framework offer a valuable foundation for moral thinking. The paper first elucidates the conception of *qing*, as "emotion," through which Li formulates his moral theory. It then elaborates how this "emotion" functions as "substance" within the historical sedimentation of morals and reason. I propose that this constitutes a concrete humanist moral theory in which right and wrong are products of empirical and sensible human life. It distinctively understands right and wrong to be grounded in contribution to actual human wellbeing rather than governed by universal abstractions. The final section of this paper then considers some practical implications of applying this outlook to ethical and political questions facing us today.

## **LI ZEHOU IN THE TRADITION OF MASTERS AND COMMENTATORS**

**Paul J. D'Ambrosio**

Li Zehou can be extremely frustrating. In translating his works or writing on his thought one encounters a host of difficulties with both the style and content. Li's analysis of Western philosophy, from the Greeks through Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and up to Sandel, is often puzzling, misleading, or just plain inaccurate. Explanations of Chinese thought, including his detailed work on the *Lunyu*, are often unapologetically one-sided; expressing a very particular view. From the perspective of contemporary Western philosophical discourse, these difficulties are damning. We might even go so far as to say that Li is hardly a decent scholar, much less a "philosopher."

In this paper I will put Li Zehou in the context of his own philosophical tradition; one that revolves around a philosophy of masters and commentators. Viewed in this intellectual tradition, we can appreciate Li's work more fully. As a sometimes master and sometimes commentator himself, Li Zehou is—as he is increasingly recognized—a phenomenal thinker with theories both broad and deep. Like a commentator Li unabashedly presents particular readings which can elucidate difficult passages, but are always in service of the development of his own philosophical theories. Like a master Li does not provide narrow responses to narrow problems—his ideas function best when they are taken as starting points for further discussion, and as outlines for responding to various and dynamic issues.

Additionally, this paper will provide insight into better understanding how the Chinese tradition functions, as well as some inherent limits of approaches that do not value "master" or "commentarial" thinking.

## **AUTONOMY AND THE NATURE OF RUIST MORALITY: LI ZEHOU AND MOU ZONGSAN**

**David Elstein**

Li Zehou sharply criticized Mou Zongsan's interpretation of Ruist morality, particularly Mou's interpretation of Song-Ming *Lixue*. Despite this, their understandings of morality reveal several points of convergence: Kant's ethics is close to Song-Ming *Lixue*, morality must be rational and a priori, and Mengzi made it clear that morality must be autonomous. In this paper, I will examine Li Zehou's analysis of Ruist morality in his *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*. I will argue that, although there is reason to believe Li did not fully understand Mou, his criticisms do latch onto some difficulties for Mou's interpretation. On the other hand, Li's own interpretation of Ruist morality exhibits some deep tensions, perhaps outright contradictions. The choice to follow the understanding of morality articulated by Kant is the source of these. This choice is particularly curious for Li, who pays so much attention to the social, economic, and historical conditions of thought, empirical factors which Kant excluded from true understanding of morality. I suggest that neither Li nor Mou offer a fully satisfactory account of the nature of Ruist morality, or morality in general.

## **LI ZEHOU ON THE DISTINCTION AND INTERACTION BETWEEN ETHICS AND MORALITY**

**Jinhua Jia**

Li Zehou emphasizes the distinction between ethics and morality, and defines ethics as social customs and norms and morality as individual behaviour and psychology. Li's distinction and definition are not completely novel but roughly in accordance with that of some philosophers. What clearly distinguishes his notion from others is his description of the interrelation and interaction between the two categories. Applying his theory of anthropo-historical ontology, Li expounds the interaction and historical evolution of the two categories as external social ethics constructs internal psychological morality, and morality in turn feeds back to ethics. This notion, differing from relevant opinions of all other philosophers, better accords with the historical actuality of human experience. This paper explicates this innovative notion by drawing examples of the interaction between the socio-ethical norms of early Chinese ritual culture and the ethical-moral conceptions of classical Confucianism.

**THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE CULTURE AND THE QUESTION OF SHAMANISM:  
DIFFERENT VIEWS OF LI ZEHOU AND XU FUGUAN**

**Maja Maria Kosec**

The article aims to compare the views of Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan on the origins of Chinese Culture and the question of shamanism. In this context shamanism is analysed through interpretations of the role and position of King Wen (文王 ca. 1112-1056 BC) and Duke of Zhou (周公 reigned ca. 1042-1035BC) both of whom embodied the role of religious and political rulers at the turn between the Shang and Zhou dynasties. In this period China slowly moved away from religion and into the realm of humanism and ethics. Based on textual criticism, both authors develop their own interpretations on the origins of the roles of religious and political rulers, the reasons for the merging of these two roles, as well as the consequences this had on the further development of Chinese culture. There are many similarities in Li and Xu's respective understandings of this merged role, but they also have differing views on whether or not early kings were also shaman (*wu* 巫). This paper will focus on the key elements of their theories that, based on their interpretations of the Axial Age in China, explain the similarities and differences between how they viewed the role of King Wen and Duke of Zhou in the development of Chinese Culture.

**Keywords:** King Wen, Duke of Zhou, Xu Fuguan, Li Zehou, shamanism

## **LI ZEHOU AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: LI'S RESPONSE TO LIBERALISM**

**Andrew Lambert**

This paper explores Li Zehou's Confucian critique of Western political liberalism, and explores his account of a fusion between Confucian and liberal society. The paper focuses on Li's widely-discussed claim that "harmony is higher than justice", which expressed his faith in Confucian values when faced with the appeal of the individualism expressed in liberal political theory. What does the claim that harmony is higher than justice mean and is it plausible? To answer this, we must examine how Li understands justice and whether his account is plausible. At the same time, we explore what resources from the Confucian tradition Li draws on, and also how yet other ideas from Confucian and Western thought might help to make Li's response more comprehensive and convincing. This will include a study of Anglophone aesthetics. In what follows, I examine Li's account of emotion and its role in practical judgment and social harmony, and then highlight problems with this account. I finish by exploring how Li's wide-ranging account of justice, emotion and relationality (*guanxi-ism*) hints at a novel account of human flourishing. This conception of flourishing confirms Confucian thought's continuing relevance to ethical theorizing.

## **A DEEP HARMONY ACCOUNT OF JUSTICE**

**Chenyang Li**

Harmony and justice have often been seen as opposing values. Whereas many hold that justice is more important than harmony, Li Zehou famously claimed that "harmony is higher than justice". Others have attempted to integrate these two values and to promote harmonic justice or just harmony. In this paper, I articulate a view that grounds justice on harmony. Taking the Chinese notion of harmony as an ultimate process that generates and continues to shape the world, I argue that our conception of justice should be understood in a way similar to rule utilitarianism. In rule utilitarianism, following rules at times may violate the principle of utility, yet rules are ultimately justified on the ground of utility. Similarly, in the Confucian view I advance, justice is ultimately grounded on harmony. Thus, I agree with Li Zehou that harmony is higher than justice, but for a different reason.

## **SEDIMENTATION AND GENE-CULTURE COEVOLUTION**

**Jordan Martin**

In the final interview given before his passing, Li Zehou expressed hope that his sedimentation theory would be vindicated, particularly with respect to his prediction that “culture influences the brain”. Li’s prescience with respect to this particular prediction has, in fact, already been amply confirmed by empirical science. As a review of the evidence shows, this holds true at all three levels of Li’s sedimentation theory: culture has influenced the brains of our entire species, and does influence the brains of particular cultural groups and particular individuals. Gene-culture coevolution (GCC) is a leading interdisciplinary research paradigm which probes and explains the causal factors underlying such influence. This article discusses both the consonance and dissonance arising from juxtaposition of GCC with sedimentation theory, and after arguing for a significant degree of consonance, finds also that the introduction of GCC helps clarify an apparent contradiction in Li’s view of biological evolution. The dissonance is also instructive in sharpening our awareness of some of the known tensions inherent in Li’s thought. Finally, there are also grounds for speculating that Li would have been amenable to the idea of culture evolving via Darwinian selection processes, an idea accepted by many GCC theorists.

## **I DEMAND A RECOUNT! LI ZEHOU'S READING OF KANT'S PHILOSOPHY OF MATHEMATICS**

**Sydney Morrow**

In Li Zehou’s *A New Approach to Kant*, he transfigures Kant’s philosophy so that rather than be rooted in the unknowable darkness circumscribed by his critical philosophy, wherein we find the thing-in-itself, the moral law, and the idea of the sublime, Kant’s philosophy becomes rooted in the anthropo-sociological bases of human material evolution. In this article, I turn to Li’s transfiguring of Kant’s Mathematics. After briefly summarizing Li’s account, I turn to a problematic aspect Kant’s theory of Mathematics, namely, the relationship between numbers and the infinite. I then consider Li’s reading and suggest that although his account may indeed ameliorate the problem, it may not solve it in a way that Kant’s critics would be satisfied with.

## **LI ZEHOU, THE VORACIOUS PUPIL AND RADICAL CONSERVATIVE**

**Michael Nylan**

The Anglo-American tradition has long presented Marxism and Democracy as two rival traditions, perpetually at odds. This essay will explore Li Zehou's disinclination to abjure Marxism, an important part of the sedimented Chinese tradition of the People's Republic of China, in light of his firm commitment to democratic ideals, where the history of "Chinese democracy" does not always align neatly with democracy, American-style.

## **PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY AS AN ETHICS OF FREEDOM: FROM KANT TO LI ZEHOU. PERSPECTIVES OF AN ATTRACTIVE LINE OF THOUGHT**

**Gregor Paul**

Human beings want to satisfy their desires and inclinations. But they also ought to fulfill moral and social obligations. These often conflicting demands would be reconciled with each other if what one likes to do would accord with what one ought to do, and if what one ought to do would accord with what one likes to do. Kant and Schiller developed theories of such ideal practice, putting forward notions of a free play of the human faculties of mind. They conceived of this play as source, perception, and manifestation, or imagination, production and reception, of beauty. I call the state and operation of such play "harmonious freedom." Li agrees with Kant and Schiller in so far, as he also regards perception of certain kinds of beauty, and behaving in a beautiful way, as a pleasant experience and expressing harmonious freedom. However, he thinks that Kant's and Schiller's theories of such freedom, because of their abstractness and idealistic features, cannot be put into general practice. He argues that they have to be corrected and supplemented by ideas provided by Marxism. In so doing, he emphasizes the historical development of humankind as process of humanization and civilization, and the role of invention, improvement and spread of tools in this process.

In my paper, I try to show that Li is basically right, supporting some of his arguments by what I regard as further evidence. If my reconstruction of Li's aesthetic as a theory of harmonious freedom should be questionable, I would argue that his aesthetics should be developed in such direction.

**Key words:** Kant, Li, free play of the faculties of mind, beauty, harmonious freedom.

## **CHINESE AESTHETICS AND LI ZEHOU'S MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS: »THE PATH OF BEAUTY« AND »THE CHINESE AESTHETIC TRADITION«**

**Karl-Heinz Pohl**

The article will deal with a brief overview about the modern history of aesthetics in China, addressing questions such as aesthetics as an epistemic discipline, the role of aesthetics in modern China and Chinese aesthetics as a Chinese art of life.

Central is a comparison of Li Zehou's two major books on aesthetics: *The Path of Beauty* 美的历程 (1981) and "The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition" 华夏美学 (1988).

Within the framework of this comparison, basic Ideas: will be discussed such as: anthropological concepts of Karl Marx: "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" (i.e. the concept of human nature, "naturalism of man" and "humanism of nature") as well as Li Zehou's ideas about "Sedimentation", "Significant Form", "Cultural-Psychological Structure/Formation", "Unity of Heaven and Man".

Finally, the article discusses Marx and Confucius as the major influences for Li' thought and looks at the conceptual difference and development in Li Zehou's two major works on aesthetics.

## **LI ZEHOU: A POSTMARXIST YOGĀCĀRIN?**

**Dawid Rogacz**

The paper analyzes the structural similarities between Li Zehou's notion of sedimentation and the concept of the transformations of Store Consciousness (*Ālayavijñāna*) in Buddhism. It first introduces the idea of Alaya as a collective proto-consciousness that gathers the seeds (*bīja*) of human activities, which then result in the rise of individual psycho-physical formations, thereby securing the continuity of these activities throughout generations. Then the article discusses the importance of the categories of sedimentation, subjectality, and the "greater self" (*dawo*) for Li Zehou's philosophy of history, particularly for his Post-Marxist reframing of the tenets and explanatory function of historical materialism. Trying to address the question of whether Li's approach can be justifiably interpreted as a materialist and pragmatist take on the historical dynamics of Alaya, I will also refer to Li Zehou's comments on the system of Zhang Taiyan, who employed the Yogācāra thought as a basis for his evolutionary understanding of the historical process.

## **A POST-MARXIAN DIALOGUE ON THE SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATION: LI ZEHOU AND ADORNO ON THE DIALECTICS OF AESTHETIC SUBJECTIVITY**

**Jana S. Rošker**

This paper will compare the views of Li Zehou (1930-2021) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) on the relationship between subject and object of perception and cognition through the lens of neo-Marxist paradigms. First, I will describe the main features and innovations of Marxist epistemology that formed the basis of their aesthetic thought and theories of perception. Then I will outline how Li Zehou's epistemology and aesthetics -particularly with regard to his conception of the subject-object relationship-relate to this Marxist framework. In a next step, I will place Li's respective views in a productive relation to Adorno's concept of the "primacy of the object" and his critique of "identitarian philosophy." In this context, I will point out some inconsistencies in his conception of the possibilities of breaking out of such an identitarian theoretical model and conclude with a preliminary proposal for an alternative solution based on Li Zehou's concept of "subjectality" especially with regard to the dialectic of the subject-object relation. In this context, I will be focusing on the traditional Chinese and Confucian notion of the grasping the proper measure, *du* 度.

**Keywords:** Li Zehou, Adorno, subjectality, negative dialectics, *du*

## **A NEW ALTERNATIVE TO THE HOW-TO-LIVE CONCERN**

**Wang Keping**

As regards the how-to-live concern in his practical philosophy of subjectality, Li Zehou takes the full-fledged development of human capacity as an alternative to address the issue. Comprising three dimensions in terms of free intuition, free will, and free enjoyment, human capacity is claimed to escalate mainly through a trifold aesthetic engagement in the acts of illuminating the true, furnishing the good, and making life worth living through the beautiful. It is at this stage that the whole becoming of human as human will be attainable in light of human subjectality as the acme of human capacity and the ultimate outcome of human fulfillment.

**Keywords:** Li Zehou; how-to-live concern; human capacity; human subjectality; trifold aesthetic engagement.

**THE *DU* BEYOND THE LIMITS OF *DU* AND FINDING THE *DU* IN THE *DU* WITHOUT LIMITS – DISCUSSING LI ZEHOU'S »PRIMARY CATEGORY OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY«**

**Wu Xiaoming**

Confucius' concern for “*du*” as rules and regulations (*du-shu*), recorded in the fictional story of his visiting Laozi distantly echoes Li Zehou's real concern for *du* as a philosophical concept. This echo may not be purely coincidental, whereby the historical resonates with the contemporary, and the traditional resonates with the innovative. These distant echoes may not have been recognized in the thought of our times, nor were they anticipated by the traditional narrative and hence at most remain as disguised potentialities and possibilities. Nevertheless, unravelling these potential dialogues in the history of ideas and rousing their potential meaning, thus shedding new light on these ideas, or at least creating new space for the generation of new ideas, is precisely the purpose of studying such ideas. Although this paper will primarily discuss Li Zehou's philosophy, the two-thousand-year-old fictional tale of the conversation on the pursuit of *dao* between Confucius and Laozi could be an imagined background or the potential horizon of our discussion.

**Keywords:** *Du*, Laozi, Confucius, Li Zehou.

**Paul J. D’AMBROSIO:  
Li Zehou in the Tradition of Masters and Commentators**

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**An Introduction**

Today “philosophy” often connotes “academic philosophy.” For those outside of the discipline, and especially those outside of academia, this study lives largely in an ivory tower. It speaks in high-fluent grandiloquent language, relies heavily on methods abounding in the abstract and absolute, yet the issues it deals with are common parts of everyday life (or at least they should be). Life is concrete and nuanced. It happens in the nitty-gritty details of complex social relations, with, through and by incongruent and multifarious persons. It is about *doing*—what we professors like to call “*praxis*.” Sure theory informs people, and there are currents in cultures, spirits of times, and the like, but living there, thinking from there, and being there alone only alienates oneself, one’s thought, and academic philosophy itself.

For all the celebrations of “philosophy as a way of life,” practical philosophy, and every variation of ethics, the common criticism of philosophy being confined to an ivory tower is, if we are honest, for the most part accurate.

Academic books on philosophy are read by academics. Academic conferences are attended by academics. Millions of hours of research and article writing are digested by the intended consumer: academics. And they, in turn, regurgitate and re-serve their own versions to those very consumers who fed them.

Increasing specialization, institutionalization, and various types of rating and ranking measures only narrow the audiences and further marginalize the disciplines as a whole—as well as the growing number of sub-disciplines or “specializations.”

Today a philosopher’s goal—and that “philosopher” is a philosophy professor—is to pick out the smallest article or whatever from a text of another philosopher, and wrap tightly around it. A tiny piece, and the smaller the better, should be examined under the most exacting of lenses.

The text or philosopher who has been picked on is often wildly interesting to those outside of the discipline, and even academia. (For example) Plato, Nietzsche, Confucius, Zhuangzi, these are the curating forces from which our humanity has been shaped. Their

influences are immeasurable and ineffable. We simply could not imagine a world without them. And there is no doubt that this world would not be what it is outside these ever resonating forces.

What then, are we academics doing? When we dissect Plato, speaking only to those with the necessary conceptual background and linguistic professionalism only the most educated can understand, what are we doing?

The best, the most accurate, or even “contextualized” understanding. That is the promise. Those who study should surround themselves with others who study, this will lead to the best, the most accurate, the true interpretation. And isn’t that what philosophy is all about?

Yes, there are advantages here. No inspiring lecturer, worthy of the trust provided and listening evoked by their students, speaks without due reflection. But where do we draw the line? When is enough enough?

It is no (real) secret that today’s philosophy books written for more general audiences are scoffed at by the majority of academics who are simply incapable of (or “not interested in”) appealing to the electricians, nurses, musicians, photographers.

This is, of course, not as true of Plato, Nietzsche, Confucius, Zhuangzi. Sure, in academic settings we may say that only scholars understand them. But that was not the reason their work was produced (?), nor is it how their power has made the world what it is today. Plato theorized about the Good, and inquired about it with vicious veracity. Nietzsche walked himself mad thinking about nearly everything from every imaginable perspective. His aching head and failing eyes could not restrain his lust for reflection. For Confucius the cultivation of persons and society was a constant project. He wanted to know how to be a good person, and defined it locally through concrete day-to-day interaction. Zhuangzi’s thought rivals Nietzsche’s wild imagination, but the Chinese thinker is expressed more calmly. Deciding, ultimately, that playful wandering might just be a pretty good way to live, his thought has fascinated millions for ages.

When academics work on these giants they do not write about “the Good” or deepen Nietzschean insights. The Good often becomes aloof, and some of the most narrow-minded people dominate “Nietzsche studies.” Confucius and Zhuangzi suffer similar fates, somehow today being thrown into comparative “isms,” and various familiar categories of “ethics” represent some of their better treatments.

To summarize, we can observe that the most inspiring works in philosophy reflect on the world. They investigate it in order to open new ways of understanding which further open new avenues for thinking about and living in the world. Academic treatments of such works often tend to do the opposite. The particularness of the world is more or less ignored, often

overtly so. Reflections are replaced with needle-nose pillars targeted at extracting something small—this will not be used to broaden, but rather to sufficiently exact some one thing about that philosopher or text. The object of academic philosophical research often becomes smaller and more familiar as a result. The object of philosophical reflection often becomes broader, richer, and less familiar.

In this article I will celebrate Li Zehou for being a solid philosopher, while also, or perhaps because of this, a less than impressive academic.

## **Philosophical Methods**

Li Zehou first gained wide recognition in China for his works on aesthetics. According to Li, aesthetics are foundational to Chinese culture. Even separating this type of thought from other categories, such as ethics or politics, is somewhat inaccurate when trying to fully comprehend the Middle Kingdom. Yet, a few years later, as he slowly becomes more exposed to and interested in Western academia, Li's works begin to have “ethics” in their titles. He increasingly shifted his focus to questions of morals and ethics.

Karl-Heinz Pohl, a friend and translator of Li Zehou, has suggested that the move towards ethics might have been due to Li's realization that aesthetics is not broadly interesting to Western academic audiences. Whereas in China a large number of scholars were intrigued by Li's work on Chinese aesthetics, the same cannot be said for the West. Li thereby began to research ethics and morality to appeal to Westerners.<sup>1</sup> However, Pohl agrees with Robert Carleo and others that rather than a “pivot” we might understand this as a shifting of emphasis—for Li aesthetics and ethics have never been anything but fully intermingled.<sup>2</sup> So while the titles of his works and many of the theories he deals with were progressively related to “ethics,” this is perhaps an organic development from his earlier focus on aesthetics—albeit one with a definite nod to the interests of Western philosophy professors.

Li's understanding of aesthetics and ethics as fundamentally integrated (or perhaps even “unified”) is probably best described in more familiar Chinese terminology as “aesthetics and

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<sup>1</sup> This argument was made by Karl-Heinz Pohl in his talk “Chinese Aesthetics and Li Zehou's Major Contributions: *The Path of Beauty* (美的历程) and *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (华夏美学)” at the Summer School on Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Thought hosted by the University of Ljubljana, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Carleo made this point in the question and answer portion of Pohl's talk (see footnote 1) in the subsequent discussion Pohl agreed.

ethics have the same root (*ben* 本).” Already this treatment of philosophical schools violates the trajectory of contemporary academic studies, which are often about narrow treatments, particular and fixed descriptions, and dissection. Bringing ideas together, appreciating their inter-connections or their shared root, and developing understanding further, i.e. looking for how we can move ahead in studies, marks Li’s works. Today, the attitude that dominates many books and articles is not a forward motion which constructs and develops new understandings. It is instead one of claiming to have dug out the precise meaning of some minute detail—though there is nearly always some lip service to “contributions.”

Even in his historical accounts of the development of thought in the Chinese tradition Li could not help but advance wildly unique perspectives. Rather than claiming to have “figured out,” for example, the intellectual movement of the Wei-Jin period, he classifies it as a *Zhuangzi*-based attitude or “*feng du* 风度.” In less than twenty pages he provides a fascinating discussion of the *Zhuangzi* and the general movement of scholars such as He Yan, Wang Bi, Guo Xiang, and the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. For those looking for an account of whence this movement came about, a detailed philosophical investigation of how Confucian and Daoist themes were reimagined, or how we might trace major ideas in Wei-Jin thought to the fall of the Han, Li is sorely disappointing. For those who have not previously studied this period, who are not familiar already with works such as Tang Yongtong’s 湯用彤 *Essays on Wei-Jin Period Xuanxue* 魏晉玄學論稿 (1957), or the primary sources themselves, Li does not really offer much. Indeed, Li’s discussion shares more with Lu Xun’s 魯迅 *Wei-Jin Period Attitudes and Other Things* 魏晉風度及其他 (1927), than Tang’s work, or other classical philosophical histories such as Feng Youlan’s *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948).<sup>3</sup> And yet, for those well-versed in Wei-Jin writings, and the scholarship around them, Li offers an exciting perspective. One does not so much learn *about* this period from Li as they feel inspired. Inspired to explore his explanation, to re-read the works of He Yan, Wang Bi, Guo Xiang, and the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. In the hands of Li, readers do not dissect Wei-Jin thought, they are opened to it, and by it.

We find this short discussion of the Wei-Jin period in Li’s book *On the History of Classical Thought* 中國古代思想史論 (2008b). “On” is a good way to translate “*lun* 論” here, which can also mean “discussion,” “analysis,” “illuminate,” “consider,” or even “theory.” Without this character, we should expect a history in the more traditional sense. But that is not

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<sup>3</sup> Feng Youlan also wrote a long history of Chinese thought in Chinese, and has several other works that discuss Xuanxue. It does not matter which one Li is thinking of, if any.

what Li provides. His title is accurate. Like Confucius, whose views are transmitted in the *lun-yu* 論語, Li's work is best read as a starting point. Neither Confucius nor Li are so much telling the reader the right way to think or to act as providing inspiring suggestions for reflection.

Later in his life Li utilized yet another method in his works. Rather than the comparatively straightforward treatises—even if many of them were essays (*shuo* 說/*jiang* 講), “outlines” (*gangyao* 綱要), or “readings” (*du* 讀), which were written like the “*lun* 論” discussed above—Li wrote “interviews.” These interviews were not actual interviews. No one was asking Li questions (although some interviews between scholars or journalists and Li do exist, as do discussions with professors).<sup>4</sup> These “interviews” represent Li's more relaxed writing style. As Deng Delong, a long-time friend and funder of English translations of Li's works describes, “Professor Li has turned to ‘interviews’ as a method of philosophical writing. He is tired of trying to ‘prove’ his ideas. It is easier to write this way for Professor Li. He is old and not so much interested in academia.”<sup>5</sup> Works such as *A Response to Sandel and Other Matters* 回應桑德爾及其他 (2014) were written entirely in this format.

Reading these supposed interviews it is actually quite clear that they are manufactured. The questions give it all away. They are too perfect. Each exactly formulated to allow Li to continue his line of thinking. Every one expressing an intimate knowledge of Li's thinking. None really push back on Li. And the “interviewer” never points out mistakes or inaccuracies, which, for example in *A Response to Sandel and Other Matters*, exist. The entire interview actually reads better than it should. As one text. And this is precisely what Li intended.

Deng compares Li's choice to write interviews with Plato's dialogues. Both might have been inspired by actual discourse, but it does not matter either way. The dialogue format allowed Plato to express his ideas in ways he saw fit, and the style and content are purposively matched. Li's interviews should be read similarly.

Reflecting on our other three paradigmatic philosophers, we find the intertwining of uniqueness of style and content as a constant. Nietzsche's aphorisms perfectly suit his pointed insights. Confucius's short sayings, or cutting discourses, are instructive in their brevity, and in their being targeted at specific students in particular contexts. And how could the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* be expressed without “metaphorical language (*yuyan* 寓言)”?

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<sup>4</sup> We have examples of both in Li's *What is Morality* 什麼是道德.

<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication: I had this conversation with Deng Delong several times in 2014 and 2015.

Today philosophy professors do their best to write in clear, logical, and tightly argued structures. There is little variance in what is “acceptable” to academic standards. Few, if any, of our philosopher-heroes, those we all write about, would be even close to publishable today.

Strange.

We seek to “explain” and “analyze” the thought of Plato, Nietzsche, Confucius, Zhuangzi and others through a style they themselves would (very) likely reject if not severely criticize.

In his essays, outlines, readings, and interviews, Li’s style, as well as the content of his works, often more closely resembles those we write about than the accepted standards of Western academic philosophy.

### **And Other Matters...**

Li reminds of philosophical greats in content as well as style. Ideas introduced by Li can prove to be magnificently inspirational, even while his references can be the root of great frustration. Before looking at the more wonderful side, the content of his work, we will address a difficulty—which in some regards really is quite problematic.

In translating *A Response to Sandel and Other Matters* Robert Carleo and I often joked that the more appropriate title would simply be “And Other Matters.”<sup>6</sup> Written in the interview style, it was quite clear that while the “interviewer” and Li were familiar with Sandel’s work, they did not really study it. Michael Sandel, who read an early draft of the translation, was taken aback as to how Li was able to publish a manuscript so full of mis-characterizations of his work. While at first quite troubled by the glaring misunderstandings, it has since become clear that they are at best secondary, and in fact not so important when reviewing this contribution as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

In broad strokes we can understand Li’s “response” as similar to Sandel’s own position; despite Li often being critical and seeking to correct Sandel’s partial appreciations of crucial philosophical issues, for example, of the importance of harmony, the relationship between emotions and reason, and his conception of the person.<sup>8</sup> Sandel’s general backboard is based

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<sup>6</sup> This a reference to Lu Xun’s title, mentioned above.

<sup>7</sup> One example is “The International Conference on Michael Sandel and Chinese Philosophy” held at East China Normal University, Shanghai, March 8-10, 2016, and subsequent publication of *Encountering China* (2018). These were direct results of research on Li’s work.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed discussion of this see D’Ambrosio 2016.

on critical counters to John Rawls' theory of justice, and others who hold similar views—he is especially negative on libertarian positions. In many places Li's "corrective" on Sandel's view is simply a misreading. Rather than responding to Sandel's alternative to a Rawls-like position, Li responds to that Rawls-like position himself, and proffers something similar to or almost exactly the same as Sandel. In other words, Li is responding more to Rawls than to Sandel, and his response to Rawls often echoes Sandel's own.

There are also many details which Li gets wrong about Sandel. He misunderstands Sandel's discussion of the "trolley car problem," and generally fails to appreciate Sandel's dialogue style of philosophizing. He does not realize that Sandel presents various perspectives as part of his argument, thinking, instead, that "Sandel's evaluations are often uncertain and waver between approaches and standpoints," which Li finds problematic. (Li 2016, 1098) Additionally, Sandel's most fundamental philosophical approach, whereby the values of one's communities are recognized as meaningfully constituting the person and their own values, thoughts, feelings, and the like, is lost on Li. The latter sees the former as relying heavily on "abstract principles" and constantly reproaches him accordingly. Those familiar with Sandel's work will find this absurd. Equally absurd is Li's reprimanding Sandel for not taking concrete particulars in his discussion of markets—which is of course Sandel's entire point about the constitutive role of communities in establishing conceptions of the person, values, and the like.

Immanuel Kant provides, in many ways, the starting avenue of Li's philosophical endeavors. Many Kantian scholars have similar reservations about Li's work on Kant as those just outlined in regard to Sandel. However, when viewed not so much as a professor trying to elicit the true meaning of Kant, or narrowly define some particular part of his thought, Li's work becomes more meaningful. Truly, what Li says about Kant is far less interesting than what he says about his own thought. *A Response to Sandel and Other Matters* should be read the same way. The "response to Sandel" is not a very good piece of scholarship. What Li writes about his own understandings, the "*And Other Matters*,"<sup>9</sup> is far more valuable. So rather than reading Li as responding to Sandel, it is best to take his text as comments about his own thought with reference (accurate or not) to Sandel and others. And really, what he says about Sandel does not matter. His own thought is more than enough.

Before discussing Li's own theories—the "magnificently inspirational" Li—there are two other issues that should be mentioned. Again these are small grievances which, if Li is

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<sup>9</sup> By "Other Matters" Li actually means the appendixes, for example, there is one on Legalism and Confucianism. However, Robert Carleo and I like to appreciate it from a different perspective.

judged on contemporary academic standards, are quite damning. But that they are more or less moot with regard to appreciating the richness of his thought. And indeed perhaps precisely because of them we learn more about Li as a philosopher, about the Chinese tradition, and about philosophy itself. Both issues are most apparent to translators, but are evident to any serious reader of Li's works. And again, that they are more or less ignored, and Li's gravitational force suffers not because of them, attests to his significance.

It may come as unsurprising after the comments about Li's work on Sandel and Kant above that Li can be inaccurate in other ways. Translators can have difficulty finding quotes (in Chinese) Li references, or ideas he attributes to a variety of thinkers. For example, there are places where he quotes from Martin Heidegger, G.W.F. Hegel, or Karl Marx and yet no such quote can be found in their original works (citations are not as popular in Chinese academia as Western). And in general he sometimes attributes ideas and understandings to thinkers that many deem completely inaccurate. Thinking of these issues in the same way as Li's readings of Sandel and Kant again demonstrates their relative unimportance. However, when we compare with what is standard in Western academia, we quickly notice that Li is not a very good "philosophy professor" in that sense.

Another issue that has been particularly bothersome for those who translate and work on Li's thought—and has brought about much contention in these circles—is his list of preferred translations for particular terms. There are basic Chinese vocabularies that Li insists should be translated in particular ways, many of his translators—who have a better command of English than Li—disagree. For example, Jana Rošker, Robert Carleo, and Andrew Lambert have taken issue with translations such as "*legan wenhua* 樂觀文化" which Li wants to translate as "culture of optimism" and "*guanxi zhuyi* 關係主義" as "guanxi-ism." (Rošker 2019b, 2020; Carleo 2023; Li (Lambert) 2019) But the most contested term, which appears in not less than six of Li's own neologisms, is *benti* 本體. The abovementioned translators have each written a good deal on this term. (Rošker 2019a; Carleo 2023; Li (Lambert) 2019) Li asks it to be translated as "substance, root, body, final reality" and often when coupled with other terms has it as "ontology." Translators and scholars have noted that while Li might want to call this "substance" or "ontology" his use differs sharply from the way it is understood in (much) Western philosophy. (This issue is not limited to Li, and many Chinese scholars face the same difficulties when borrowing heavily from Western philosophy—and of course the same happens the other way around.)

Coupled with his specious references and general misunderstandings of key philosophers, the confusing translation and understanding of key terms might be a final straw.

Yet, despite all of these issues—each one on its own completely unacceptable by current (Western) academic standards—there is a gravity around Li. Those who get introduced to his work are often unable to pull themselves away. A certain attraction radiates. The reason might not be “despite” these issues, but precisely because of them.

## Theories

In some sense it is slightly awkward to talk about Li Zehou’s ideas as “theories.” Certainly he has ideas that resemble theories, but the way he treats them, and how one should approach them as a reader, invites a different attitude than more familiar theories.

Some of Li’s most compelling theories include *guanxi*-ism (*guanxi zhuyi* 關係主義), emotion as substance (*qing bentu* 情本體), emotio-rational structure (*qing-li jiegou* 理解結構), theory of two morals (*liang de lun* 兩德論), one world theory (*yi ge shijie* 一個世界), sedimentation (*jidianlun* 積澱論 or *jidianshuo* 積澱說), and harmony is higher than justice (*hexie gaoyu zhengyi* 和諧高於正義). He has many more equally original and provoking ideas.<sup>10</sup> Here we can look briefly at the ones mentioned above, before discussing how Li himself treats them, and how they might be approached. This demonstrates, perhaps more than his style, method, historical context, or even influence, the philosophical nature of Li’s thought.

*Guanxi*-ism, which some scholars think should be translated “relationism,” is the idea that persons are constituted entirely by their relationships or *guanxi*, with others. Western individualism provides a sharp contrast. Theories that posit a self, soul, or anything prior to relationships and endows meaning are vehemently rejected by *guanxi*-ism. So too are conceptions such as Sandel’s, which take a foundational power of reflection or agency as being pre-given. Even critical reflection is born from interpersonal interactions. Approaches to ethics and morals should echo this conception, and there are strong implications for thinking about emotions and the relationship between emotions and reason.

One of Li’s keys for reading early Confucian thought and its traditional developments is “emotions as substance.” This position argues that emotions are the foundation of individual psychology as well as communities and interactions. Confucianism has always upheld this position, Li thinks, and it is instructive for understanding humanity the world over. Rather than learning which is so heavily based on reason, and can be taken as pure and therefore unchanging

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<sup>10</sup> For in-depth treatments of some of his basic terminology see Rošker 2019a; D’Ambrosio, Carleo and Lambert 2016.

in some sense, Confucianism bases much of our understanding on emotions and thereby implies an importance of cultivation. Emotions are cultivated (with reference to reason). Thus everything which relies on emotions (as substance) can be cultivated as well. Persons, relationships/ethics and morality, emotions, tradition, and our humanity itself.

Cultivation happens mainly through the inter-instructive mingling of emotions and reason, occurring within the individual, through their interactions with others, and in communities more generally. Li writes, “The emotio-rational structure refers to the concrete intersection of emotion with reason and emphasizes that emotions and reason exist in dynamic, constantly changing relationships of different ratios and proportions with one another.” (Li 2016, 1082) This is implied already in the abovementioned concepts, and once again marks, for Li, a critical contribution Chinese thought has to make to global philosophy. Western thought, Li says, lacks this type of appreciation.

The “two moral theory” includes “modern social morals (*xiandai shehuixing daode* 現代社會性道德)” and “religious morals (*zongjiaoxing daode zong* 宗教性道德).” Before modern times there was no real distinction between these two morals, but as reason came to dominate, individualistic conceptions of the person gained popularity, and abstract principles were developed, modern social morals were gradually separated from religious ones. The latter are related to conceptions of the good, convictions, values, and beliefs held by individuals and communities. They are largely based in tradition, and rely strongly on emotional elements. Modern social morals are almost opposite. Here reason dominates, conceptions of the good are drowned by “rights” and the importance of beliefs and tradition downplayed. The relationship between the two types of morals is balanced by “proper measure (*du* 度)” though this tool is used in various arenas.

All of Chinese thought is based on a “one world theory”—which needs to be defined through contrast to Western (and other) “two world theories.” A two world theory holds that there is another (typically more perfect, ideal, transcendent) world which should serve as a model for this one. This concrete world is full of particulars that include messy details, accidents, contingencies, and other less than ideal, less than perfect, and very much not transcendent factors. In this world, achieving goodness, beauty, or justice will always be compromised by

the very imperfections of concreteness.<sup>11</sup> Only in another, more perfect place can they fully exist; here we can only mirror them and at best realize just some small fraction. According to a one world theory ideals can be models, but we never imagine escaping concreteness, or idealize a world without imperfections. There will always be messy particulars to deal with, and all our understandings should appreciate them. So while a two world theory might accuse emotions of being fickle and influencing people in undo ways, a one world theory does not supposed we could somehow get rid of them, nor would it want to. A one world theory takes “emotions as substance,” that is, the foundation of human existence. Relatedly, *guanxi*-ism, the importance of cultivation, and interweaving of emotions and reason are all based on a one world theory. A two world theory might see a core soul or self as covered by particulars, and thereby downplay the influence of others and cultivation. It could also prioritize reason and at least partially reject emotions. Li’s ideas are thus all based on and grown from a one world theory. This allows him to rethink historical progress and well as the idea for human interactions as well.

One of Li’s most versatile and intriguing ideas is “sedimentation.” Like rocks that sediment over time, individuals, cultures, and humanity itself develops through the accumulation of experiences. Loose materials can be made stable and even become extremely solid, and, eventually, the basis for further layering. Li uses this to explain a host of different phenomena. In the aesthetic realm, humans transformed natural objects into expressions of beauty. From here a sense of beauty was developed, and has grown. Again, this happens in individual persons, cultures, and humankind. Rituals, which Li sees as essential for many parts of humanity, were sedimented from shamanistic practices. Songs and dances slowly became rites and ceremonies. Today they still exist and are foundational—even if they are extremely thin or all but forgotten. Thinking about humans as a conglomerate of *guanxi*, framed through emotional-rational structures, and against the background of a one word theory, we come to view agency and the power of reflection as gradually sedimented (again in the individual, culture, and humanity) through time. Moral principles too, including something “absolute” such as Kant’s categorical imperative, are the result of sedimentation. As will be discussed below, Li’s broad application notwithstanding, there can be many other areas where “sedimentation” might be usefully applied.

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<sup>11</sup> In a recent work titled *In Praise of Failure* (2022), Costica Bradatan defines “failure” as basically “concreteness.” In other words, the inability to be perfect and live up to other-worldly standards is what constitutes “failure” in the eyes of many.

The final idea we will consider here is Li's proposal that "harmony is higher than justice." He takes "harmony" as broadly indicative of a Chinese approach to morality/life, and "justice" as a Western counterpart—which he characterizes, perhaps to an extreme, as overly rational, abstract, and principle based. But Li never really describes what "harmony" means, nor does he satisfyingly discuss "higher." He more or less throws these ideas out, and sees what others make of them. When questioned in interviews, be they with others or as a writing style, Li quickly turns the question to the interviewer, or else evades by carrying on a corollary discussion. For example, when directly asked (by himself in the interview style) to describe what he means by "harmony being higher than justice" Li responds: "That's impossible." He continues:

As I mentioned before, philosophical ethics can only provide certain main ideas. The development or unfolding of such details belongs to other areas such as political philosophy, psychology, and philosophy of religion. This requires the research of many more specialists. More importantly, the aspects falling under political philosophy require more complete empirical resources from which to draw on. (Li 2016, 1098)

He similarly passes off detailed descriptions of sedimentation and other major ideas to so-called "specialists" even though he is the one who coined or purposed them.

Li's response to being asked to describe what "harmony is higher than justice" means wonderfully encapsulates his philosophical attitude. His ideas are not "theories" in the sense of being an explanation that can be proved and is consistent with observations or the results of scientific research. They are better understood as jumping off points, as proposals that we can use to think about the world, to discuss. In sum, one should think *with* Li (as opposed to merely thinking *about* him). He is not interested in his ideas being "tested" or in "proving" them in an academic sense.

Once again, Li is unconventional. Not merely disregarding academic standards, he seems actually unable to meet them. If he cannot show, or even explain what "harmony is higher than justice" means, or provide adequate proof of sedimentation, the one world theory, or his other major ideas, why should we listen? How can he say other specialists need to take him seriously and test his ideas?

The academic conventions surrounding philosophical theories, their explanations, proofs, and general attitudes taken toward them, are actually quite at odds with those great

philosophers of the past we reference or theorize about. Li's work functions like, and can be read in the same vein as, Confucius, Plato, Zhuangzi, or Nietzsche. They too discuss their ideas, but never seek to fully prove them. In many cases they simply “throw something out there” for others to think *with*. The reason we study and revere these thinkers is that their ideas really are worth reflection, they help us interpret the world, think about ourselves, and live together. They are not brilliant or even close to being acceptable by current academic standards.

Only time will tell if Li is a giant of philosophy, but his ideas certainly seem, to many, up to snuff.

### **A Tradition of Masters and Commentators**

The Chinese tradition of thought which became labeled “philosophical” begins with masters (*zi* 子) texts. While this recognition is sometimes challenged by those who believe it might somehow degrade these texts in the eyes of Western philosophy professors, it is clear that “masters” texts form the foundation for what we call Chinese philosophy. In many ways the records from or of the masters remind of classical “philosophers” in Western thought. Contrasting with contemporary academic standards, there is much less emphasis on analytical reasoning, logical rigidity, and reference to the discourse in these older styles. The Chinese masters may be further differentiated from the mainstream Western philosophical tradition in that masters texts are often comparatively more obtuse. For example, the *Yijing*, *Analects*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and even more straightforward classics such as the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, or *Sunzi*, and *Hanfeizi*, can rely on highly contextualized observations, difficult to parse comments, or simple sayings that are rich and broad enough to have become idioms. More often than not these texts do not provide “reasons” for what they promote, and there is even less in the way of arguments or proofs—though no shortage of scholars looking for them, however feebly. Whereas many classics of Western philosophy aim to convince readers through reasoning and argumentation, demonstrating, for instance, how other viewpoints are incorrect or incomplete.<sup>12</sup> Chinese masters texts, and the commentarial tradition that follows, rely rather on proffering ideas and then having readers check them themselves through their own life experience.

The “truth” or efficacy of what masters texts advance is concrete and fully embedded in the nitty-gritty of contextualization, relationships, emotions, and the like. Accordingly, relying

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<sup>12</sup> Contemporary academic standards have instilled in me the need to apologize profusely for these being gross generalizations.

on pure argumentation, theoretical discussion, or too much abstraction is not only counterproductive, it is not really possible. Western philosophical texts thrive on those methods because they are part and parcel of their philosophical positions and their methodology. Strong reference to a two world theory, notions such as “pure reason,” and abstract visions of justice are well served by the dialogues of Plato or Aristotle’s “writings.” Chinese philosophy needs to be realized by the reader because it is always contextual, and decided within concrete situations. Like nearly all Chinese philosophers, Li Zehou emphasizes the importance of *du* 度 which he translates as “proper measure,” which is also referenced as the *jing* 經 and *quan* 權 dynamic—in other words, weighing (*quan*) doctrines, principles or rules (all of which are *jing*) in particular situations. This is how masters texts function, and it is why “obscurity” is a valuable method.

The tradition that is developed therefrom is predominately constructed through commentaries. These are widely misunderstood as being, and aimed at merely being, restricted to exegeses of original (mostly “masters”) texts. The two main forms, both of which are commonly referred to as “commentary” in English, “*shu* 疏” and “*zhu* 注” can be broadly understood as “annotations” and “explanations” respectively. There are many commentaries that function mainly as annotative and explanatory—the commentary to the *Analects* overseen by He Yan 何宴 (d. 249), *Lunyu Jijie* 論語集解, is, for example, from a philosophical perspective, quite dry. Only a few observations are exceptions. Other commentaries, such as Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (d. 1200) *Lunyu Jizhu* 論語集注 or Wang Bi’s 王弼 (d. 249) *Lunyu Shiyi* 論語釋疑 to the *Analects* or his *Laozi Daodejing Zhu* 老子道德經注 commentary to the *Laozi* are philosophically rich but also include glaring “mistakes.” Wang Bi famously “misreadings” *chugou* 芻狗 “straw dogs” in chapter 5 of the *Laozi* as “straw and dogs,” which has led to many proudly proclaim to have a better understanding of this section than the Xuanxue genius.<sup>13</sup>

The commentarial tradition is sometimes misunderstood because it functions according to the *jing-quan* model. Extracting the “truth” either of reality or what some master has said is uninteresting from this standpoint. Masters texts are masters texts because they provide excellent *jing*. The criterion for a good *jing* is applicability beyond some one time or certain

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<sup>13</sup> Wang Bi of course has a very good reason for reading the passage this way, which is part of his own philosophical understanding. He is not necessarily arguing this is how the passage should be read, but making his own point. (See D’Ambrosio 2022)

situations. Contoured by specific and concrete aspects, yet still proving efficacious, good, or as promoting some other value. These *jing* are then *quan*'ed according to *du* or proper measure. (The danger of this system is traditionalism or conformism, and it is on these grounds that the Chinese tradition is often criticized.) The goal of a commentator in this lineage is therefore to properly (*du*) weigh (*quan*) masters texts (*jing*) to fit well their times and situations. Exegesis and annotations are a necessary step in this process, but variance is encouraged, and rejection or re-readings are allowable as well.

The approach continues to this day. Some contemporary scholars, such as Yang Guorong 楊國榮 and Huang Yong 黃勇 sometimes<sup>14</sup> treat Chinese classics the way Western classics are normally treated, i.e. containing propositions that are more or less true and can be assessed accordingly. For example, they argue about types of “relativism” or “concerns with Being” in the *Zhuangzi* (Yang 2009) or look at Confucian texts in terms of “the Good” or “virtue ethics.” (Huang 2019) Terminology, method, and it seems the very way that they read these texts are forged with the adoption of foreign molds. Others’ emphasis is more on a “master-commentator” style; this includes scholars such as Chen Guying 陳鼓應 and Wang Bo 王博, and Li Zehou as well. Chen and Wang are both poetic in their styles, draw seamlessly from various classics or sections of classics, and are not concerned with completing linear arguments formed through reading Chinese philosophy in a “propositionalized” fashion. We might further distinguish this latter method by saying that it philosophizes *with* texts as opposed to philosophizing *on* them. Philosophizing *on* as a method is important and informative, but does not capture what Chen Yun 陳贇 refers to as the “spirit” or “essence” (*jing shen* 精神) of the texts. (Chen 2016) In lieu of further elaborating on the difference between philosophizing *with* versus *on* a text, which overlap to a large degree, we can discuss Li’s own style—which well illustrates the point.

Two of the most discussed passages in the *Analects* have been 17.21 and 13.18. They are almost perhaps the most contested and controversial. According to Li, 17.21 is one of the most “crucial” passages of the entire book. Here we have Zai Wo asking if it would be okay to mourn for one year instead of three, and Confucius saying that so long as his heart-mind would

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<sup>14</sup> This is to say that they often emphasize this type of treatment. In many ways Yang and Huang still treat masters texts and commentaries as masters texts and commentaries, and they never lose sight of a *jing-quan* dynamic. Other scholars, particularly in the analytic tradition, appreciate *jing-quan* on a superficial level, and do not allow it to significantly inform their methodology.

be “at ease (*an* 安)” then he should do it. After Zai Wo leaves Confucius variably calls him a “rotten wood” and “shit”—clearly no one should feel “at ease” with mourning for only a year after the death of a parent.

Li writes that “Confucius’ ‘ritual’ is established on a principle of psychological emotions.” In this way “subjective human emotions” are the “first principle” in Confucian thought. Whether it is “‘three years’ or ‘one year’ is not at all important.” The three years is just a way of carrying on what was done in the past. (Li 2008a, 523) While some have argued that three years mourning is justified by the three years one is held by their parents after birth, and others go so far as to say there is “universality...grounded in the very nature of human experience.” (Slingerland 2001, 118) Li emphasizes the “subjective” and “emotional” aspects. Yes, we should look to our experience, but not as something “universal.” Experience of emotions, institutions that promote them, and the rituals thereby developed tell us everything. Li is not interested in an ultimate justification, or really any “reason” in a contemporary philosophical sense of the word.<sup>15</sup>

In 13.18, as is true of Li’s entire work on the *Analects*, we find again appeal to emotions and a resistance to finding a perfectly logical line of thought or universal reasoning behind what Confucius says. This is the famous “sheep stealing” passage where Confucius says a father and son should cover for one another. Li’s attitude here is characteristically light-hearted and “flowing.” The world of Confucius and Mencius is based on clans, family is important as are related virtues. The relation between these values and the law has constantly changed, but we can appreciate that emotions are important here, and worth philosophical consideration. Indeed, this issue speaks also to sociology and psychology. So when we think about family-based considerations and their conflict with public good we need to be broad in what we consider. Li concludes that when considering the “upright” and “justice (*gongzheng* 公正)” in the *Analects* we need to recognize that they are always related to emotion.

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<sup>15</sup> Li’s philosophical style and “masters”-like interaction are well exemplified in the next part of his explanation of 17.21. Here he mentions the works of A. C. Graham, David Hall, Roger Ames and others before saying that he differs mainly on seeing the Chinese society as largely born from “Shamanism rationalized.” (Li 2008a, 524) He also says the work of Ames goes too far in emphasizing the differences between East and West, and then simply writes “In this book there is no way I can talk about this in a detailed way.” (Li 2008a, 524) After all, Li says, he’s “discussed this all before.” This is a great example of how he has poignant remarks that are well worth considering, but do not need to be fleshed out detail by detail. We will return to this in the conclusion.

Many others, both in the Chinese tradition and more recently, have explored all sorts of explanatory acrobatics to justify what Confucius says. It is reasonable, right, or an expression of “justice” for such and such reasons. Li differs. He invites readers to open their considerations to various aspects, look at methods in other disciplines, to allow themselves to find emotional avenues, and to think concretely about their own experiences when being instructed by Confucius. Li thus becomes both master and commentator in his own work.

## Conclusion

It would be interesting, though perhaps overly pedantic, to wax on about the virtues of incorporating more “master-commentator” thinking in philosophy today. Surely the pendulum is currently swinging hard towards “maximum bob” and at some point it will rest before moving back in the opposite direction. Along the reverse trajectory the style of philosophy found in the works of masters, developed by commentators, and exemplified by people like Li Zehou will be invaluable—and not just for academic reasons, but for real (-life) ones as well. For now we can note the importance of Li’s work on a smaller scale, and hope that more thinkers come to emulate him.

Broadly speaking Li and the style of philosophy he represents begins with some simple observations about the world: There are some things that simply cannot be well described in language, and there are other things that *should* not be described in language (and yet others that at least not in explained in a detailed fashion). Realizing this we sometimes reflect without claiming to know everything or explain everything. We philosophize in an open manner: open to the world, to others, and to future developments. Academic philosophy would do well to better appreciate, and not merely through talking about it, the efficacy of these points. They are, after all, surprisingly simple and mundane.

In our everyday life the efficacy of *not* explaining every detail is ever present. My 13-year-old nephew does need to know everything. At least not yet. Sometimes the best way through an argument is to simply “move on” and not go into the finer points of everything said or all that led up to the disagreement. And if we cast or net further, and are really honest about it, we find many things in life either cannot or should not be discussed or even thought about. To do so, and at the same time employ systematic line-by-line propositional thinking, is often counter-productive at best. Logic is a great tool in math and physics, but what place does it have with family and friends? If it does benefit us in thinking about who to give ventilators to or what groups to vaccinate first it still does not touch on the nuance, the detail, or the human—not to speak of the emotional—aspects and results of these interactions.

Contemporary academic philosophy is unlikely to admit that there are more perhaps “truths” more insights into human interaction and perhaps better reflections on living in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, than Plato’s dialogues. For those who believe the possibility of literature outdoing “philosophy,” or who sometimes favor a not speaking or hinting over explanation, Li Zehou is a true philosopher.

Like Confucius, Plato, Nietzsche or Zhuangzi, if we apply current academic standards to Li he is certainly lacking. But when we contextualize him in a master and commentator tradition, reading him in a *jing-quan* style, we better appreciate the breathe and consequence of his style of philosophizing *with* texts, rather than merely *on* them.

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**David ELSTEIN:**

**Autonomy and the Nature of Ruist Morality: Li Zehou and Mou Zongsan**

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Li Zehou's wide-ranging work made him the most influential mainland Chinese philosopher of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is known for incorporating Marxism and Kantian thought along with traditional Chinese philosophy. Li stands out for several reasons. He took Marxism seriously without being dogmatic about it, he emphasized the need to take into account the historical and cultural conditions of thought, he developed his own philosophical views through deep engagement with many thinkers, and he constructed his own interpretation of the history of Chinese thought that did not adhere to the two main trends in Chinese scholarship: doctrinaire Marxism and the New Ruist philosophies from Hong Kong and Taiwan that largely followed Mou Zongsan. Li knew of Mou's work and responded to him in some of his writings on the history of Ruism, but had some pointed criticisms of Mou's interpretation of Ruist philosophy. And yet, a closer look at Li's own analysis of Ruism reveals some deep tensions.

The chief tension comes from something Li and Mou both share: an understanding of morality that accepts a great deal of the Kantian picture of what it must look like. Although Li criticizes Mou for neglecting the empirical reality of feelings in morality, he appears not to notice the difficulties to his own interpretation caused by trying to do away with a priori aspects. Li does misunderstand some aspects of Mou's thought, but his criticisms nevertheless get at some serious difficulties for Mou's interpretation. However, his own interpretation of Ruist ethics is not free from problems. Unlike Mou, Li pays close attention to the role of history and culture in morality, and yet this sits uneasily with the kind of morality he advocates (and Ruism in general). In this essay, I will explore Li's criticism of Mou's interpretation of Ruism and examine his own understanding of Ruist ethics. I will argue that Li does not provide a satisfactory account of Ruist morality either, and like Mou, this is because he still accepts much of the Kantian description of what morality has to be. This is not how Ruist philosophers understood morality, and although I will not argue this point here, it is arguably a standard of morality that can never be met in the real world (as Kant was aware).

### **Mou's account of Ruist morality**

Before we look at Li's criticism of Mou, it will be useful to summarize briefly Mou's position to understand better where Li objects. Mou of course follows the Mengzi line, emphasizing the continuity between Mengzi and Song-Ming Ruism. Li mainly takes issue with Mou's characterization of Song-Ming Ruist morality, and so that is a reasonable place to begin. In his major work *Heart-mind and Human Nature in Themselves* (*Xinti yu xingti* 心體與性體), Mou's argued that Song-Ming Ruists were engaged in the same philosophical quest as Kant: establishing the a priori conditions of morality. For Kant, what defines morality is that its commands are necessary and unconditional. Necessity cannot be established based on any empirical experience, and so morality has to be known a priori. Mou agrees: "If the moral law cannot be established on an a priori, universal, and efficacious basis, then there can be no true, pure moral behavior to speak of" (Mou 2003b, 1:148). The a priori basis of moral practice is the freedom and autonomy of the will (Mou 2003b, 1:11). Song-Ming Ruists did not use the same terminology of autonomy or the free will, but rather talked about the heart-mind and human nature as fundamental realities in themselves, not as empirical appearances. Mou concludes that what Song-Ming Ruists were doing was examining the a priori basis of morality, with their own vocabulary (Mou 2003b, 1:10).

Autonomy for Mou requires independence from interests, inclinations, and external control. It must be independent from anything empirical. Morality has to be founded on a principle that the will gives to itself, not something that comes from outside it. Mou writes, "Any moral principle that is created by anything related to an object or an object's particular character that determines the will is an unreal and inconsistent moral principle. As far as the will is concerned, it is heteronomous." A will that is decided or controlled by anything external is not a free, autonomous will (Mou 2003b, 1:136). As he put it elsewhere, free will cannot be an effect brought about by something else; it can only be a cause (Mou 2003c, 247). In addition, he writes, "If it requires a lower interest from something external to stimulate it, then it is not the fundamental heart-mind; it is not the true, autonomous will that gives the law to itself" (Mou 2003b, 1:171). Morality requires the will to determine itself, free from the influence, control, or stimulation of an external object. That is autonomy.

The key point is that morality requires an unconditional command to be real, which is a product of a free, autonomous will. Through moments of moral response to a situation in the world (such as Mengzi's example of seeing a child about to fall into a well), the fundamental

heart-mind reflexively becomes aware of itself, a process in which this heart-mind grasps itself intellectually and not sensibly (Mou 2003a, 105). This fundamental heart-mind is the author of the autonomous command given to itself which makes morality possible. “Morality means action based on an unconditional categorical imperative. The issuer of this unconditional categorical imperative...in China is called the fundamental heart-mind, benevolence in itself, or innate moral awareness, and it is our nature in itself” (Mou 2003c, 245–46). We see here the Kantian influence: morality must be unconditional, which means it cannot be based on anything sensible. It must therefore be autonomous, not depending on anything outside the self. This leads Mou to identify a faculty capable of issuing autonomous commands free from any external influence, the fundamental heart-mind. What he calls the orthodox line of Ruism emphasized autonomy, and went a step beyond Kant in showing that morality was a reality and not merely a postulate.

### **Li Zehou’s Criticisms of Mou**

One of the most immediate differences between the two philosophers that leaps out when comparing them is very different understandings of what the task of philosophy is. Mou’s concept of philosophy comes out in the passages quoted above: the task of moral philosophy is to provide a sure foundation for morality. Because morality has to command universally and unconditionally, it cannot be based on anything empirical. Experience can only provide contingent truth, not necessary truth. This means that empirical examination of morality can never provide the grounds for an unconditional moral principle, because empirical truth could always be otherwise. Morality has to be entirely a priori, which led Mou to develop his moral metaphysics. Although some later New Ruists, notably Liu Shuxian, allowed room for some particular cultural expressions, the fundamental moral principles have to be universal. Morality cannot be one thing in China and something else in Germany. The task of philosophy is to understand the universal.

Li plays much greater attention to history and culture and how thought intersects with these. He says that the reason for divergent understandings of Kongzi’s thought is insufficient understanding of the historical and social circumstances in which Kongzi lived and which contributed to his thought. Kongzi’s thought, according to Li, expressed some aspects of clan and aristocratic society at the time (Li 1999, 1:11). It then follows that grasping Kongzi’s thought properly requires better understanding of those circumstances that influenced its development and it expressed. Li is not suggesting some kind of materialism where social and economic conditions simply determine thought. Kongzi developed what Li calls a cultural-

psychological formation (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構) that exercised major influence on the future development of Chinese culture and the way Chinese people think. In other words, thought influences cultural and social conditions while also being influenced by them. History, social norms, reason, and emotion interact in complex ways, shaping internal motivations as well as external rules (Li 2016, 1079).

The upshot of this is that philosophy is not a form of pure thought entirely divorced from social, economic, and political conditions. Li does not claim that the truth of philosophical claims is an empirical matter. He does, however, have a different understanding of what philosophy is about. For Mou, the point of philosophy is to discover a priori, universal truths, moral principles in particular, in which there is nothing empirical. Li sees it differently: the cultural-psychological formation and wisdom of a nation are not unchanging things outside of space and time that can be understood a priori. The task of Chinese philosophy specifically is to understand the Chinese cultural-psychological formation, eradicate its errors, and transform it to meet the new century (Li 1999, 1:300–301). Philosophy is necessarily connected with the sensible world. This is the foundation of Li's criticisms of Mou's interpretation of Ruism: Mou was trying to eliminate anything sensible from Ruist ethics, but this is not how most Ruist scholars understood their work, and furthermore it cannot be done.

Sensibility in the form of psychological feeling is necessarily connected to Ruist ethics in Li's understanding. Mou followed Kant in strictly separating feelings from true morality: anything contingent—anything belonging to the world of appearances—could not be the basis of morality. This led him to develop his moral metaphysics to understand the a priori conditions of morality. Mou therefore employed the autonomy/heteronomy distinction in his historical work on Ruism, insisting that the orthodox line of Ruism always emphasized the autonomy of morality. Free will still has a major role in Li's Ruism, but in a very different way than Mou (Carleo 2020). Li's deepest dispute with Mou is about the place of emotions. Mengzi said the foundation of moral responsiveness is a heart that is not unfeeling to others, an illustration of which is the feeling of alarm and compassion that anyone would have when seeing a child about to fall into a well (*Mengzi* 2A6). Li asks, what could a heart that is not unfeeling to others be, if not some kind of psychological feeling or response in the sensible world (Li 1999, 1:265)? For this reason, the basis of morality cannot be found apart from the sensible world.

Morality is thus more multidimensional in Li's thought than it is in Mou's. Because it is not an a priori examination, it includes historical, cultural, technological, psychological, and

biological factors (hardly an exhaustive list). All of these things shape human thought and contribute to the cultural-psychological formation of a nation and an individual, without determining it (Li 1999, 1:258). Li does not say that philosophy should be strictly naturalistic, but it certainly should not entirely ignore the sciences (Li 2018, 265). Philosophy cannot pretend that knowledge of the sensible world is utterly irrelevant for understanding morality.

The concern for sensible feelings manifests in one more way in Li's philosophy: the role of joy and satisfaction of desires. He does not advocate asceticism. Echoing Dai Zhen, Li is critical of Song-Ming Ruist philosophers for failing to recognize the importance of desires, which he believes had terrible effects (Li 1999, 1:256–57). Liu Zongzhou is held up as a model by Mou, but Li criticizes him for a near-religious asceticism which lost any significant objective content and “became unusually dry religious commands with no vitality” (Li 1999, 1:266). In Mou as well, it is hard to find much room for or value in satisfying any desires or having joy in life. It is true that Mou says the fully manifested free, autonomous will is holy and so feels no sense of conflict. It takes joy in the moral law it gives to itself (Mou 2003a, 80, 84). And yet this is evidently very different than the joy of fulfilling desires or aesthetic experience generally. Mou says almost nothing about music, which for Li is critical to completing oneself as a person (Lambert 2021, 291–92). Joy occupies a much more central place for Li, defining Chinese culture.

### **Li's Account of Ruist Morality**

Although Li has a different conception of what philosophy is that leads him to the above criticisms of Mou's interpretation of Ruism, he retains significant Kantian influence in his own understanding of Mengzi especially. Li does not end up as far from Mou as he himself seems to think. The basis of the moral norms is different, but Li still ends up incorporating the fundamentals of the Kantian understanding of morality, and as a result introduces significant tensions in trying to make morality both transcendent and cultural, a priori and empirical. Because of this, Li ends up according more significance to Xunzi, whom he argues does not have the transcendent aspect of Mengzi and most Song-Ming Ruists. This is an advantage for Li, while it renders Xunzi unacceptable heteronomy for Mou. And yet it does not entirely resolve the tension.

As described above, Li believes it is important to attend to historical and cultural factors when understanding a tradition of thought such as Ruism. This is not, however, the same as stating that the truth of its claims depends on contingent historical and cultural factors. However,

there is a necessarily empirical element to morality for Li. He emphasizes both reason and emotions, what he calls the emotio-rational structure (情理結構).<sup>16</sup> Crucially, emotions are essentially related to moral norms.

Li's clearest statement of this is found in his analysis of Mengzi. Mengzi "made psychological principles the foundation and starting point of his entire theoretical construction," and his political and economic framework was "entirely built on psychological feelings and principles" (Li 1999, 1:47). The most fundamental of these is the heart-mind that is not unfeeling to others; a general feeling of empathy. Li is careful to call this a psychological feeling or sensation. It is worth pausing a moment to consider precisely how Mou and Li are different.

To do so, let us look at what both philosophers had to say about Mengzi's example of witnessing a child about to fall into a well. This is of course the example Mengzi himself offered to illustrate what he meant by a heart-mind that is not unfeeling to others, and further as an illustration of the feeling that is the basis of humaneness (*Mengzi* 2A6). For Mou, seeing a child about to fall into a well is manifestly a perception that belong to sensibility. However, the moral response, the feeling of alarm and compassion, is reflexive awareness of one's own mind that is intellectual, not sensible:

This awakening due to astonishment is like the red sun rising out of bottom of the sea; it is not at all sensible. Therefore, the reflective verification in question is the illuminating awareness of intellect itself reflecting its own light back onto itself and not a phenomenal mind different from itself sensibly and passively coming to cognize it, which could never reach it in itself. So this reflective understanding is purely intellectual and not the passivity of sensibility. (Mou 2003a, 105)

My purpose here is to understand Mou's claims, not evaluate them, so I will pass over most possible objections.

We do need to raise one question: when this response is elicited by a sensible event (the sight of the child), how can Mou say it is purely intellectual and has nothing to do with sensibility? I believe the answer is to distinguish causal dependence and logical dependence. When Mou says this moral awareness is intellectual, that is another way of saying it is a priori. A paradigm of a priori knowledge is mathematical knowledge: one can calculate the angles of

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<sup>16</sup> For more on emotion in Li's thought, see (Jia 2018).

a thousand-sided figure independently of whether a thousand-sided figure has ever existed. Clearly, certain experiences will be causally necessary to have the concepts of a thousand-sided figure, angles, calculation, and so on. One will need to have a language and probably some exposure to fundamental mathematical concepts. This will be due to sensible experiences. However, once the concepts are acquired, one can use them to derive new knowledge which is not dependent on any particular sensible experience. Knowledge of the sum of the angles of a thousand-sided figure is causally dependent on the sensible experience necessary to acquire the relevant concepts, but not logically dependent on any sensible experience of such a figure. We can take Mou as saying something similar: the awareness of one's fundamental heart-mind is causally dependent on the sensible experience of seeing the child, but the nature of that awareness is not sensible but intellectual.

Li, by contrast, makes a much simpler point. The feeling of alarm and compassion elicited by seeing the child *is* a psychological feeling directly related to sensibility. Mou developed various terms for the moral feelings and the moral mind to show that these were not part of appearances or sensibility, but a different category of feeling entirely that was intellectual, such as “moral feelings of illuminating awareness” (*mingjue jueqing* 明覺覺情) or “ontological moral feelings” (*bentilun de jueqing* 本體論的覺情) (Lee 2021, 259–60). Li sweeps all that aside and simply recognizes that these are psychological feelings, and furthermore asserts, “Since Kongzi, the key characteristic of Ruism has precisely been that it has been built on principles of psychological feeling” (Li 1999, 1:265). He dispenses with a priori or intellectual feelings and categorizes the moral feelings as psychological responses, apparently on par with any other psychological feeling.

This would all be neat and tidy, except that after saying that Mengzi built his theory on psychological principles, Li immediately throws a wrench into this by also insisting that morality is a priori in Mengzi and Song-Ming Ruism as well (notably, not Xunzi). He follows up his analysis of the child falling into a well example with a discussion of ethical relativism and absolutism, stating that all philosophical ethics falls into these two types. Crucially, in relativism “human nature possesses no a priori moral character.” Morality is necessarily linked to sensibility. By contrast, in ethical absolutism “morality is above the human realm and so its origin has nothing to do with sensibility. It is a supraempirical or a priori command that controls and dominates sensibility” (Li 1999, 1:50). The deduction Li appears to make is this: all ethics is a form of relativism or absolutism; absolutism holds that morality commands universally; a universal command must originate in the a priori; Mengzi holds that morality commands

universally and so is an ethical absolutist; and therefore the origin of moral norms must be a priori. Li himself then notes the connection to Kant, saying the unconditional nature of moral obligation is similar to Kant's categorical imperative.

As it turns out, in parallel to emphasizing the psychological basis of Ruist morality, Li also agrees that the universal and unconditional nature of morality means it also must be a priori. What Mengzi did, according to Li, was blend both emotions and the categorical imperative: “[Mengzi's theory] took the a priori universality of the categorical imperative and directly connected it to the human feelings of the empirical world (mainly ‘the feeling of alarm and compassion,’ which is in fact sympathy) and further made these (psychological feelings) the basis” (Li 1999, 1:50). Morality is at the same time a priori and empirical. Li ends up returning to a Kant-influenced understanding of morality, reading this not only into Mengzi but Song-Ming Ruists as well (Li 1999, 1:237–38). Yet the element of feeling belonging to sensibility is also present as well, setting up an uneasy tension. We will return to this tension later. The point I wish to highlight now is how Li is critical of Mou Zongsan for ignoring the importance of emotions while sharing the Kantian understanding that morality must be a priori in order to be unconditional.

Before moving on, let us take stock of where we are. Li criticized Mou for disregarding psychological feelings is his explanation of Ruist morality. In Li's view, Mengzi built his ethical theory by deriving moral norms from feelings and psychological responses. However, this is still a kind of ethical absolutism that makes universal and unconditional demands. There is an analogy with Kant's categorical imperative. Morality is both a priori and empirical, based on psychological feelings and also based on universal principles.

### **Evaluating Li's interpretation**

We will begin with Li's objections to Mou before evaluating Li's own interpretation. Li's chief objection is that Mou neglected the emotions; Ruists did not strictly divide reason and emotion, but aimed at integrating both in the emotio-rational structure (Li 2018, 239). Their concern was not primarily metaphysical, but was about addressing the problems of real life, taking into account practical psychology (Li 1999, 1:269).<sup>17</sup> When much of Mou's work was devoted to developing Ruist moral metaphysics, using morality to confirm the two-tier ontology

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<sup>17</sup> Li's position here is interestingly similar to Xu Fuguan's, but Li rarely mentions Xu in his historical work and seemed unaware of this convergence.

of appearances and things in themselves, this criticism has some bite. Of course, Mou was hardly along in this; modern Chinese philosophy rapidly professionalized with most representatives spending their careers in academia. Liang Shuming is the noteworthy exception.

Nevertheless, it is a fair point that human psychology is incorporated in traditional Ruist morality and Mou, out of concern to show that morality is a priori, dismissed anything psychological as merely empirical. One could reasonably question whether Song-Ming Ruists, when they used terms such as “fundamental heart-mind” (*benxin* 本心) or “heart-mind of the Way” (*daoxin* 道心), necessarily meant something apart from the world of appearances. Attention to emotions such as concern for one’s parents, compassion for suffering, and sympathy for those in need is frequently found in Ruist texts. The psychological importance of a supportive community of family, friends, and teachers is likewise a common theme. Joy in following the Way as well is highlighted by Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi, while joy is rarely found in Mou’s works. Emotions do play a significant role in Ruist thought.

However, a supporter of Mou could respond that Li has misunderstood Mou’s position. It is true that Mou dismisses anything empirical as a source for morality, but that does not entail dismissing all feelings or emotions. Li does not pay sufficient attention to Mou’s category of intellectual or ontological feelings which are not sensible in nature. Lee Ming-huei in particular develops this aspect of Mou’s thought, expanding on Mou’s category of ontological feelings that are a priori, and arguing that in Ruism reason and emotion are united, not mutually exclusive as in Kant (Lee 2017b; 2017a). This sounds very close to Li. Whether these feelings should be categorized as psychological (心理的) is a difficult question. Li appears to think of psychology as necessarily belonging to sensibility. In that case Mou’s moral feelings would not be psychological, since he denies that they are sensible in nature. Nor are they products of discursive, conceptual thinking (Mou 2003a, 105). And yet these feelings are some kind of mental state or awareness, and in that sense belong to psychology. It is not clear whether Li has fully appreciated the distinctiveness of Mou’s position on the different categories of feelings, sensible and intellectual.

What this does not resolve is whether Mou’s use of ontological feelings as a category and intellectual intuition is an accurate interpretation of Ruist philosophy. And there Li raises some serious questions, at the very least. Mou’s interpretation gets some support from Mengzi’s division of the greater and lesser within the person (*Mengzi* 6A14, 6A15). The greater—the moral feelings—maps neatly onto Mou’s category of ontological feelings of the fundamental

mind, and the lesser—sense perceptions and ordinary desires—maps onto feelings and desires that belong to appearances (Mou 2003d, 44–50). Yet we may wonder whether Mengzi meant “greater” and “lesser” to have any ontological significance, or simply a value claim about which feelings should be given priority. In favor of Li’s interpretation, we notice that when Mengzi is discussing the moral responses (as in the child falling into a well or the king freeing the ox examples), he focuses on the experience of the feelings, with very little in the way of metaphysics. In fact, we might go step further and say that for Mengzi, what seems to be important is not any kind of theoretical belief about morality (even that human nature is good), but being disposed to have the right feelings in response to the right situations at the right times. I will not go further into how Mou could respond to this, because his response and further questions could occupy a book at least. I will merely say that there is something to Li’s claim that psychology is important.

The way Li resolves the tension between the a priori and empirical is to favor Xunzi over Mengzi. Although he does not make this so evident in his *History of Classical Chinese Thought*, in some other works he makes clear his opposition to founding morality on the a priori and the need for a historical approach to understanding morality based on sedimentation of certain cultural conditions, circumstances, and ways of thinking. For Li, this fits Xunzi’s way of thinking more closely, and so he is inclined toward Xunzi. “Mengzi’s thought is transcendental whereas Xunzi’s is empirical. My own theory of sedimentation relies on the accumulation and solidification of experience to explain what is often ‘innate’ or ‘transcendental’ for the individual (what I refer to as ‘the empirical for humankind becoming a priori for the individual’ *jingyan bian xianyan* 經驗變先驗. Thus of course I lean toward Xunzi here” (Li 2016, 1094). As other scholars have observed, Li is critical of Western philosophy for overreliance on reason and abstraction (D’Ambrosio, Carleo, and Lambert 2016, 1060). His theories of the emotio-rational structure and cultural-psychological formation are correctives to this. Morality is not a priori, but rather “learning and education are morals’ real source” (Li 2016, 1112). Learning, which includes ritual but goes beyond it, is of course a great point of emphasis in Xunzi precisely because morality must be learned. Li’s favoring of Xunzi makes sense, and is one more major point of difference with Mou Zongsan.

One minor point bears correcting here, concerning Li’s use of the phrase “the empirical for humankind becoming a priori for the individual.” Taken literally, it does involve a contradiction, because it is not as if the process of sedimentation Li talks about produces changes in brain structure in future generations. Chinese people are not born with fully formed

Ruist values. What he means is that through education and socialization, the accumulated wisdom of historical experience can become second nature in the individual, again much in the way that Xunzi talks about. One can learn to respond automatically and effortlessly, as with one's native language (and note that Li follows Wittgenstein in connecting language learning to acquiring a way of life) (Li 2016, 1112). However, there is a necessary process of learning here, and so it is not truly innate or a priori, although it came come to feel that way. It is best to understand Li as meaning "a priori" in this more figurative way here.

All problems would be solved and my essay could end here, except for two more issues. First, recall Li's distinction between ethical relativism and absolutism. In ethical relativism, morality is rooted in human social life, depending on sensibility. Significantly, Li says Xunzi's philosophy falls in this category (Li 1999, 1:50). Xunzi was arguably not a relativist himself, but more importantly, Li is not: historicism is definitely not relativism in his view (Li 2016, 1109, 1120, 1135). Yet if morality based on human social life *is* relativist, how can Li not accept relativism?

Second, it is doubtful whether Li can avoid attributing any innate moral capacities to human beings. Li claims that "no human capacities are a priori or innate, but rather belong to humans as a result of history and education" (Li 2016, 1107). Even supposing that is a slight overstatement and Li did not intend to rule out any biological capacities at all, he is right that this is a major difference between him and Kant. And yet, can Li sustain this position? Is not the tendency toward sociality itself an innate capacity? The tendency toward forming groups and establishing moral rules to begin with? If not, could we learn and internalize morality at all? Here Li recognizes the difficulty for Xunzi: how do we learn to regulate ourselves with rituals in the first place? He admits that there must be some innate capacity to make that possible. "Xunzi also emphasizes that the heart-mind that has the function of rationality has a certain a priori quality" (Li 1999, 1:122). It seems this must be true for Li as well. The emotional capacities themselves that he makes foundational for morality cannot be entirely learned (though particular forms and manifestations could be).

And hence Li's position still has its difficulties. He does not accept complete relativism, but agrees with Kant that universal morality must be based on a priori principles, which he rejects. He favors a historical account of morality, but will find it hard to explain how this is possible without any a priori capacities. I suggest that to resolve these problems, the best route for Li is to turn back to a version of Mengzi, but without the Kantian presuppositions that led him to favor Xunzi.

## Resolving the Contradiction

I want to consider whether there are ways to resolve the tensions in Li's thought while preserving his fundamental insights. That means when Li says, "The key characteristic of Ruism has precisely been that it has been built on principles of psychological feeling," we read "psychological feeling" in a commonsense way, as the ordinary feelings of sensibility. We take seriously his claim that what distinguishes Ruism from Kant is that Ruist ethical principles "are intimately linked to sensible existence and psychological feelings. They are not purely formal, but appeal to a basis in the social and psychological" (Li 1999, 1:240). In short, Li thought Ruists were doing something very different from Kant. Can we take this claim seriously and still maintain some level of universality in morality, such that moral progress is a sensible notion?

My answer is no, not in the way that Li tries to, but that there is a way to preserve the universality of morality that is a key concern of his. When we understand why Li (and Mou) accepted the Kantian concept of morality, we understand something important about their thought. We also find a way to resolve the above problems in Li. To understand this, we must go back to his distinction between relativism and absolutism. In relativism, there can be no universal ethical standards. Human nature is not inherently good. Morality, Li says, is based on human social life, by which I take him to mean that it depends on the values, standards, and goods of a particular society (Li 1999, 1:49–50). Absolutism is just the opposite. It is universal and unconditional. Due to the influence of Kant, both Li and Mou thought that any universal and unconditional principle had to be a priori, because empirical knowledge is always contingent and could turn out to be different.

The first thing to note is that "unconditional" is not a term that should be applied to any moral principles, even Kant's. Kant says the categorical imperative applies to all rational beings, so its application is conditional on rationality: it does not apply to nonrational beings. Li's Ruist morality is going to be even narrower, because it has a basis in the social and psychological. We can make this even more specific: the psychological feeling that Li mentions most frequently, and the one that distinguishes Ruism from Kant, is humaneness or benevolence (*ren* 仁). Let us imagine an alien species of rational but not social beings. They reproduce in the manner of some snakes or sea turtles: the male and female have no lasting relationship, and once the female lays her eggs, her parental involvement is done. If either parent ever meets their children again, it is an accident and they treat each other as strangers. This species is self-

sufficient and solitary, forming no social group with others of its kind (or any other species). It is perfectly capable of rational thought—maybe some of its members have deduced mathematical truths for fun. However, it has no social feelings, because it is not social. In particular, it lacks the sense of humaneness.

Kant's categorical imperative could still apply to this species, because they are rational in the necessary way.<sup>18</sup> But Li's Ruist morality could not apply here, because *ex hypothesi* this species lacks the social feelings that ground Ruist morality. They have a psychology, but it would be a psychology of a very different order. They do not feel compassion for others and have no concept of family (the basis of *ren* 仁 according to Mengzi). With no social groups, they have no feeling of what is socially right (*yi* 義) and no disposition to follow social rules (*li* 禮). When seeing a child of their own species about to fall into a well (or meet with some other bad end), they feel wholly indifferent. What is pathological in a human being is simply normal psychology to them. Ruist morality can have no meaning for them, because they lack the requisite feelings that are the source of Ruist moral principles. But I believe Li would say such a lack of morality is not possible for human beings.

My point with this admittedly far-fetched example is to get a better sense of what “universal and unconditional” mean for Li. I suggest that what they should mean are “universal and unconditional for all normal human beings,” because as it happens normal human beings have the psychology that Ruism is based on. As Li says, Ruist ethics are not purely formal principles, but have a basis in the social and psychological (and these turn out to be connected). But it is a contingent fact about human beings that we are highly social: obviously not every species is. Because we are social, we have a psychology which is extremely sensitive to what people around us are thinking and feeling. If that is the basis of morality, then this is not known through a priori reason. Li is correct about that. It is not a necessary fact about human beings that we have the moral feelings that Mengzi identified, not in the same way that it is a necessary fact about triangles that their angles add up to one hundred and eighty degrees. It is a logical contradiction to imagine a triangle with angles adding up to three hundred sixty degrees, but it is not logically contradictory to imagine human beings as more like the aliens I sketched above. That is not what we are, but we could have been.

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<sup>18</sup> Whether they would apply it in the way that Kant did is another question. In particular, I suspect that they would analyze Kant's example concerning beneficence in the *Groundwork* very differently. However, this is not our concern here.

Fortunately for Li's purposes, he can preserve some degree of universality in morality without giving it an a priori basis, which in fact it does not have according to him. This universality seems to be the critical point. Although he says that moral rules are formed through human social life, this itself sets boundaries on what is possible morally: it has to make human social life possible. This is Li's view: "I see all of ethics and morals, including justice, as serving the continuous extension of human existence" (Li 2016, 1076).<sup>19</sup> This will impose limits on what human morality can be. If human nature is universal (as Mengzi claimed), then that provides the requisite general moral principles. It is true that this will not be unconditional in a strict sense, but I argue that it does not matter. No moral principle, even the categorical imperative, is truly unconditional. When we look at why one might be concerned with morality being conditional, we see that there is no cause for worry with making morality dependent on human nature. One reason for concern might be that psychologically people fail to feel the pull of a moral principle, or feel it too weakly. It is simply a fact that people often do not do what we believe they should do. No philosophical argument will make that fact go away. Kant is not in any better position than Mengzi here (and arguably worse).

A more significant reason to worry is that if morality is conditional, we in fact will have insufficient reasons for insisting that some individuals or groups abide by the moral principles, because they do not satisfy the first part of the conditional. And then we will be back to some form of relativism, where the moral rules only apply to certain people and not others. When the source of morality is universal human nature, this disappears because everyone who meets the criteria for being human will satisfy the conditional and morality will apply to them. Here it is worth observing that Mengzi defined humanity in moral terms, not biological: being human means having the requisite moral capacities, not being *Homo sapiens*. Even Song-Ming Ruists, who often attributed attenuated moral capacities to animals because they still had the Pattern even if it was not fully expressed, still thought only human nature could fully realize the Pattern and thus only humans were fully moral beings.<sup>20</sup> Modern New Ruists often assert that every biological human has the moral capacities. I think this is debatable at the least, but is ultimately not a pressing question. Even if we allow that some small percentage of the population are

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<sup>19</sup> Note that this is by no means limited to biological existence. As the aesthetic is fundamental to humanity for Li, it would also have to include beauty.

<sup>20</sup> An example is Zhu Xi in *Categorized Conversations of Master Zhu*, "Nature and Pattern 1," 41. <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/4#n586443>.

sociopaths who lack the capacity for morality, this is no obstacle to attributing moral responsibility to everyone else.

How common sociopaths are is itself an empirical question, but I do not think it is very important to have a definitive answer to it in order to recognize that moral responsibility applies to the overwhelming majority of people. We can admit right off that not every biological *Homo sapiens* is a moral agent or will become one; people with severe mental disabilities, for example. The more difficult question is whether there are people who can function at a level that permits them to be independent and engaged in social life, exercising most of the rights and capacities of being a person, and yet lack the moral responses that Ruists believe define humanity. I suspect the answer is “yes.” Yet they are clearly outliers and do not make it impossible to define a morality that applies to *almost* every human being. Notice that when he is faced with the question of whether someone is capable of being morally responsive, Mengzi’s answer is not to defend theoretically the claim that every single human being is. It is to find an example where the person *was* morally responsive in something like the correct way, showing that *this* person has the requisite capacities (*Mengzi* 1A7). The assumption seems to be that sociopathy is rare. If Ruists (and modern psychologists) are wrong about that, it would cause problems for their moral theory, but the possibility of sociopathy does not make it incoherent.

To sum up, basing morality on human nature means Li can have the level of universality he requires from morality without trying to make it a priori, as in fact it is not. It does mean sacrificing the unconditional nature of morality, but not much is lost by doing so. It was never entirely unconditional to begin with, and the conditions are so easy to satisfy that the demands of morality will still apply to almost every functioning human being. It will not turn into complete relativism. Li said that in Mengzi, morality is both a priori and based on the psychological feelings of human nature. Since there is a contradiction here, Li turns to Xunzi instead, but this created other problems. By giving up the a priori aspect in Mengzi, he can stay true to the Ruist tradition of basing morality on psychological feelings and still have what he wants in a moral theory, which is pluralism without falling into relativism. To do so, he simply has to give up on the Kantian definition of morality.

## **Conclusion**

Both Li Zehou and Mou Zongsan faced a difficult task: interpreting Ruist ethics in a way to preserve its essential insights while accepting a Kantian definition of morality that required a priori moral principles in order to command necessarily and universally. There is

debate about how Kantian Mou was and it is fair to say Kant was primarily a foil for him, a comparison that enabled him to bring out what was distinctive about Ruism and Chinese philosophy generally. He wanted to show where Ruism surpassed Kant. The Prussian philosopher plays a similar role for Li. Li and Mou both disagree with aspects of Kant's thought, but one point I want to bring out here is how both were deeply influenced by his concept of morality, even when there is no question that Mou accepted more of it than Li did. The categorical nature of morality made a strong impression on the overseas New Ruists, and we see from Li that it influenced mainland Ruist philosophers as well. The how of Kant's introduction into Chinese thought is well known (Huang 2004; Müller 2006). Why Kant made such an impact is a more difficult question, and this is not the place to explore it.

What I tried to show here is that accepting Kant's definition of morality causes trouble for both Li and Mou. Ruist philosophers, whether Mengzi or Xunzi or Song-Ming thinkers like Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming,<sup>21</sup> do not derive purely formal moral principles from reason alone. Feelings appear to play a strong role in justifying morality for them. This is what Li and Mou have to explain. I will not go further into whether Mou's solution is successful here, but I have argued that Li cannot have it both ways: if morality is based on psychological feelings (as Ruist morality is for him), it cannot be a priori. If it is a priori, it cannot be based on psychological feelings. He has to choose. I have further suggested that he can preserve the role of feelings without losing what he wants from morality, which is to apply universally. He simply has to recognize that Kant was wrong: morality can be (sufficiently) universal without being a priori.

Two twentieth century European philosophers might have proved useful to Li and Mou, allowing them to see that they did not have to accept Kant's definition of morality: Philippa Foot and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Foot takes aim at the supposed categorical nature of morality in her famous article, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" (1972). She began to cleave apart the identity of hypothetical imperatives and self-interest, showing that there can be hypothetical imperatives that have nothing to do with self-interest. Then one can be committed to the goal of a particular hypothetical (say, the wellbeing of others) for moral reasons quite apart from one's own good (though these could overlap as well).

Li mentions Wittgenstein several times, but as far as I know does not reference his lecture on ethics, where Wittgenstein puzzled over the supposed categorical nature of morality.

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<sup>21</sup> Li and Mou agree that Xunzi was not a candidate for autonomous morality to begin with. They disagree about Zhu Xi, Mou considering him heteronomous while Li argues his ethics is autonomous.

As he notes, if someone plays tennis badly, but says they do not want to play any better, then that is the end of the matter. Once the goal (playing tennis well) is rejected, it makes no sense to say that he should improve. But morality is different. If one is behaving like a beast, but says he does not want to behave any better, that is not the end of the matter. He is not thus freed from any obligation (Wittgenstein et al. 2014, 44). He cannot simply decide to reject the goal of behaving decently. But Wittgenstein cannot make any sense of this. “The *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs would be one in which everybody, independently of his tastes and inclinations, would, *necessarily*, bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has in itself, what I would like to call, the coercive power of an absolute judge” (Wittgenstein et al. 2014, 46). He concludes that whatever we are doing with moral language, it is not describing some such state of affairs. Which is another way of saying that a categorical imperative is incoherent.

What I have suggested here is that when we think of morality in an alternative, less Kantian way, the problems Li and Mou face diminish if not disappear. Morality does not have to be a priori. This would not show that Ruists ethical theory is correct; the question here is definitional. If one accepts the Kantian definition of morality, then Ruism is not a true moral philosophy (as Hegel thought), at least not without some interpretive gymnastics. With a different definition of morality, then Ruism is a moral theory and might be a good one. My argument boils down to saying that Ruists—Li and Mou included—should not accept Kant’s definition of morality. It does not have to be based on a categorical imperative, *if* there are hypothetical imperatives which are not self-interested (as Foot argued) and *if* (as I have argued) there are some hypothetical imperatives which one must accept in order to be fully human, or better, that every person (in the philosophical sense) does accept.

Then the answer to that hypothetical interlocutor who says, “Yes, I’m behaving badly but I do not want to behave any better,” is, “You *do* want to behave better, and you show it through your actions and your feelings.” And then we could do what Mengzi did, showing instances in which he did exhibit compassion (or honesty or fairness, and so on). Or what Wang Yangming did, pointing out that people have feelings of sympathy for living and non-living things that have been damaged or destroyed (Wang 2014, 242). This effort might not always be successful. Perhaps in a few cases we find someone who has *no* history of moral actions all (at best, actions motivated by self-interest that happened to conform with morality), and is able to persuade us that they feel no shame, no guilt, no compassion, no sense of fairness, or any other moral feeling. What then? “This person is simply lost. What difference is there between a person

like this and an animal? What point is there in rebuking an animal?” (*Mengzi* 4B28). Since there have been accounts of human actions, there have been accounts of people behaving like beasts. Plato and Aristotle could not make that go away, and neither could Kant or Mill. It should not be a strike against Ruists that their moral theory cannot wholly preclude it either.

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**JIA Jinhua:**

## **Li Zehou on the Distinction and Interaction between Ethics and Morality**

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### **Introduction**

Li Zehou claims that the most important notions of his ethical theory rest on three major distinctions—the distinction between ethics and morality, the distinction between human emotions, concepts, and the will that constitute morality, and the distinction between traditional religious morals and modern social morals.<sup>22</sup> This paper focuses on the first distinction, especially on Li’s innovative notion of the historical, evolutionary interaction between ethics and morality.

As scholars have noted, there is no obvious difference between the two English terms of ethics and morals in their etymological roots,<sup>23</sup> and thus in the common or broad sense the two have long been used synonymously and interchangeably. In the philosophical or narrow sense, however, the two terms have often been distinguished by philosophers with different or even opposite definitions of each term and of what distinguishing the two.<sup>24</sup> In the Chinese tradition, after the term *lunli* 倫理 was selected for translating ethics and the term *daode* 道德 for morality first by Japanese scholars in the late nineteenth century,<sup>25</sup> the two terms have also been used interchangeably in common sense just like their English counterparts. Etymologically and traditionally, however, the two Chinese terms are of different implications.

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<sup>22</sup> Li Zehou, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao* 倫理學新說述要 (Beijing: Shijie tushu chubangongsi, 2019), 136.

<sup>23</sup> Damian Grace and Stephen Cohen, *Business Ethics: Australian Problems and Cases* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>24</sup> For general reviews of scholastic discussions on various definitions of the two terms, see mainly Josie Fisher, “Social Responsibility and Ethics: Clarifying the Concepts,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 52.4 (2004): 397; Jana S. Rošker, *Becoming Human: Li Zehou’s Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 53–63.

<sup>25</sup> Weifen Chen, “The Formation of Modern Ethics in China and Japan—The Contributions of Inoue Tetsujirō and Cai Yuan-pei,” in *Facing the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Wing Keung Lam and Ching Yuen Cheung (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, 2009), 195–210.

Basically, *lunli* refers to social customs and norms regulating interpersonal relationships,<sup>26</sup> while *daode* refers to moral virtues and behaviours.<sup>27</sup>

Li Zehou's distinction and definition of ethics and morality mainly develop from the traditional implications of *lunli* and *daode*. He defines *lunli* or ethics as social customs and norms, and *daode* or morality as individual conduct and psychology. This distinction and definition, however, are not utterly novel but roughly in accordance with that of some philosophers such as Shelling and Hegel.

What clearly distinguishes Li's notion from others is his exposition of the interrelation and interaction between the two categories. Applying his theory of anthropo-historical ontology, Li describes the historical, evolutionary interaction of the two categories as external, social ethical norms constructs internal, psychological moral maxims, and morality in turn feeds back to ethics. This notion, differs from relevant opinions of other philosophers, better accords with the historical actuality of human experience. An examination of the interactional process between the ethical norms of early Chinese ritual culture and the ethical-moral conceptions of classical Confucianism convincingly provides a good example for supporting Li's theory.

### **Ethics and Morality: Theory and Comparison**

Li Zehou's *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao* (Gist of A New Ethical Theory) published in 2019 is one of his final works, in which he clearly defines the distinction and interaction of ethics and morality. Li argues:

In my opinion, humans' moral conduct and psychology come from social, ethical norms. Therefore, I strictly distinguish ethics (external institutions, customs, regulations, conventions ...) from morality (internal psychology, i.e., the will, concepts, and emotions). I contend that the former constructs the latter and the latter feeds back to the former. This is the dialectical relationship between human culture (civilization) and human disposition (psychology).

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<sup>26</sup> Rošker has made a good etymological analysis of the term *lunli*; see her *Becoming Human*, 58–62.

<sup>27</sup> The compound *daode* comprises two characters of *dao* 道 and *de* 德. Originally, *dao* refers to *tiandao* 天道 (heaven's way), and *de* refers to heaven's virtue. In early cosmology, heaven generates humans and bestows its virtues on them, and *rendao* 人道 (human's way) imitates heaven's way, and therefore *daode* gradually extends to refer to human's virtues as well. See Jinhua Jia, "Religious Origin of Dao and De and Their Signification in the *Laozi*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, series 3, 19.4 (2009): 459-88, and discussions below.

我以為人的道德行爲和心理，都從社會倫理規範而來。從而，我嚴格區分倫理 (ethics, 外在制度, 風俗, 規約, 習慣 ...) 與道德 (morality, 內在心理, 即意志, 觀念, 情感), 並認為由前者構建後者, 後者反饋于前者。這也就是人文 (文明) 與人性 (心理) 的辯證關係。<sup>28</sup>

Li Zehou emphasizes the importance of distinguishing ethics and morality and offers his definition of the two categories. Ethics refers to external social norms such as institutions, regulations, and customs, representing human civilization. Moreover, ethical norms here are broadly inclusive, extending from primeval communities to the public regulations of contemporary societies, and ranging from early totems, taboos, shamanistic ceremonies, and superstitious norms to later legal laws, political institutions, and religious doctrines, as well as customs and conventions of all times. As Li concludes, “Ethical norms are demands, commands, restrictions, controls, jurisdiction, and formal promotion of the community over individual behaviour, which are various, myriad, and complex” 倫理規範是群體對個體行爲的要求, 命令, 約束, 控制和管轄以及正面提倡, 多種多樣, 繁多複雜。<sup>29</sup> Li defines morality as internal individual psychology that comprises three major elements of emotions, concepts, and the will. Morality involves the integration of emotion and reason, and is characterized by reason’s governance of emotion, desire, and instinct. Furthermore, reason is divided into its conceptual content and form of the will, and the most decisive force of moral psychology is the free will of moral autonomy. Meanwhile, morality is not just psychological concepts, but rather must also be good conducts that practice and implement good concepts.<sup>30</sup>

After distinguishing ethics and morality, Li Zehou goes on to describe the historical-evolutionary interaction between the two. He contends that ethics constructs morality and morality in turn feeds back to ethics, thus evolving in an interactional, reciprocal process from external to internal and then back to external. In other words, the moral psychology of human mind originates from evolutionary internalization of social-ethical norms imposed from outside,

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<sup>28</sup> Li Zehou, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 24. Translations of all citations from Li’s works are adapted from Robert A. Carleo III, ed. and trans., *The Humanist Ethics of Li Zehou* (Albany: State University of New York, 2023), forthcoming. I thank Robert for sending me the proofs of his work and allowing me to cite it.

<sup>29</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 26–28. For a detailed discussion of Li’s particular explication on the rationality of moral psychology, see Carleo, “Introduction: A Particular Sort of Rationalist Humanism,” in *The Humanist Ethics of Li Zehou*.

going through a process of emotional-rational formation (*qingli jie gou* 情理結構) and gradually becoming the individual's psychological constitution of moral sentiments, conscience, and principles. Then moral agents' rational principles and motivated moral conducts in turn influence external community and society and bring changes to public values and ethical standards.<sup>31</sup>

Li Zehou's exposition on the distinction and interaction of ethics and morality is based on his theory of anthro-historical ontology, especially his notion of historical sedimentation through lived human culture. He assumes that the movement from external to internal or from ethics to morality "can also be understood in terms of the movement from history to education, which is an important part of my philosophy of the historical sedimentation of human psychology" 這也可以稱為歷史—教育路線。這是我的歷史主義人性積澱說哲學的重要部分。<sup>32</sup>

Li Zehou's distinction and definition of ethics and morality are not utterly novel, as a considerable number of philosophers have held similar opinions. What clearly distinguishes his theory from others is his exposition of the interrelation and interaction between the two categories, which differs from relevant opinions of other philosophers. The ethical theories of three representative figures of German idealism, Kant, Shelling, and Hegel, are good examples for making a comparison.

Kant does not make a direct distinction between ethics and morality. Interestingly, Li Zehou proposes to view the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, "humans as ends," as content of external ethical norms, and the other two formulations, "universal legislation" and "free will," as construct of individual's internal moral psychology. Li argues that "humans as ends" proclaims a demand specific to modern society and therefore is not a universally valid categorical imperative.<sup>33</sup> In my opinion, we can add another Kantian notion for comparison. Kant's distinction between juridical duty and virtuous duty from a deontological perspective,<sup>34</sup> among the series of sharp conceptual distinctions that he draws throughout his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, seems to bear more similarities with Li Zehou's distinction between ethics and morality. Kant describes the juridical duty as external, resulting from social legislation and applying to actions a person is compelled to do by

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<sup>31</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 24–36.

<sup>32</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 13–16.

<sup>34</sup> This kind of duty is also called ethical duty by Kant. Here "ethical" refers to what Li Zehou means as "moral."

appropriate legal authorities, and thus “acting in conformity with duty”; while the virtuous duty is internal, resulting from inner legislation and applying to actions originating from a person’s awareness of the moral law, and thus “acting from duty.”<sup>35</sup> The juridical duty enforced by external, authoritative laws and prescriptions is similar with Li Zehou’s definition of ethics as external, social norms and prescriptions. The virtuous duty originated from the internal moral autonomy of agents is similar with Li’s definition of morality as internal psychological autonomy. Nevertheless, there are also certain differences between Kant’s distinction between the two kinds of duty and Li’s distinction between ethics and morality. For example, Kant’s virtuous duty implies his two formulations of categorical imperative, “universal legislation” and “free will,” and therefore is also viewed as ahistorical, metaphysical, transcendental *a priori*. As Li indicates, Kant emphasizes the individual psychological characteristics of free will and practical reason, but does not talk about their external, communal origin.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Li Zehou stresses the historical, cultural, experiential development of moral psychology, which is gradually internalized, sedimented, and transformed from external social norms.

In his early work titled “New Deduction of Natural Right” (*Neue Deduction des Naturrechts*) first published in 1796,<sup>37</sup> Schelling clearly distinguishes ethics from morality. He defines ethics as a domain that “sets up a commandment which presupposes a realm of moral beings and which safeguards the selfhood of *all* individuals by means of the demand addressed to the individual,” and morality as a domain that “lays down a law addressed only to the individual, a law that demands nothing but the absolute selfhood of the individual” (§31). Ethics provides a commandment set up by external social authorities and demands for all individuals to observe it, thus representing the “general will.” Morality is an inner commandment of absolute selfhood and autonomous conscience, thus expressing the free “individual will” (§32–33). These assertions are similar with Li’s distinction and definition of ethics and morality. Concerning the relationship between the two, however, their notions are different. While Li describes a historical evolution from external-social ethical norms to internal-individual moral autonomy, Schelling proposes an opposite direction of a breakthrough from the moral domain of the individual will to the ethical domain of the general will. The purpose of this breakthrough is to maintain and safeguard the freedom of the individual will by the empirical general will

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<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood, with essays by J. B. Schneewind et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 13–21.

<sup>36</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 38.

<sup>37</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, “New Deduction of Natural Right,” in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti (London: Associated University Presses, 1980), 221–52.

and to harmonize the two for becoming equivalent concepts. As Schelling states: “This commandment of ethics depends on the higher commandment of morality,” and “consequently, the problem of all ethics is to maintain the freedom of the individual by means of the general freedom, to safeguard the individual will by means of the general, or to harmonize the empirical will of all with the empirical will of the individual” (§33, 36). The highest commandment of ethics, Schelling believes, is that the entire moral world could will the individual’s action in its matter and form, and the individual’s action does not treat any rational being as a mere object but as a cooperating subject (§45). Although he attempts to transcend Kant’s abstract world of categorical imperative by introducing the empirical existential world of social, general ethical domain, Schelling’s notion of a breakthrough from morality to ethics remains an ideal, metaphysical deduction.

In his works such as the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* first published in 1820,<sup>38</sup> Hegel follows Schelling to make a clear distinction between the sphere of morality and the sphere of ethical life/order. He defines the former as the Kantian individual autonomy, subjectivity, and free will, and the latter as “ethical behaviour grounded in custom and tradition and developed through habit and imitation in accordance with the objective laws of the community” (§106, 145, 150, 153). These definitions are also about the same as that of Li Zehou. Like Schelling, however, Hegel’s view regarding the relationship between ethics and morality is also different from that of Li Zehou. Hegel proposes to abridge individual subjective sentiments and the concept of general rights by a progressive transition from morality to ethics through the ethical orders of the family, civil society, and state (§142–340). As he contends, “The right of individuals to be subjectively destined to freedom is fulfilled when they belong to an actual ethical order, because their conviction of their freedom finds its truth in such an objective order, and it is in an ethical order that they are actually in possession of their own essence or their own inner universality” (§147, 153). Hegel adds a historical, progressive perspective to Schelling’s breakthrough from morality to ethics, but his scheme is still an ideal, logical reasoning, not a conclusion drawn from historical actuality of human experience.

Above discussions display that Li Zehou’s distinction and definition of ethics and morality are roughly the same as that of some philosophers such as Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, especially the latter two. Li’s notion of the interrelation and interaction between the two domains, however, are different from that of them and other philosophers. The schemes

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<sup>38</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

designed by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel for opposing, harmonizing, or abridging ethics and morality are significant contributions to the development of ethical-moral philosophy, but these are fundamentally abstract, idealistic, and logical deductions. These schemes are different from Li's unique notion that is grounded on actual historical process of lived human experience, which I attempt to illustrate by examples of classical Confucian ethical-moral conceptions in the next section.

### **Externality and Internality: Classical Confucian Ethical-Moral Conceptions**

As discussed above, Li Zehou argues that, historically and progressively, ethics constructs morality and morality in turn feeds back to ethics, thus evolving in an interactional, reciprocal process from external to internal and then back to external. Li cites Christopher Boehm's research to support his argument. Boehm studies the activity and morality of primates and primeval human communities from the perspective of evolutionary socio-biology. He finds that morality originates in demands of the community on the individual to be self-regulating in the context of the competition and continuous existence of the species, and therefore morality is the individual's biological mechanism of self-regulating. As Boehm repeatedly emphasizes, "the conscience of self-regulating was the first milepost in humankind's moral origin," and "norms imposed on individuals by some communities appeared as early as the age of the Common Ancestors and even more obvious with their successors."<sup>39</sup> Li Zehou claims that Boehm's finding provides evidence for supporting his description of the movement from ethics to morals and of external communal norms constructing internal moral psychology of individuals.<sup>40</sup>

The development of Classical Confucian ethical-moral conceptions also supports Li Zehou's notion of the evolutionary interaction between ethics and morality, not only from external to internal but also from internal back to external. As is well-known, Li's theory of ethics is mainly grounded in a revival, modification, and reinterpretation of classical Confucian ethics. In his "General Schema of Ethics" ("Lunlixue zonglan biao" 倫理學總覽表), Li uses *li* 禮 (ritual) in the general sense of representing external social-ethical norms, but he does explain it with the example of traditional Chinese ritual culture and institutions that encompass ethical,

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 176, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Li, *Lunlixue xinshuo shuyao*, 29–31.

religious, and political domains.<sup>41</sup> Li argues that Confucius explicates ritual-ethical norms as grounded on *ren* 仁 (humaneness) and hence internalizes external norms to become individual moral feelings and virtues:

Confucius transfers the practice of an external ritual institution into an internal drive and intention, and integrates reason and drive to become the specific process of emotion (humanity, i.e., *ren*).

孔子將實踐外在禮制化爲內心欲求，融理欲于一體而成爲情（人性，即仁）的具體過程。<sup>42</sup>

Particularly, Li Zehou illustrates Confucius' stress on the genuine affection (loving feelings toward one's parents) and reason (repaying parents' love and rearing) for attending parents and observing the ritual of three-year mourning, instead of merely performing the ritual norms of filiality superficially.<sup>43</sup>

During the Warring States, Confucius' followers further elaborate the interrelation and interaction between external ethical norms and internal moral sentiments, thus providing more evidence for supporting Li Zehou's theory. The distinction and debate between the internality and externality of ethical-moral virtues during this period is the best example for our discussion. Before the famous debate between Gaozi 告子 and Mencius on whether *ren*-humaneness and *yi* 義 (duty/rightness) are internal or external (*Mencius* 6A4–5),<sup>44</sup> several excavated Guodian 郭店 bamboo manuscripts already discuss this issue. For example, both the *Yucong yi* 語叢一 (Miscellaneous Discourses I; strips 21-23) and *Liu de* 六德 (Six Virtues; strip 26) define *ren* as

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<sup>41</sup> Li, *Lunlixue gangyao* 倫理學綱要 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2019), 252–68; Li, *Huiying Sangde'er ji qita* 回應桑德爾及其他 (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2014), 73–76.

<sup>42</sup> Li, *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* 中國古代思想史論 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), 15–33; Li, *Lunyu jindu* 論語今讀 (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 270. Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 and Benjamin Schwartz have already held a similar opinion that Confucius internalizes *li*-ritual norms and places a new focus on the inner moral ideal of *ren*-humaneness, though Li offers more nuanced and comprehensive analysis on this point. See Xu, *Zhongguo renxinglun shi: Xianqin pian* 中國人性論史：先秦篇 (1963; reprint, Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2002), 73–75; Schwartz, “Transcendence in Ancient China,” *Daedalus* 104.2 (1975): 57–68, esp. 63–64.

<sup>43</sup> Li, *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun*, 15–33.

<sup>44</sup> Scholars have discussed and debated on the issue of a Mencius' internalism, which, though from different perspectives, are inspiring. See mainly Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 102–104; Xiusheng Liu, “Mengzian Internalism,” in Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 2002), 101–31.

internal and *yi* as external, an opinion similar with Gaozi's argument.<sup>45</sup> The recognition of *ren* as internal follows Confucius' identification, while the recognition of *yi* as external still pertains to the ethical-role duty of the ritual tradition.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the most important Guodian text related to our discussion is *Wuxing* 五行 (Five Conducts), which holds a unique opinion

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<sup>45</sup> All citations of the Guodian manuscripts are from Chen Wei 陳偉, ed., *Chudi chutu zhanguo jiance [shisi zhong]* 楚地出土戰國簡冊 [十四種] (Beijing: Jingji kexue chubanshe, 2009). In the *Yucong yi*, inner *ren*-humaneness is identified with treating family members with affection (*qin qin* 親親), and outer *yi*-duty is identified as treating the noble reverently (*zun zun* 尊尊). The *Liude* uses inside the gate (*mennei* 門內) to define internal *ren*-humaneness, and outside the gate (*menwai* 門外) to define external *yi*-duty, the former referring to the emotional connection of father, son, and husband, and the latter the differentiated status of lord, subject, and wife. Similar opinions or distinctions are also seen in the "Sangfu sizhi" 喪服四制 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Ritual), the "Benming" 本命 chapter of the *Dadai liji* 大戴禮記 (Elder Dai's Record of Ritual), and the "Wenyan" 文言 commentary on Hexagram #2 "Kun" 坤 in the *Yijing* 易經 (*Classic of Changes*). These opinions vary on expressions, but they are essentially close to Gaozi's view. The "Jie" 戒 chapter in the *Guanzi* 管子 also expresses a similar view, "Ren-humaneness is from interior and *yi*-duty behaves in exterior" 仁從中出, 義從外作. See Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳 and Liang Yunhua 梁運華, ed., *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 10.509–10. Some scholar contends that those arguments and differentiations between *ren* and *yi*, including that of Gaozi and Mencius, present two divisive boundaries of family and heart. See Qingjuan Sun, "Revisiting the Internal-External Issue of Ren and Yi in and beyond Mengzi 6A:4," *Philosophy East and West* 70.2 (2020): 506–21. This distinction, however, does not seem to be meaningful because both concepts of *ren* and *yi* are embodied or derived from the ritual norms which are built on the ethical relationship of familial system, and therefore encompass both familial and psychological dimensions. For example, Confucius, Mencius, and others define *ren* as an extension from *xiao* 孝 (filiality) and implying biased loving feelings toward one's family members (see further below). For more different interpretations of those Warring-States debates and arguments, see mainly Wang Bo 王博, "Zaoqi rujia renyi shuo de yanjiu" 早期儒家仁義說的研究, *Zhexuemen* 哲學門 11 (2005): 71–97; Liang Tao 梁濤, *Guodian zhujian yu Si-Meng xuepai* 郭店竹簡與思孟學派 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2008), 308–309; Tang Wenming 唐文明, "Renyi yu neiwai" 仁義與內外, in Shandong shifan daxue qilu wenhua yanjiu zhongxin 山東師範大學齊魯文化研究中心, ed., *Rujia Si-Meng xuepai lunji* 儒家思孟學派論集 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2008), 388–403.

<sup>46</sup> *Yi* presents dual categories in classical Confucian conception. The first category is ethical-role duty originated from the Zhou ritual culture, which is a set of social norms defining ethical duties that fit each person's role and status in the kinship group and society and regulating what was appropriate for a person's behavior. The second category is moral conscience and rightness resulted from the internalization of social norms and ethical duties. For a detailed discussion of this dual definition, see Jinhua Jia, "From Ritual Culture to the Classical Confucian Conception of Yi," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 20 (2021): 531–47; see also further discussion below.

that the cardinal virtues of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* 智 (wisdom/knowledge) can be both external and internal. This opinion is similar with Mencius' argument.<sup>47</sup>

Let us look at the beginning passages of the *Wuxing*:

If *ren*-humaneness takes shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue”; if it does not take shape from within, it is called “conduct.” If *yi*-duty/rightness takes shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue”; if it does not take shape from within, it is called “conduct.” If *li*-ritual propriety takes shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue”; if it does not take shape from within, it is called “conduct.” If *zhi*-wisdom/knowledge takes shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue”; if it does not take shape from within, it is called “conduct.” If *sheng*-sagacity takes shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue”; if it does not take shape from within, it is called “conduct of virtue.”<sup>48</sup>

仁形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行。義形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行。禮形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行。智形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之行。聖形於內謂之德之行，不形於內謂之德之行。(Strips 1–4)

The conducts of virtue number five, and when all five in harmony it is called “virtue”; when four conducts in harmony it is called “goodness.” Goodness is human's way, and virtue is heaven's way.

德之行五，和謂之德，四行和謂之善。善，人道也。德，天道也。(Strips 4–5)

The five types of conducts and their corresponding categories of virtue are *ren*-humaneness, *yi*-duty/rightness, *li*-ritual, *zhi*-wisdom/knowledge), and *sheng* 聖 (sagacity). *Nei* 內 (internal) refers to people's heart/mind, and *wai* 外 (external) refers to their social context. The text uses the boundaries of internality and externality to describe the first four conducts and virtues from two levels. On the first level, when these four conducts take shape within a person's heart/mind,

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<sup>47</sup> A silk manuscript of the same title and content along with an appended commentary is included in the excavated Mawangdui silk manuscripts. Li Xueqin 李學勤 proposes that the *Wuxing* was written by Confucius' grandson Zisi 子思 (483–402 BCE) or his disciples; see his “Jingmen Guodian Chujian zhongde ‘Zisizi’” 荊門郭店楚簡中的子思子, *Wenwu tiandi* 文物天地 2 (1998): 28–30. This proposal has been agreed by many scholars, though there have been different voices as well.

<sup>48</sup> All translations of citations from Guodian manuscripts are adapted from Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation* (Ithaca, New York: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012).

they are identified as “conducts of virtue.” In other words, “conducts of virtue” are motivated by a person’s autonomous will and moral conscience.<sup>49</sup> On the second level, when these same four conducts are formed externally and imposed by social force, they are identified simply as “conducts.” The external-social force here refers to ritual norms, not only because *li* and *yi*, two of the four virtues, are originally the core content and concepts of the ritual tradition, but also because the *Wuxing* further states that when the four “conducts” are in harmony they are of the moral quality of “goodness” that belongs to human’s way (*rendao* 人道), which is often used identical with *li*, the ritual tradition, during this period.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, *sheng*-sagacity, the fifth conduct and virtue, is always “virtuous” no matter formed and motivated within or without; when it and the four “conducts of virtue” motivated internally are in harmony, they are of the moral quality of *de* 德 (virtue), which originally belongs to heaven and represents heaven’s way (*tiandao* 天道). What is heaven’s *de*-virtue? As is well-known, *de* is an extremely complicated concept with multiple implications and has been the focus of many scholastic studies and debates. Here I only present a possible interpretation. The commentary to the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) states, “The great *de*-virtue of heaven-earth is to generate [the myriad things]” 天地之大德曰生 (“Xici xia” 繫辭下); “The great man unifies with heaven-earth in their *de*-virtue” 大人者與天地合其德 (“Qian Wenyan” 乾文言). Heaven-earth (*tiandi* 天地) represents the cosmos which is often simply referred to as heaven (*tian* 天), and the movement or operation of the cosmic order is called heaven’s way, whose *de*-virtue is the ceaseless generation of the myriad things including human beings. Heaven bestows its *de* to humans, especially to sage kings such as King Wen of Zhou and sages “without a crown” such as Confucius (for example, *Shi Qiang pan* 史牆盤; *Analects* 7/23). *Sheng*-sagacity pertains

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Csikszentmihalyi argues that the *Wuxing* emphasizes the innate origin of virtue and genuine moral motivation. Chen-Feng Tsai views “conducts of virtue” as “based on an internal, independent will” and “stemming from an autonomous principle.” See Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 70–71; Tsai, “Zisi and the Thought of Zisi and Mencius School,” in Vincent Shen, ed., *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy* (Dordrecht Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 119–38, esp. 124.

<sup>50</sup> Liu Xinlan 劉昕嵐 and Li Tianhong 李天虹 have offered plentiful evidence for this identification; see Liu, “Guodian Chujiang Xing zi ming chu pian jianshi” 郭店楚簡性自命出篇箋釋, *Guodian Chujiang guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 郭店楚簡國際學術研討會論文集 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2000), 330; Li, *Guodian zhujian Xing zi ming chu yanjiu* 郭店竹簡性自命出研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 136–37.

heaven's *de*, and therefore always brings out “conduct of virtue” whether formed within or without.

Like many contemporary thinkers, the author(s) of the *Wuxing* are curious in inquiring the origin and formation of ethical-moral virtues and conducts. However, unlike others who identify *ren* as internal and *yi* as external, they hold a unique view that all the conducts of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi* can be motivated both externally and internally, and they obviously favour the internal source of moral motivation and affirm it as authentic virtue. This view represents an effort in following Confucius to further internalize the heteronomous ritual-ethical norms to become people's autonomous moral virtues. For centuries, the Zhou ritual-ethical norms have regulated what are proper and good conducts for people to perform. Originally, *li* contains a set of normative social-ethical customs and rules guiding and regulating people's conducts and interpersonal relationships. *Yi* is the core and substance of *li*, referring to ethical-role duties and corresponding proper conducts, fitting each person's role and status in the hierarchical kinship group and society defined by ritual norms.<sup>51</sup> In the era of the late Western Zhou to Spring and Autumn, *ren* mainly denotes two meanings, the first virtuous government and the second to love one's family members;<sup>52</sup> then the second meaning is further explicated by Confucius, the author(s) of the *Wuxing*, and Mencius as an extension from *xiao* 孝 (filiality), the earliest ritual-ethical norm already appeared in the ancestral sacrificial ritual of the Shang dynasty (*Analecets* 1/6, 1/2; *Wuxing*, strip 33; *Mencius* 1A7).<sup>53</sup> The original character for *zhi* 智 is *zhi* 知 that connotes both meanings of wisdom and knowledge,<sup>54</sup> which mainly refer to handling political affairs properly and wisely during the late Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn,<sup>55</sup> and are embodied in the classics of *Poetry*, *Documents*, *Ritual*, and *Music*, the heritage of the ritual cultural tradition. The author(s) of the *Wuxing* acknowledge the external-ritual origin of these

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<sup>51</sup> Jinhua Jia, “From Ritual Culture to the Classical Confucian Conception of *Yi*,” 531–47.

<sup>52</sup> For example, the *Guoyu* 國語 records such a saying, “For those practice *ren*, to love their family members is called *ren*; for those rule the state, to benefit the state is called *ren*” 為仁者，愛親之謂仁；為國者，利國之謂仁 (“*Jinyu yi*” 晉語一). For more examples and discussions, see Chen Lai, *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie: Chunqiu shidai de zongjiao, lunli yu shehui sixiang* 古代思想文化的世界：春秋時代的宗教，倫理與社會思想 (Beijing: The Joint Publishing, 2009), 312–41.

<sup>53</sup> Jinhua Jia, “*Shu*-Considerateness and *Ren*-Humaneness: The Confucian Silver Rule and Golden Rule,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-021-09879-x>.

<sup>54</sup> Zong Fubang 宗福邦, Chen Shinao 陳世鏐, and Xiao Haibo 蕭海波, eds., *Guxun huizuan* 故訓匯纂 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2003), 1032, 1573–74.

<sup>55</sup> Chen Lai, *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie*, 312–41.

four virtues, but at the same time reidentify them as the internal conscience of moral agents, who are capable of motivating authentic virtuous conducts. In order to legislate their efforts of internalizing the ritual norms to become the autonomous moral virtues, the author(s) trace the origin of those authentic virtues to the cosmic authority of heaven's way.

The *Wuxing*'s distinction of two levels of internal and external virtues is further developed by Mencius.<sup>56</sup> On the one hand, Mencius insists in the importance of continual observation of established external ritual norms; on the other, he places more emphasis on the internalization of those ethical norms for the purpose of fostering inner moral awareness and autonomy.<sup>57</sup> In addition to his argument of both *ren* and *yi* being internal in the debate with Gaozi, Mencius further elaborates the *Wuxing*'s four virtues as “four beginnings” inside a person's *xin* 心 (heart/mind):

Whoever does not possess the heart/mind of compassion is not human; whoever does not possess the heart/mind of shame and dislike is not human; whoever does not possess the heart/mind of courtesy is not human; whoever does not possess the heart/mind of right and wrong is not human. The heart/mind of compassion is the beginning of *ren*-humaneness; the heart/mind of shame and dislike is the beginning of *yi*-rightness; the heart/mind of courtesy and modest is the beginning of *li*-ritual; the heart/mind of right and wrong is the beginning of *zhi*-wisdom/knowledge.

無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也。 (*Mencius* 2A6; see also 6A6)<sup>58</sup>

Mencius' “four beginnings” along with his other relevant discourses have long been interpreted as presenting a theory of human nature that expounds inborn, universal, or transcendental

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<sup>56</sup> Scholars have discussed the influence of the *Wuxing* on Mencius from various perspectives; see mainly Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue*, 103–113; Chen Lai, *Zhubo Wuxing yu jianbo yanjiu* 竹帛五行與簡帛研究 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2009), 158–200.

<sup>57</sup> David S. Nivison has noted that there are two sources of morality in the *Mencius*, one formal and public, and the other internal and motivational. He indicates that to Mencius the ideal is the internal moral source. See Nivison, “Motivation and Moral Action in Mencius,” in Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigation in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 101-104.

<sup>58</sup> Translations of all citations from the *Mencius* are adapted from D.C. Lau, *Mencius: A Bilingual Edition*, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003).

morals.<sup>59</sup> There are solid reasons for supporting this interpretation, but reading the *Mencius* as a whole and together with excavated Warring-States manuscripts, we see that Mencius' project is not to shape a theory of human nature,<sup>60</sup> but rather to construct a theory of moral psychology, with a central concern on the moral autonomy of agents rather than the inborn goodness of human nature.<sup>61</sup> This theory is constructed mainly through two ways. The first is to integrate the functions of the psychological properties of *xing* 性 (predisposition, nature), *qing* 情 (emotion, circumstance), and *xin* 心 (heart, mind), and the second to internalize the heteronomous ritual-ethical norms. About the first way, there have been a considerable number of studies.<sup>62</sup> Although there is still plentiful space for further investigation in this issue, because of the limit of topic and space I focus only on the second way in this essay.

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<sup>59</sup> For reviews of scholarly works on this theory, see mainly Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 180–234; Huang Junjie, “Contemporary Chinese Studies of Mencius in Taiwan,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 4.1 (2004): 151–66, esp. 151–59; Winnie Sung, “Mencius and Xunzi on Xing (Human Nature),” *Philosophy Compass* 11/11 (2016): 632–641; Xiaogan Liu, “Straightforward Reading, Injective Interpretation, and Scientific Implication: On the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (2020) 19:175–192.

<sup>60</sup> A. C. Graham indicates that Mencius usually talks about *xing* or ethical inclinations only when dealing with his debating opponents; see Graham, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), 57–59. Hektor K.T. Yan argues that *xing* or “human nature” does not occupy a central role in the Mencian moral philosophy; see Yan, “Beyond a Theory of Human Nature: Towards an Alternative Interpretation of Mencius' Ethics,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9.3 (2014): 396–416.

<sup>61</sup> Some scholars have already explored the possibility of a Mencian moral psychology or a classical Confucian moral psychology from various perspectives. See mainly I.A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition* (1932; rpt., Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997); Antonio S. Cua, “Xin and Moral Failure: Notes on an Aspect of Mencius' Moral Psychology,” in Alan K.L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 126–50; Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue*, 59–160; Kwong-loi Shun, “Early Confucian Moral Psychology,” in Vincent Shen, ed., *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy*, 263–90.

<sup>62</sup> For example, Xu Fuguan claims that Mencius is in fact “talking about the goodness of *xing* from the goodness of *xin*” 由心善以言性善, and *xin*'s independent activities are the ground of people's moral agency; see Xu, *Zhongguo renxinglun shi*, 160–62. Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 holds a similar opinion that Mencius' view of the goodness of *xing* cannot be separated from his conception of *xin*-heart/mind; see Mou, *Cong Lu Xiangshan dao Liu Jishan* 從陸象山到劉蕺山 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1979), 216–17; Kwong-loi Shun argues that to say human nature is good is to make the claim that the heart/mind has predispositions towards the ethical attributes of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*; see Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 180–234. Roger T. Ames challenges the use of “human nature” for translating *xing* and emphasizes the close relationship between *xing*, *qing*, and *xin*, describing *xing* as

Just like the second level of the four conducts and virtues formed externally described in the *Wuxing*, Mencius' four beginnings are originated or derived from external ritual-ethical norms. Throughout the *Mencius*, Mencius stresses the importance of maintaining the function of the normative *li*-ritual and discusses frequently how a person observes ritual norms when interacting with others in various social contexts.<sup>63</sup> Mencius firmly defends *yi*'s social function as ethical-role duties fitting each person's role and status; for example, he praises a gamekeeper's refusal to transgress the rites of his role as following the path of *yi* (5B7).<sup>64</sup> Mencius is famous for his advocacy of humane government by rulers and, like Confucius and the author(s) of the *Wuxing*, Mencius affirms that *ren*-humaneness is extended from the ritual norm of *xiao*-filiality (*Mencius* 1A7).<sup>65</sup> In the *Mencius*, among the thirty-three cases discussing the exercise of *zhi*-wisdom/knowledge, about half is on the ability and knowledge of kings and ministers making proper judgement and strategy in accordance with circumstances of political

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“a process of cultivation that includes *xin* as the ground for the habitual dispositions” and “fully informed by both feelings and circumstances (*qing* 情)”; see Ames, “The Mencian Conception of *Ren xing* 人性: Does It Mean ‘Human Nature’,” in Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991); “Mencius and a Process Notion of Human Nature,” in Alan K. L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 72–90; “Reconstructing A.C. Graham’s Reading of *Mencius* on *xing* 性: A Coda to ‘The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature’ (1967),” in Carine Defoort and Ames, eds., *Having a Word with Angus Graham: At Twenty-Five Years into His Immortality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 185–213. In his review of scholarly works on the “Mencian theory of human nature,” Xiaogan Liu criticizes Ames’ studies as “injective interpretation” that is “not acceptable for discovering possible true meanings of Mencius’ theory”; see Liu, “Straightforward Reading, Injective Interpretation, and Scientific Implication,” 181–86. However, it seems that Ames’ interpretation is more insightful and sophisticated than the straightforward and simplified reading advocated by Liu. As a matter of fact, the complicated integration of *xing*, *qing*, and *xin* already appears in Guodian manuscripts such as the *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 (*Xing*-predisposition Comes from Heaven’s Mandate), *Wuxing*, *Yucong*, and so on. See mainly Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue*, 67–82; Chen Lai, *Zhubo Wuxing yu jianbo yanjiu*, 13; Franklin Perkins, “Motivation and the Heart in the *Xing Zi Ming Chu*,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (2009) 8: 117–31; Shirley Chan, “*Xing* 性 and *Qing* 情: Human Nature and Moral Cultivation in the Guodian Text *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 (Nature Derives from Endowment),” in Chan, ed., *Dao Companion to the Excavated Guodian Bamboo Manuscripts* (Dordrecht Heidelberg: Springer, 2019), 213–38.

<sup>63</sup> Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 52–56.

<sup>64</sup> For more examples and discussions on this issue, see Jinhua Jia, “From Ritual Culture to the Classical Confucian Conception of *Yi*,” 531–47.

<sup>65</sup> For more discussions on the origin of *ren*, see Jinhua Jia, “*Shu*-Considerateness and *Ren*-Humaneness: The Confucian Silver Rule and Golden Rule,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-021-09879-x>.

contexts.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, like Confucius, Mencius fully acknowledges the importance of the external ritual-ethical origin and function of *ren*, *yi*, *li*, and *zhi*.

Then, in 2A6, 6A6, and other places, Mencius redefines the implications of these four virtues. Now, *ren* begins with the moral emotion of compassion to all human beings, *yi* begins with the moral conscience of shame and disapproval of bad things,<sup>67</sup> *li* begins with the moral attitude of courtesy and modesty, and *zhi* begins with the moral judgement of right and wrong. The four external ethical virtues enforced by ritual norms now become inner moral virtues motivated by autonomous emotion and reason (ideas and the will), including *li*-ritual itself. This is a further development of the *Wuxing*'s first level of virtuous conducts motivated within a person's heart/mind.<sup>68</sup> Mencius uses human's predispositional tendency of goodness as a starting point, but his main purpose is not to establish a theory of human nature, but rather to internalize the heteronomous demand of "acting in conformity with *ren* and *yi*" (*xing renyi* 行仁義) to become the autonomous moral practice of "acting from *ren* and *yi*" (*you renyi xing* 由仁義行) (*Mencius* 4B19). This conceptual difference is similar with Kant's distinction of the difference between "acting in conformity with duty" and "acting from duty."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 66–71.

<sup>67</sup> The feelings and attitudes of "shame and dislike" implicate ample meanings (Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 58-63), but basically they are evaluations and determinations against conducts that are inappropriate, disgraceful, wrong, or unreasonable. As Mencius stated, "All persons have things they are unwilling to do. To extend this to what they are willing to do is *yi*" 人皆有所不為, 達之於其所為, 義也 (7B31).

<sup>68</sup> Pang Pu 龐樸 has argued that the views of Confucius' followers in the question of why human nature is *ren* can be divided into two camps of seeking internally and externally, and he identifies authors of Guodian manuscripts and Mencius as the former; see Pang, "Kong Meng zhijian: Guodian Chujian de sixiangshi diwei" 孔孟之間: 郭店楚簡的思想史地位, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中國社會科學 5 (1998): 88–95. Csikszentmihalyi has defined Mencius' view of the origin of virtuous conduct as an internalist account shared with the *Wuxing*; see Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue*, 109.

<sup>69</sup> Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 identifies the Mencian moral thought as "the same as the autonomy of will and self-legislation presented by Kant"; see Mou, *Yuanshan lun* 圓善論 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1985), 12-27. Although it is questionable whether Mencius' idea is completely the same as Kant's, Mou is acute and insightful in detecting Mencius' emphasis on the autonomy of moral agents. Xiaogan Liu again criticizes Mou Zongsan's opinion as "injective interpretation" that is "not acceptable for discovering possible true meanings of Mencius' theory." See Liu, "Straightforward Reading, Injective Interpretation, and Scientific Implication," 181–83. However, Mou's philosophical analysis of the Mencian thought seems to be more profound and nuanced than the straightforward and simplified approach advocated by Liu.

We may explore further into the causes and process behind this tendency of internalization. From the Shang to the Zhou, the ritual ceremonies, norms, and customs have gradually formed codified or uncoded regulations and institutions encompassing religious, ethical, and political domains, whose content is recorded and embodied in the early classics. In the *Yili* 儀禮 (Classic of Rituability) and *Zhouli* 周禮 (Zhou Ritual), ritual norms and ceremonies are defined as the content of education and conducts. Then, through ritual education and practice over centuries imposed by states and communities, the ritual-ethical norms are gradually sedimented and internalized into people's heart/mind. The springing up of numerous inventories of virtue and virtuous conduct during the Spring and Autumn period is the result of such a sedimentation and internalization.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, the collapse of ritual institutions from the late Spring and Autumn to Warring States have forced philosophers to reflect on the urgent issue of how to preserve the ethical order previously maintained and enforced by ritual norms. Accordingly, Confucius and his followers reflect and elevate the importance of internal moral autonomy. Confucius' explanation of *li*-ritual as grounded on *ren*-humaneness and the distinction and debate of the internality and externality of virtues and virtuous conducts from the *Wuxing*, *Liude*, and *Yucong* to Gaozi and Mencius mark the process of moral internalization. As a result, the “conducts” stemmed from external ritual-ethical norms are transformed to become the “conducts of virtue” motivated by internal moral conscience, the heteronomous demand of “acting in conformity with *ren* and *yi*” becomes the autonomous moral practice of “acting from *ren* and *yi*,” and the rites of reverence and submission to the superior and elder become what Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) explicates as “my heart/mind of respecting them” 我長之之心.<sup>71</sup> This process of internalization supports Li Zehou's description of how external, social ethics constructs internal, psychological morality, as well as his notion of the “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua-xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構) of humanity sedimented and constructed through historical process.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For examples of the inventories, see Chen Lai, *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie*, 306–356.

<sup>71</sup> Zhu Xi's, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Jinan: Qilu shushe 1992), 157.

<sup>72</sup> Li, *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun*, 31–33; Li, *Lishi bentu lun* 歷史本體論 (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2002), 124–32. For discussions of Li Zehou's theory of “cultural-psychological formation” and historical sedimentation, see mainly Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Robert A. Carleo III, and Andrew Lambert, “On Li Zehou's Philosophy: An Introduction by Three Translators,” *Philosophy East and West* 66.4 (2016): pp. 1057-1067, esp. 1060, 1064–65; Jana Rošker, *Following His Own Path: Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 47–102.

By the late Warring States, the Confucian theory of moral psychology has so well developed that the notion of internal moral conscience and virtues start to feed back to social-ethical standards and formulate new public values. This tendency is represented by the emergence of new concepts such as “gongyi” 公義 (public rightness), “gongdao” 公道 (the way of public rightness), “zhengyi” 正義 (righteousness, justice), and so forth, which transcend the ritual-ethical norms of the hierarchical society to a general context and often appears with the contrast and conflict between spheres of *gong* 公 (public) and *si* 私 (private). These new concepts appear simultaneously in many Warring-States texts including the *Xunzi* 荀子, *Mozi* 墨子, *Hanfeizi* 韓非子, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, *Guanzi* 管子, and excavated manuscripts, indicating a common attitude regarding general, public values during this period. Among these texts, the *Xunzi*'s discussion of those new concepts is the most clear and profound.<sup>73</sup>

The *Xunzi* states as follows:

As for being in charge of the post of prime minister, that is to prevail over people by means of one's position of authority. Treating what is right as right, treating what is wrong as wrong, treating those capable as capable, treating those incapable as incapable, shutting out private desires, all these must follow the way. The way of public *yi*-rightness and the current *yi*-duty can be compatible mutually—this is the way that prevails over people. ... If things were like this, then who in the state would dare not to practice *yi*-duty? If the lords and the ministers, superiors and subordinates, noble and humble, senior and junior, right down to the common people, all practiced *yi*-duties, then who in the world would not want to conform to *yi*-duty/rightness?

夫主相者，勝人以執也，是為是，非為非，能為能，不能為不能，併己之私欲，必以道。夫公道通義之可以相兼容者，是勝人之道也....如是，則國孰敢不為義矣。君臣上下，貴賤長少，至於庶人，莫不為義，則天下孰不欲合義矣。<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Scholars have identified the different ethical-moral tendencies between Mencius and Xunzi as the different emphases between *renyi* 仁義 (humaneness and rightness) and *liyi* 禮義 (ritual and duty) or internalism and externalism. See mainly Cua, “*Xin* and Moral Failure,” 126–27. However, as discussed above, Mencius still attaches importance to *li* or *liyi*. Although Xunzi places much stress on *li* or *liyi*, he also expounds the importance of *ren* or *renyi* to a large extent. For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Jinhua Jia, “From Ritual Culture to the Classical Confucian Conception of *Yi*,” 531–47.

<sup>74</sup> Wang Xianqian 王先謙, ed., *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988), “Qiangguo” 彊國, 11.295. All translations of citations from the *Xunzi* in this essay are adapted from Eric Hutton, trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

A good prime minister makes correct judgement on right and wrong and gives fair treatment on the capable and incapable. In order to do so he must shut out his private desires to hold “gongdao” 公道 (the way of *gong*). In early Chinese texts, the character “gong” 公 connotes various meanings such as “gonggong” 公共 (public, common), “gongzheng” 公正 or “gongping” 公平 (fairness, rightness, or justice), and “gongmen” 公門 (the state or court).<sup>75</sup> Since here the “way of gong” involves fair judgement of right and wrong and treatment of people while rejecting private desires, it refers to the way of rightness, fairness, and public interests and can be translated as the “way of public rightness.” As the *Liji* reads: “In the eras when the great way prevailed, the world was shared by gong-public. The worthy was selected and the capable was appointed. People stressed trustfulness and promoted harmony. Therefore, they did not regard parents as only their own parents, or sons as only their own sons” 大道之行也，天下為公。選賢與能，講信修睦。故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子。<sup>76</sup> In the *Xunzi*, “gongdao” is used synonymous with “gongyi,” which also rejects private desires or family interests, and holds unbiased, non-hierarchical fairness and rightness for the general public. For example:

When the way of public rightness (*gongdao*) succeeds, the private gate is blocked; when public rightness (*gongyi*) shines bright, private things disappear.

公道達而私門塞矣，公義明而私事息矣。<sup>77</sup>

Through public rightness (*gongyi*) the superior person can overcome private desires.

君子之能以公義勝私欲也。<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, in the term “tongyi” 通義, “tong” 通 means “tongxing” 通行 (current) or “changgu” 常規 (common norms or routines); together “tongyi” refers to the current role-duties hierarchically grounded on the traditional ritual norms, just as *Xunzi* uses this term in another

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<sup>75</sup> Mizoguchi Yūzō 溝口雄三, *Zhongguo de gong yu si • Gong si* 中國的公與私 • 公私, trans. Zheng Jing 鄭靜 (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2011), 230-59.

<sup>76</sup> Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648), eds., *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), “Liyun” 禮運, 21.769a.

<sup>77</sup> *Xunzi jijie*, “Jundao” 君道, 8.239.

<sup>78</sup> *Xunzi jijie*, “Xiushen” 脩身, 1.36.

place to explain the ritual-role duties of respecting the elder and submitting to the noble: “For the young to serve their elders, for the humble to serve the noble, for the unworthy to serve the worthy—these are the current *yi*-duties of all people” 少事長，賤事貴，不肖事賢，是天下之通義也。<sup>79</sup> Xunzi believes that “the way of public *yi*-rightness and the current *yi*-duty can be mutually compatible” 公道通義之可以相兼容, and if a minister holds on this, “who in the state would dare not to perform *yi*-duties/rightness” 則國孰敢不為義. Here the fair minister represents the ideal moral character who both conforms with and goes beyond the prescriptive ritual-ethical norms regulating a person’s duties and interests, thereby aligning with *yi*-rightness oriented by the interests of the public and state. In this way, Xunzi bridges internal moral autonomy with external public values. Thus, the moral virtue of *yi*, which first evolves from the external ritual-ethical norm of role duty to the internal individual moral conscience of rightness, now in turn goes back to influence social-public values and forms the general concepts of righteousness, fairness, and justice. This developing stage of classical Confucian ethical-moral theory provides evidence for Li Zehou’s notion that while ethics construct morality, morality also feeds back to ethics.

## Conclusion

Li Zehou emphasizes the distinction between ethics and morality, and defines ethics as social customs and norms and morality as individual conduct and psychology. Li’s distinction and definition are not utterly novel but roughly in accordance with that of some philosophers such as Shelling and Hegel. What clearly distinguishes his notion from others is his description of the interrelation and interaction between the two categories. Applying his theory of anthropo-historical ontology, Li describes the historical, interactional evolution of the two categories as external social ethics constructs internal psychological morality, and morality in turn feeds back to ethics. This innovative notion, differing from relevant opinions of other philosophers, better accords with the historical actuality of lived human experience.

The formational process of classical Confucian ethical-moral conceptions provides a good example for supporting Li Zehou’s theory. While inheriting and developing the ritual tradition, Confucius and his followers also gradually internalize heteronomous ritual-ethical norms to become autonomous moral virtues, which in turn influence social-public values and ethical standards in a general way. During this process, classical Confucianism gradually

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<sup>79</sup> Xunzi jijie, “Zhongni” 仲尼, 3.113.

constructs an ethical-moral theory that integrates and harmonizes external ethical norms and internal moral virtues.

**Maja M. KOSEC:**

**The Origins of Chinese Culture and the Question of Shamanism: Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan**

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**Writing the history of thought: philosophically vs. historically**

Li Zehou was one of the leading theorists of modern Confucian renewal, world theory of humanism, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophical anthropology. He is also the author of one of the most influential and scholarly innovative studies analysing the beginnings of Chinese culture. (Rošker 2016, 229) As Paul D'Ambrosio notes in his chapter of this volume, contemporary philosophy professors usually write in clear, logical, and tightly argued structures, with very little variance in what is “acceptable” to academic standards. (see D'Ambrosio's contribution to this volume) In terms of this type of style Li is, as we will see, often lacking. *“But when we contextualize him in a master and commentator tradition,”* argues D'Ambrosio, *“we better appreciate the breathe and consequence of his style of philosophizing with texts, rather than merely on them.”* (Ibid.) In order to evaluate Li Zehou's theory of the shamanistic-historical tradition in the context of his time, the present article offers a critical comparison of his and Xu Fuguan's (徐復觀 1903-1982)<sup>80</sup> understandings of the origin of Chinese culture.

Xu Fuguan is known as one of the representatives of the second generation of Modern New Confucians (*xin ruxue* 新儒學) (Sernelj 2013, 72), the stream of thought that, to some extent, also influenced Li Zehou's work. And although Li disagreed in many ways with Modern New Confucians, their common point was a strong emphasis on Chinese history and traditions with which they were all well familiar. This helped them interpret where China was at the time and where it might be headed in the future. (Rošker 2022b) A small part of this analysis that both Li and Xu dealt with was the role of the ruler during the period of transition between the Shang (商 1600 - 1046 BC) and Zhou (周 1046 – 221 BC) dynasties.

The present article thus aims to compare the Li and Xu's respective understandings of the role and position of King Wen (文王 1112-1050 BC) and Duke of Zhou (周公, reigned 1042-1035 BC) in the Chinese history. King Wen and the Duke of Zhou—the legendary

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<sup>80</sup> Xu was born in China in 1903, studied under Xiong Shili (熊十力 1885 - 1968) and later devoted himself to philosophy, sociology of culture, literary and art criticism, becoming most famous as one of the first theorists of a specifically Chinese aesthetics in contemporary China. (Sernelj 2013, 72)

founders of the Zhou Dynasty—were those who Xu Fuguan and Li Zehou believed embodied the role of religious and political rulers during this period. The social changes and the transformation of beliefs during this time, when China slowly moved away from religion and into the realm of humanism and ethics, provide an important exception to Jasper's theory of the axial age, which we will discuss in more detail later. However, based on textual analysis, Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan develop their own views on the origins of the roles of religious and political authority, the reasons for the merging of these two authorities, and the impact of these early rulers on the further development of Chinese culture. The many similarities in Li's and Xu's understanding of these merged roles are accompanied by their differing views on whether or not these rulers were also shamans (*wu* 巫). This paper will focus on the key elements of their theories that explain the similarities and differences between their interpretations of the roles of King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, and the implications of these differences for their understanding of Chinese culture. These differences that manifest themselves through the present contrastive analysis of the ideas of both authors and their ideational backgrounds can simultaneously serve as an exposition of certain discursive or paradigmatic differences between the work of a philosopher and a historian. Their methodological starting point, as we will read in the following quotations, is just the opposite. In his book on Xu Huang Chun-Chieh notes that Xu believes that researchers of intellectual history should start with the tangible (the written text) and move toward the abstract (thought) (2019, 21). Starting from the abstraction of thought, these researchers should then turn to the concrete reality of human life. An approach that is exactly the opposite of Li's own description of his work.

In 1978 I claimed that one can write the history of thought in two ways, historically and philosophically, and that these correspond to the respective methods of 'my thought commentating on the classics' and 'the classics commentating on my thought.' My statements roused a bit of criticism. Regrettably, to this day I remain able to write only through the method of 'the classics commentating on my thought': fabricating concepts and providing perspectives with which to examine the phenomena of our world. (Li 2018, 11)

In the following we will examine how these conflicting methodological clues are reflected in Li's philosophical and Xu's historical interpretation of the origin of Chinese culture.

## **Early Chinese Shamanism and Religion**

To put the discussion in a broader context theoretically, we can begin with the so-called Axial Age. Many Chinese scholars believe that during the period that Karl Jaspers (Jaspers, 1965) refers to as the Axial Age, China transitioned from a period of natural religion to a period where the ethics of humanism were prominent. (Yang 2004, 111) While the Shang religion emphasized fertility worship based on its agricultural system, the nomadic Zhou culture focused primarily on the sun and star worship typical of nomads and their mostly shamanistic religiosity. In the merging of these two cultures, the cults of the victorious Zhou culture naturally prevailed, but at the same time some of the elements from the heritage of the overthrown Shang were also adopted. The result of this fusion was the rise in importance of the ancestor cult, which retained its significance throughout China's history. (Rošker 2021, 170-1) It is also worth noting that although the Shang people believed in the supreme ruler *Shangdi* (上帝) or Heaven *Tian* (天), the latter originally contained no ethical or anthropomorphic elements. It was only in the beginning of the Zhou dynasty that *Tian* became perceived almost as an anthropomorphic entity. However, this belief in *Tian* as creator and supreme moral authority began to wane rapidly in the following decades, leading to a transition from religion to humanism in the period between the Western (西周 1046 - 771 BC) and Eastern Zhou periods (東周 770 - 221 BC). (Ibid., 174-5) According to numerous Chinese scholars, China is a major exception to Jasper's theory of the Axial Age, which states that in the period between the 8th and 4th centuries BC, all developed cultures began to doubt the systems of natural religions and developed higher forms of mostly monotheistic religious systems. (Rošker 2022a, 24) As Chen Lai points out (Chen 2017, 4), this change occurred because people recognized the limitations of deities and therefore shifted their focus to the real world of human relations and society regulations. Thus, the breakthrough that Jaspers understands as a "breakthrough towards transcendence" was actually a "breakthrough towards humanities" in China.

## **Interconnection of religion and politics in the early Zhou dynasty**

The question is what were the reasons for this breakthrough and what consequences it had for the further shaping of Chinese culture and history. Here, of course, the ideational and philosophical explanations differ greatly between different streams of thought and authors. Xu and Li worked roughly in the same historical period, but, as already mentioned, belonged to

different currents and methodologies. Before elaborating on their theories we will take a look at their background.

Despite the many similarities and points of agreement between Li Zehou and the Modern New Confucians, there are also many significant differences between them. One of the major points of divergence comes from their different views on the history of Confucian philosophy, on ontology (especially on the question of transcendence and immanence), on the question of the human self, and on the question of relation between the individual and society. (Rošker 2022b) The Modern New Confucians have seen the human being as immanent and transcendent, a view developed in China during the Axial Age. Jaspers believed that with the development of the means of production, natural religions became unreliable, so more developed monotheistic religions emerged. In China, however, as we have already mentioned, in the same period religion was abolished and transformed into morality and a part of the human mind. The representatives of the second generation of Modern New Confucians, including Xu Fuguan, have followed this assumption, according to which this historical process of social transformation in China, namely the idea of *Tian* was transformed from an almost anthropomorphic higher force into criteria of inner human morality and ethics. (Rošker 2016, 186-8) Li Zehou, on the other hand, does not rely on the same hypothesis as the second generation of Modern New Confucians. He describes the worldview that he believes prevailed in the Chinese tradition as a "one-world view (*yige shijie* 一個世界觀)." This view, which he believes developed from rationalized shamanism, means that there is only one world, the world in which we live. There is neither the need nor the possibility to transcend to any higher realm. Based on this belief, Li sharply criticized the Modern New Confucians' concept of immanent transcendence and their notion of double ontology. (Ibid.)

### **Xu Fuguan and the awakening of the humanistic spirit**

Xu's historically based theory about the position and importance of political and religious leaders in early Chinese history, while not directly touching on Jasper's theory of the Axial Age, deals with the same period and its developments. Xu begins his explanation, which he sets forth most clearly in *The History of Humanness in China (Zhongguo renxinglun shi* 中國性論史), with a discussion of early Chinese religion and its transition to the spirit of humanism in the early Zhou dynasty. At the same time, he also assesses the role that King Wen and his son, the Duke of Zhou, played in this process. He draws his conclusions from an in-depth hermeneutical analysis of Zhou dynasty texts, highlighting in particular the concept of "*Concerned*

*Consciousness* (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識)” of the new rulers at the time of coming to power. This concept of *concerned consciousness* forms the main concept of Xu Fuguan's philosophy.

Xu emphasizes the importance of ancestor worship in ancient China, saying that the religious life of the people during the Shang Dynasty was mainly determined by their ancestral gods. Their relationship with heaven functioned through their ancestors as intermediaries, and the same form of worship was later adopted by the Zhou. Although the Zhou have often been interpreted as "the barbarian state taking power over the civilized one," Xu believes that the Zhou's victory over the Shang was due to the fact that a spiritually conscious group defeated a less conscious group, namely the Shang. (Xu 2014, 15-6)

All human cultures begin with religion. China is no exception. But cultures also form a set of clear and rational ideas that influence the development of human behaviour—they must develop a certain level of self-awareness in people. The original religions, however, are usually characterised by a primitive belief in supernatural miracle powers, rooted in a sense of dread of extinction and catastrophes that can be caused by heaven/nature. In such religions there is absolutely no consciousness of self-awareness. Highly developed religions differ from each other depending on the society and epoch in which they originated. Therefore, they can either accelerate or inhibit human self-consciousness. (Ibid.)

Xu believes that from looking at the bronze vessels from the Shang period Chinese culture appears as a fairly highly developed one. However, looking at the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells from that period, we can see, that the spiritual life and the religion of the Shang people was still primitive. Their lives were completely dependent on various deities, especially of the ancestral spirits, the nature deities, and the supreme ruler Shang Di. (Ibid.)

The contribution of the people of the Zhou period was to bring into this traditional religious life the spirit of self-awareness. In doing so, they brought a culture that had until then been based on material achievements into the realm of ideas, helping to establish a humanistic spirit of Chinese morality. (Ibid.)

Xu believes that traditional Chinese culture and philosophy developed from a sense of *anxiety* or *concerned consciousness* (*youhuan yishi* 忧患意识), that arose from awakening to one's own responsibility. (Sernelj 2013, 78) As Xu explains it:

Anxiety (*youhuan*) is the psychological state of a person when his feeling of responsibility urges him to overcome certain difficulties, and he has not got through them yet. /.../ In a religious atmosphere centered around faith, a person relies on faith for salvation. He hands all the responsibilities to God and will therefore have no anxiety. His confidence is his trust in God. Only when one takes over the responsibility oneself will he have a sense of anxiety. This sense of anxiety entails a strong will and a spirit of self-reliance.<sup>81</sup> (Xu 2014, 20)

Xu Fuguan particularly highlights the emergence and development of the concept of *concerned consciousness* in the period between the Shang and Zhou dynasties. He points out that the new Zhou kings were afraid of losing the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian ming* 天命) after the Shang were overthrown.

The Zhou people did change the mandate of the Yin [Shang]; in other words, they became the new winners. However, what one understands from reading the texts and documents from the beginning of the Zhou dynasty does not give the impression of a high-and-mighty atmosphere that characterizes most nations after winning a war. The feeling reflected in those texts appears more like what the classic *Yizhuan* called a "concerned" consciousness.<sup>82</sup> (Ibid., 19)

Through this constant deep fear (*kongbu* 恐怖), they became aware of the connection between their own actions and "fortune or misfortune," which led to a shift from the "the divine" to the "the human" and gave rise to specific Chinese humanism. (Ibid., 20) Xu believes that as people began to doubt the Mandate of Heaven, they slowly shifted the focus of their concern from external deities to their own inwardness, which gradually freed them from dependence on religion. However, in the early Zhou era, according to Xu, it was still too early to completely break away from religion, so another transformation of religious thought had to take place first. People began to understand the Mandate of Heaven through their political leader. (Ibid., 25-6) Since there was no independent monastic class, political activities and religious activities were mostly inseparable. Consequently, people tended to view the will of the gods in the actions of political leaders, so that the immorality of political leaders simultaneously became a failure of the gods' credibility. With the lack of self-awareness of the humanistic spirit at the end of Shang

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<sup>81</sup> English translation by Tea Sernelj 2013, 79.

<sup>82</sup> English translation by in Huang Chun-Chieh 2019, 24.

rule, the loss of divine power only contributed to spiritual chaos, but did not seem to cause a fundamental rethinking of religion. However, in the Western Zhou Dynasty, this failure of the ruler led to the fall of the idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which led to the further development of humanism in China. (Ibid., 37)

### **Li Zehou and the shamanistic-historical tradition**

Let us now compare this historically based theory with another approach presented by Li Zehou. Li, the author of one of the most influential and scholarly innovative studies analysing the beginnings of Chinese culture, approaches his interpretation from the standpoint of philosophical anthropology based on anthropo-historical ontology and his own elaboration of Marxist theory. Building on this, Li develops the idea of a shamanistic-historical tradition as the basic foundation of Chinese culture, which he details in his work *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humanness* (2018)<sup>83</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, Li sharply criticised the Modern New Confucian concept of immanent transcendence and their notion of double ontology. He therefore introduced his own concept, called the "one world view", emphasising that there is only one world—the concrete, historical, social world of human beings. This idea is closely related to another concept of Li Zehou, namely the idea of "culture of joy (*legan wenhua* 樂感文化)." This concept, also translated as the *culture of optimism*, is the term Li uses to distinguish the Chinese cultural tradition from the Japanese "culture of shame (*chigan wenhua* 耻感文化)" or the Western "culture of guilt (*zuigan wenhua* 罪感文化)." (Rošker 2019, 119) Since the "one-world view" rejects the possibility of the existence of any higher transcendental world that affects human life, Li believes that the Chinese tradition did not focus on the search for a higher meaning to reach a higher transcendent world. Therefore, their way of searching for ethical and social rules was more joyful, Li argues. (D'Ambrosio 2016, 1059) As Li explains, the term *culture of joy* thus has a threefold semantic connotation. Namely, it refers simultaneously to the "culture of worldly happiness" that characterises Chinese tradition, to an optimism about one's ability to improve one's living conditions, and to the "culture of music and aesthetics." (Wang 2015, 235)

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<sup>83</sup> Published in Chinese as Li Zehou [李泽厚]. 2015. *You wu dao li, shi li gui ren* [由巫到礼, 释礼归仁]. (*From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humanness*). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.

In Chinese heritage, such joy (*le*) is a symbol of the essence and function of music (*yue*), both of which are considered to be integral to human nature in the light of the teleological pursuit of ultimate joy or happiness. (Ibid.)

The feeling of joy (*legan*) here refers to a set of emotions that were a necessary precondition for the formation of a sense of humaneness that developed in people from the union of their material and spiritual lives. (Rošker 2019, 120) As Li explains, early shamanistic ceremonies played an extremely important role in this process. It was only during the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasty that the worship of totems in shamanistic dances and songs was gradually replaced by the humanized and rationalized worship of heroes and ancestors (Sernelj 2018, 339), which became one of the most important primordial phenomena of Chinese culture. In his explanation, Li relies on a Chinese archeologist, Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 (d. 1966), who tells us that ancestor worship and the worship of celestial gods gradually converged and intermingled, giving rise to the paradigm of post-Shang Chinese religion, specifically the predominance of ancestor worship over the worship of celestial gods. With this gradual integration of god worship and ancestor worship, the integration of religious and political authority also took place. According to Li, this fusion and subsequent continuation of the rationalized form of shamanism became key to understanding Chinese thought and cultures. (Li 2018, 12-4) As Byung-seok Jung explains, Li believes that shamanic culture ensured that religion and politics could not develop independently in China. Since ethics, religion, and politics were based on the system of rites rooted in shamanism, they became unified and formed a ruling structure and ideology-Confucianism. (Jung 2018, 204) The line between the dead and the living, between people and their spirits, had always been blurred in Chinese tradition, and the practice of serving the dead was tantamount to serving the living and continued for centuries. Jana Rošker (2019, 122-3) explains that Li believes that because of the relics passed down from shamanistic culture that closely linked the spiritual and human worlds, the latter's position was elevated to the point that people generally could not fully comprehend their human limitations and began to search for meaning themselves, without the help of external forces. However, this connection between the realms of the dead and the living had very particular means of realization that fell within the domain of the shamans. (Li 2018, 14) Here Li relies again on Chen Mengjia, who asserts: “*The king himself, although a political leader, was also the community's head shaman.*” (Chen 1936 in Li 2018, 15) Without further discussion Li concludes:

That is to say, although various aspects of shaman, supplicant, diviner, and historian, the ultimate and most important shaman was the political leader. This 'king' was the principal communicator between the spiritual and human realm, as well as the final authority in decision and direction of activity. This means that the political leader fundamentally possessed the highest religious authority for communicating with heaven. (Ibid.)

Li's assumptions are, however, problematic on several levels. Since Chen Mengjia bases his statement entirely on Mircea Eliade's work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, which has been widely and severely criticized for making romantic overgeneralizations based on little or no archeological evidence, one might doubt the basis of Li's theory as at least a little shaky. Marthe Chandler points out (2018, 279): "*Of course there is no requirement that a philosopher do anthropological fieldwork, but it is important that philosophical theories at least be consistent with the scientific evidence, particularly perhaps a theory calling itself 'anthropological ontology'.*"

However, as we have already read, Li was never methodically looking for precise or thorough arguments, if not "to reveal certain essential points or lead people toward new ideas". (Li 2018, 11) With this idea, then, Li points to further evidence that supports his notion of the unity of shaman and king. Li cites several examples of the close connection between divination practices and the duties of the political ruler. For example, it is clear from the oracles that divination and dancing were the king's domain. "*Divination: the king will dance*,<sup>84</sup>" "*Divination: The king will not dance*"<sup>85</sup>. That being said, Li also claims that shamans evolved into historians over time. To support this claim, he exposes the character for divination with plant stalks (*shi* 筮), which shows that divination was definitely the domain of the shaman in the beginning, as it is composed of the radicals for bamboo (*zhu* 竹) and for shaman (*wu* 巫). Li therefore argues that ancient divination practices evolved from the dynamic activity of shamans (shamanic ecstasy and dance ceremonies) to static numerical calculations, which he explains as a process of slow rationalization of shamanistic practices. (Li 2018, 26)

Divination, even more so than "shamanism," was pronounced in its connection to the activity of the king, especially political activity. Because of this, divinations recorded

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<sup>84</sup> “贞，王其舞。”(Guo Moruo 1978-1983, No. 11006a)

<sup>85</sup> “贞，王勿舞。”(Ibid.)

and preserved various important political and military experiences. /.../ This is precisely the concrete expression of the process of rationalization “from shamanism to historicism.” The world of shamanistic practice transformed into a world of symbolism, numbers, and historical events. Clearly, the emergence of divination, numerology, the *Book of Changes*, and the system of ritual regulations /.../ forms a crucial link in the movement from shamanism to historicism. (Ibid., 27)

Another interesting point in Li’s theory is his alternative interpretation of a passage from the *Record of Rites*, which states: “*Before the king were shamans and behind him historians.*”<sup>86</sup> Li interprets this line, normally read as referring to the physical space, as referring to time “*seeing the historian as a general office of following and inheriting the shaman's tole in carrying out rituals of divination and sacrifice in service of the king.*” (Li 2018, 27-8)

An inconsistency then appears in Li's own explanation of the role of shamans. In accordance with Chen Mengjia’s asertations, in his essay *Preliminary Remarks on the Deep Structures of Confucianism* (originally published in 1997), Li argues that the work of many scholars has shown that the ancient sage-kings of the Chinese tradition were shaman leaders, including those celebrated in Confucianism.

From the earliest shaman leaders to Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, Wen 文, Wu 武, and the Duke of Zhou 周公, and even including Yi Yin 伊尹, Wu Xian 巫咸, and Bo Yi 伯益, all of these revered ancient legendary or historical political figure can be seen as great shamans who had consolidated both political power (kingly authority) and spiritual power (religious authority) into single person. (Li 2018, 16)

But if we read his earlier works from the 1980s, we can see another explanation. In his chapter *Reevaluating Confucius* (first published in 1980), he equally explains that the Confucians emerged from these organizers and leaders of primitive ritual and shamanic practices—the shamans, officials, and scribes—and became preservers of what we know today as Confucian ritual and ceremony. (Li 2020, 1-2) However in this part Li quotes a late Qing scholar Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (d. 1936), who wrote that Confucians, originally in charge of ritual and helping the ruler to accord with yin and yang forces, were *shaman-officials* (*shushi* 術士)—i.e. important figures both religiously and politically. (Ibid., 4) Here, then, Li is not referring to

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<sup>86</sup> “王，前巫而后史。”(Li ji 2022: Li Yun 25)

Chen Mengjia's claims that kings are shamans, if not to Zhang Binglin's idea that shamans are officials. Li argues:

The great Confucian figures of antiquity, such as Emperor Shun's minister Gao Yao 皋陶, Shang minister Yi Yin 伊尹 and the Duke of Zhou 周公 were all such shaman-officials, serving as both overseers of ritual and auxiliary rulers. The later Confucian idealization of a "primeminister" (*zaixiang* 宰相) who helped the emperor rule the empire originated from this earlier role. (Ibid.)

So, should we understand the Duke of Zhou to be a shaman-king (ruler) or a shaman-official (auxiliary ruler)? If the latter, this explanation is much closer to that described by Xu Fuguan. While Li equates the role of the shaman with that of "king" or an "auxiliary ruler" or, later in Zhou, with that of "historian," Xu Fuguan notes that the status of the shaman was very high in the Shang dynasty, but that even in this period the main responsibility for worship lay with the king, not the shaman. (Xu 2014, 36) Thus, his opinion coincides with Li's regarding shaman-officials who later became historians in the Zhou dynasty, but not at all with that regarding shaman-kings. After this outline of Xu and Li's respective interpretations of the development of the intertwining of politics and religion in the early periods of Chinese history, we can now analyze their theories about the role of the first rulers of the Zhou dynasty.

### **King Wen and the Duke of Zhou**

Before we begin discussing what role the first rulers of Zhou play in the theories of Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan, let us briefly look at King Wen and the Duke of Zhou from a historical perspective. King Wen was the ruler of Zhou, one of the semi-barbarian states on the western border of the Shang Empire. He began annexing part of the territory on the Shang border, but died before he could threaten the Shang capital. After his death, his son and successor, King Wu 武王 (reigned ca. d. 1043 BCE), destroyed the Shang and founded the Zhou Dynasty. King Wen was posthumously honored as the founder of the Zhou Dynasty and titled King. He was also the father of the Duke of Zhou, who later became one of the most important figures of reference in Confucian thought. King Wen died in 1050 BCE and was succeeded by his son and the actual founder of the Zhou Dynasty, King Wu. Since Wu died at a young age, the throne was left to his son, 13-year-old King Cheng 成王 (reigned ca. 1042 - 1021 BCE). Since Cheng was too young to ascend the throne, his uncle, Wu's younger brother, the Duke of Zhou, took over the regency over the young king. He successfully suppressed the Rebellion of the Three

Guards (1042 – 1039 BC)<sup>87</sup>, but more importantly contributed much to the formation of Chinese culture. (Saje 2015, 71-72)

Let us now take a look at Xu Fuguan's understanding of their roles. As we have already seen, Xu emphasizes the inseparable connection between political and religious activities throughout Chinese history. This tight connection between both consequently led to the will of the gods being interpreted through the actions of political leaders, which meant that the immorality of political leaders simultaneously became a failure of the credibility of the gods, which was later followed by a doubt about the Mandate of Heaven. Thus, in the early Zhou period, people began to understand the Mandate of Heaven through King Wen. (Xu 2014, 25-6) They no longer revered him only as their ancestor or as a great political leader, but also associated him with the Mandate of Heaven for religious reasons. Xu points out that the *Book of Poetry* states:

The appointment is not easily [preserved],  
Do not cause your own extinction.  
Display and make bright your righteousness and name,  
And look at [the fate of] Yin in the light of Heaven.  
The doings of High Heaven,  
Have neither sound nor smell.  
Take your pattern from king Wen,  
And the myriad regions will repose confidence in you.<sup>88 89</sup>(Shi jing 2022, Da ya, Wen Wang zhi shi, Wen Wang 7)

Xu Fuguan thus says that King Wen became the concrete manifestation of the heavenly command and "the virtue of King Wen" became the true content of the divine. Therefore, the relationship between King Wen and the Divine went beyond the role of an intermediary and

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<sup>87</sup> The rebellion of the Three Guards was a rebellion of the other three brothers of King Wu, who ruled the eastern part of the territory, against the self-appointed regency of the Duke of Zhou over the young King Cheng. (Saje 2015, 72)

<sup>88</sup> “命之不易、無爾卑。  
宣昭義問、有虞殷自天。  
上天之載、無聲無臭。  
儀刑文王、萬邦作孚。”

<sup>89</sup> English translation by James Legge.

Wen actually became a representation of god. Xu says this has given some modern scholars the impression that King Wen was a shaman. However, Xu emphasises that according to Shang period materials, the person responsible for worshipping the gods was already a political leader, not the shaman. (Xu 2014, 27) Unlike a religious leader, King Wen's mind was not focused on heaven, but was primarily concerned with the problems of the present world. This position of King Wen in the eyes of the Zhou people is actually an expression of the awakening of the humanistic spirit in religion. This humanistic spirit became one of the characteristics of religion in the early Zhou Dynasty and represents a crucial difference from Shang religion, Xu concludes. (Ibid., 26) King Wen's preoccupation with the present world was already part of the process of the awakening spirit of self-awareness and taking over of the responsibility for oneself, which led to a growing sense of anxiety. (Ibid., 20)

When Xu speaks of this sense of anxiety or *concerned consciousness*, he emphasises the role of the Duke of Zhou even more than that of King Wen. Although Xu does not claim that *concerned consciousness* was created by King Wen or the Duke of Zhou personally, as it is a concept that developed gradually during a long-term historical process, he closely associates its emergence with the early Zhou period. He points out that the new Zhou kings were afraid of losing the Mandate of Heaven after the Shang had been overthrown. By constantly keeping this deep fear in mind and becoming aware of the connection between their own actions and the consequences they had, a shift from religion to a specific Chinese humanism took place. As we have seen, King Wen gave great power to the country of Zhou, but he was not honoured as the beginner of the new dynasty until after his death. Thus, Xu believes that this concept of *concerned consciousness*, emerged with King Wen, but developed mainly under the Duke of Zhou and was eventually manifested as ritual, and integrated into classical Confucianism under Confucius. (Ibid., 20 and Huang 2019, 149)

But what about Li's interpretation? He believes that Confucian ethics goes back to a demand from the rulers that grew out of the ancient shamanistic tradition. It was the "magical" charisma or virtue (*de* 德) of the shamanic ruler that later gave rise to the idea of the sage-king and the integrated religious, ethical, and political requirements of ritual education. (Li 2016, 1137) Regarding King Wen, Li quotes *The Record of the Rites*: "When King Wen made sacrifice, his serving the dead was equivalent to serving the living,"<sup>90</sup> (Li ji 2022: Ji Yi 6) and interprets

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<sup>90</sup> 文王之祭也：事死者如事生。

<sup>91</sup> English translation by Robert A. Carleo III.

this as evidence that King Wen was a shaman, who in this case was responsible for the practical and particular means of connecting with the ancestors. Li backs this up with a quote from the *Great Announcement*, "*The Tranquillizing king [King Wen] left to me the great precious tortoise- shell, to bring into connection with me the intelligence of Heaven.*"<sup>9293</sup>" (Shang Shu 2022: Zhou Shu, Da gao 3) Li also emphasizes that it was believed that both King Wen and later the Duke of Zhou would receive the Mandate of Heaven and ascend to Heaven which he supports with the quotes from the *Book of Poetry*: "*King Wen is on high, how bright is he in heaven,*" (Shi jing 2022, Da ya, Wen Wang zhi shi, Wen Wang 1) and "*The mandate of heaven, oh how boundless in its profundity, how grandly illustrious, the purity of King Wen of Zhou's virtue.*" (Shi jing 2022: Song, Zhou Song, Qing Miao zhi shi, Wei Tian Zhi Ming 1). Finally, in his opinion, the most important role of King Wen was that he was one of the pioneers of the process of rationalizing shamanism.

As we have seen from the above quotes, he also attributes the role of one of the last shaman- kings/ shaman-officials to the Duke of Zhou. But more importantly, Li believes that the Duke of Zhou was the one who actually completed the process of rationalization of shamanism and historicism, that laid the foundation for China's predominant cultural tradition. (Ibid., 32) Historically, the first Chinese dynasties up to the Western Zhou are often referred to as cultures of "ritual and music (*liyue* 禮樂)" because the cultivation of human emotions was equated with an understanding of music during this period. Through ritual and music, the Duke of Zhou comprehensively rationalized and institutionalized the shamanistic ritual ceremonies of sacrificial ancestral worship and communication with the spirits that guided human affairs. This unification of government and religion then served as the normative criterion for the social order that characterized Zhou culture. In this way, the rituality of the Zhou Dynasty began to represent a system of rules that maintained social order by orienting people to social norms. (Li 2018, 32 and Rošker 2022a, 61-2) In this regard, the establishment of the patrilineal, feudal, and sacrificial system, which was also realized by the Duke of Zhou, was also of epochal importance for Chinese history. Thus, the real reason why Confucius praised him so highly is precisely his systematization of rites and music. (Li 2011, 11) "*It was not Confucius but the Duke of Zhou who comprehensively sorted, remolded, and standardized the primitive rituals of high antiquity up to the Shang dynasty,*" states Li. (2020, 4) And we can see that "*Confucius*

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<sup>92</sup> 天降威，龜用寧王遺我大寶，紹天明。

<sup>93</sup> English translation by James Legge.

repeatedly emphasized that he “loved the ancients but did not innovate”<sup>9495</sup> (*Lunyu, Shu Er, 1*); “followed the Zhou”<sup>9697</sup> (*Lunyu, Bayi, 14*); and “dreamed of the Duke of Zhou,”<sup>9899</sup> (*Lunyu, Shu Er, 5*) indicating that he intended to preserve the Duke of Zhou’s legacy in toto.” (Li 2020, 4) In the context of the Duke of Zhou's contribution, virtue (*de*) took on a very high status, gradually evolving “from a requirement to ‘follow’ norms and rules to an aspect of personal character.” Simultaneously, *Tian* replaced Shang Di, displacing the previously important ruling anthropomorphic deity and marking a significant shift in thought between the Shang and Zhou periods. (Ibid., 86)

In the early Zhou period, “virtue” was then raised to a new height, and became connected to the Duke of Zhou's comprehensive establishment of the clan-tribe-state's institutional norms of ritual and music, which centered on the political activity of the king. The “virtuous governance” (*dezheng* 德政) of the institutionalization of ritual and music can be divided into two aspects, “reverence *jing* 敬” and “ritual *li* 禮,” which are respectively internal and external. (Li 2018, 32)

It was Confucius, who later, when music and ritual had already lost their social significance, rooted ritual in humaneness, this way ultimately completing the process of rationalization of internal shamanistic or magical emotion. (Ibid., 42)

## Conclusion

The differences in Xu's and Li's interpretation of the roles of political and religious rulers in the early Zhou periods originate in their different interpretations of the developments that took place during the Axial Age. In his historically based theory, Xu claims that the Zhou people brought the culture based on material achievements into the realm of ideas and through awakening to one's own responsibility developed a sense of *concerned consciousness*. He believes that doubt about the Mandate of Heaven gradually freed people from dependence on

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<sup>94</sup> 述而不作，信而好古。

<sup>95</sup> English translation by Andrew Lambert.

<sup>96</sup> 吾從周。

<sup>97</sup> English translation by Andrew Lambert.

<sup>98</sup> 興周公。

<sup>99</sup> English translation by Andrew Lambert.

religion and led the Chinese towards the formation of a humanistic spirit of Chinese morality. Since it was still too early in the early Zhou era to completely break away from religion, people began to understand the Mandate of Heaven through King Wen. Therefore, his relationship with the divine went beyond the role of a mediator, and Wen actually became a representation of god. Since King Wen did not focus on heaven, but was primarily concerned with the problems of the present world, Xu believes that the concept of *concerned consciousness* as an expression of the awakening humanistic spirit in China originated with King Wen, developed further under the Duke of Zhou, and was finally integrated into classical Confucianism under Confucius. Somewhat the opposite to Xu's *concerned consciousness* is Li's concept of the *culture of joy*. Li bases his theory on the "one-world view," which rejects the possibility of the existence of a higher transcendental world. He believes that as Chinese tradition did not focus on the search for a higher meaning in order to reach a higher transcendental world, its way of searching for ethical and social rules was more joyful. This feeling of joy, *culture of joy*, refers to a range of emotions that were a necessary precondition for the emergence of humaneness (*ren* 仁), which developed from the union of material and spiritual life. As Li explains, early shamanistic ceremonies played an extremely important role in this process, and it is precisely the understanding of this continuation of the rationalized form of shamanism that became key to understanding Chinese thought and cultures. Li here connects the role of the shaman-king with the power of the ruler over divination, thus interpreting King Wen as one of the last shaman-kings and, more importantly, as one of the pioneers of this rationalization of shamanistic practices. Since the cultivation of human emotions was equated with the understanding of music during this period, which can also be referred to with the same notion of *culture of music and aesthetics* (*legan wenhua*), Zhou dynasty rituality began to represent a system of regulations, which through guiding people with social norms, sustained the social order. Through ritual and music, the Duke of Zhou then comprehensively rationalized and institutionalized the shamanistic ritual ceremonies of sacrificial ancestral worship and communication with the spirits that guided human affairs. This unification of government and religion then served as the normative criteria of the social order that characterized Zhou culture. It was Confucius, who later rooted ritual in humaneness, finally completing the process of rationalization shamanism.

Xu and Li both believe that the close connection between religion and politics in China originated in the practice of ancestor worship, and that in the Shang and early Zhou periods the highest religious role, that of the person responsible for serving the ancestors, was given to the

political leader, the king. They also agree that during the Zhou dynasty, shamans evolved into historians. However, Li's interpretation of how this occurred differs greatly from Xu Fuguan's. While Xu firmly rejects the idea that the kings of the Zhou period may also have been shamans, Li posits two different theories: In the first, he identifies the early auxiliary rulers with shaman officials, as proposed by Zhang Binglin, while in the second, he asserts that the early kings were also the supreme shamans, as first proposed by Chen Mengjia. Although Li's two theories are not necessarily incompatible, they never appear together, as Li classifies the Duke of Zhou first as a shaman official and then as a shaman king.

In sum, the content of Xu's and Li's views on the position of King Wen and the Duke of Zhou are relatively similar. Their prominent role as political and religious leaders is undeniable, while whether or not they should also be understood as shamans is debatable. The role they attribute to these two kings, however, is somewhat less similar. The role Li attributes to King Wen is much more active (pioneer of the rationalization of shamanic practices) than that of Xu (symbol of the awakening of the humanistic spirit). In interpreting the role of the Duke of Zhou, however, we can note that Xu associates him primarily with the development of the concept of *concerned consciousness*, while Li exposes him as the ruler who comprehensively established the institutional norms of ritual and music, which then served as the normative criteria of the social order of Chinese culture.

By comparing Li Zehou and Xu Fuguan, this article aimed to place Li's philosophical interpretation of the origins of Chinese culture in dialogue with Xu's historically grounded interpretation. Detached from the key elements of their theories that explain the similarities and differences between their interpretations of the roles of King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, and the implications of these differences for their understanding of Chinese culture, the significance of this contrastive analysis of the ideas and ideational backgrounds of both authors manifests itself also as an exposition of numerous differences between the work of a philosopher and a historian—a note that readers of Li Zehou should definitely keep in mind when approaching his work.

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## **Andrew LAMBERT: Li Zehou and Political philosophy: Li's response to liberalism**

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### **Introduction**

The claim “harmony is higher than justice” (Li 2016) is part of Li's critical assessment of the Western liberal tradition. It involves a comparison with traditional Confucian values, and touches on questions of self, human flourishing, and political organization. But what is involved in this claim and is it defensible? To address these questions, let us first analyze the components of Li's claim, starting with “justice.”<sup>100</sup>

### **What is Justice? The liberal account of justice**

How is justice understood in the context of modern liberalism? Stated simply, liberal justice is fair consideration of morally equal people and their interests. In Kantian terms, persons are autonomous agents, capable of following their own distinctive life plan and so deserving of respect. While the roots of this justice lie in traditional demands to respect individual liberty in public and private life (Gaus 2018), modern liberalism develops this account into a more comprehensive political theory, particularly in the work of John Rawls (1971; 1996). In Rawls' work, justice refers to the creation of principles of justice among self-interested rational contractors, who agree to be bound by fair principles that govern political institutions: justice is the “first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls 1971, 3).

This conception of the just political realm has two noteworthy characteristics, incommensurability and an impartial moral viewpoint. First, liberalism recognizes the diversity of modern life, and widely differing conceptions of the good life. People's desired ends or goals

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<sup>100</sup> In Li's discussion, terms such as justice, reason, and emotion are used in several senses, and the relation between them evades precise articulation. For example, the relationship between justice as a characteristic of social institutions, which is difficult to conceive as emotional, and justice as an individual virtue is not precisely specified. Similarly, harmony is sometimes a condition of individual practical judgment and sometimes a quality of a stable social order. Likewise, the “justice” in “harmony is higher than justice” indicates a general approach to ethical and practical judgment, as well as an ideal for public institutions. Without trying to resolve all of these conceptual issues in Li's work, I hope that the interpretation presented here is plausible, and the attempted extrapolations of Li's ideas a promising way to develop his thought.

are incommensurable, and judgments about the relative worth of diverse conceptions of flourishing are not possible (within certain constraints, such as not harming others). For Rawls, political liberalism is neutral about the good life: incommensurability requires that procedural fairness takes priority over any conception of the good life. Second, judgments of fairness require an abstract and impartial viewpoint, which reasonable agents are compelled to imaginatively adopt. Principles of justice and other moral principles are then derived from this standpoint. Li challenges both of these claims. In his view, personal flourishing is socially and historically constituted to a greater extent than this framework allows, challenging the notion of incommensurable ends or goods, and an impartial moral viewpoint is not the foundation of moral judgment.

Central to Li's critique of justice is how political liberalism and its justice build from a particular conception of self and personal flourishing. Most famously expressed by John Stuart Mill, this is the view that flourishing – what makes life worthwhile to the subject<sup>101</sup> – involves “individuality” (Mill, 2001, 59): developing one's unique capacities, and setting and fulfilling individual goals.<sup>102</sup> Mill conceived of the individual as tree-like: an organism that develops a unique configuration of branching interests and dispositions. Mill writes:

“Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.” (2001, 55)

For Mill, human nature means that flourishing lies in the exercise of rational faculties, which give distinctive shape to an individual life. In contrast, following custom, failing to develop such individuality, impedes flourishing. Bernard Williams (1981), while not sharing Mill's perfectionism, adds to the liberal view of self and society. He describes the liberal self as one characterized by an individual set of desires or “projects” (1981, 5), which collectively constitute a person's character or individuality. Such personal projects might include a degree, a career, becoming wealthy and so on. To have and realize such projects is to flourish. Furthermore, projects are crucial to action because they generate the motivations to act. In

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<sup>101</sup> Here, let us set aside the question of objective accounts of flourishing – according to which subjective satisfaction is not sufficient for flourishing – famously discussed in Nozick's simulated pleasure machine example (Robert Nozick 1974).

<sup>102</sup> Mill writes, “[I]t is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings.” (Mill, 2001, 59)

extremis, Williams suggests (14), having such personal projects are a necessary condition for having any motivation to act – including the motivation to abide by ethical demands, such as justice and fairness.<sup>103</sup> These individualistic accounts of self and flourishing, and the subsequent need to adjudicate among incommensurable equals, drives the concern with justice as fairness.

Li's critique of justice challenges the veracity of this liberal view of self and human flourishing - as personal projects, pursued qua individuals, driven by an inwardly arising nexus of desires - and the concomitant conception of justice. Li's conception of human nature, in contrast, foregrounds humans' social existence and shared social goods, and the historically conditioned nature of the human subject. The next section examines Li's arguments against placing justice-as-fairness at the center of moral thought, and why harmony might be a higher priority in social and moral thought.

Li's ideas can also be extended in ways not explicitly discussed by Li, to develop an alternative conception of personal flourishing. At its core are affective (emotional) and aesthetic goods generated through everyday social and interpersonal interaction – goods that Li identifies as central to traditional Confucian social ethics. Harmony is important to this vision of the good life, and the final section explores this alternative account of flourishing.

### **LI's critique of liberal justice**

Before examining Li's critique, a few clarifications are helpful. Li is not dismissive of justice, but places it alongside other ethical ideals or values. While criticizing liberalism for promoting an ethics based on rational individualism and abstract principles, Li is not a cultural conservative. He does not seek to restore an idealized traditional Confucian society, unlike some contemporary Chinese thinkers (Jiang Qing 2013). Indeed, Li is sympathetic to the aspirations of contemporary individuals (Li 2016, 1121), is opposed to state oppression, and believes the public realm in China could benefit from greater impartiality (Li, 1128). Rather, he addresses deficiencies or excesses in the rationalistic liberal approach, thereby making room for Confucian forms of life. Finally, Li is sympathetic to Rawls' approach as an account of

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<sup>103</sup> Williams criticized moral theories that rely on an impersonal or objective view of the world (*sub specie aeternitatis*; "the point of view of the universe" Williams 1981, xi), and then claim an obligation to accept dictates deriving from that moralized viewpoint (1985, especially ch. 10). Williams regards this as an implausible account of moral obligation and human motivation. Thus, Williams' liberal individualism, unlike Rawls', does not lend support to justice as deriving from an abstract community of morally equal human beings.

redistributive justice and of the public realm (1092), but doubts that such abstract frameworks could be the foundation of *all* moral justification. It is in the realm of the personal and everyday social life, and the practical and moral judgments needed therein, that the Confucian critique is strongest.

What is wrong with the liberal picture of self, society and justice, according to Li? Simply put, justice has been unduly elevated above other moral values, and principle-based rationalism unduly dominates understandings of practical reason. This criticism has a practical aspect: general moral principles, intended to include all humans, are often too abstract to guide judgment in the highly particular contexts of everyday practical and moral judgments (Li 1108, 1124). But the objection is also metaphysical: a mis-understanding of the self and personal flourishing. Specifically, intellectual frameworks appropriate for broad political questions and public reason have wrongly become the basis for individual reflection and practical judgment.

Li's suspicion of the autonomous self that underlies justice-as-fairness partly derives from his Marxist historicist perspective. Li believes that external states of affairs – including the eco-system, technology, economic forces and social practices – shape peoples' inner psychological lives; this includes concepts acquired, emotional responses and the sense of what is reasonable.<sup>104</sup> This means that liberal political theory and the justice central to it are the product of specific historical circumstances – specifically, the rise of capitalism (Li 2016, 1081). One feature of this form of social and economic organization is the competitive free market. Echoing Michael Sandel (2010, 2013), Li notes that modern liberal states are moving from market economies to “market societies” (Li 2016, 1068). The internalization of market logic leads people to understand themselves and their relations with others in terms of market-based relations. Privately, they are autonomous individuals who negotiate with others in pursuit of their own projects. In the sphere of public reason, they are rational contractors bound by principles of fairness and Rawlsian just institutions. In response, the basic unit of moral analysis, the individual, is generic and universal, ensuring the moral equality of all. From the first-person perspective, such understandings can seem ahistorical or a-cultural (Li 1094), part of the fabric of the world.

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<sup>104</sup> This idea is expressed in several of Li's ideas, such as *cultural-psychological formation* (*xinli wenhua jiegou* 心理文化結構) and *techno-social substance* (*gongju benti* 工具本体) (Li 2019; 2016,1070). For explanations of several of Li's more technical terms, see D'Ambrosio, Carleo III & Lambert (2016). See also Jana Rosker (2020).

Li believes this presentation of the self and social relations neglects history, and overlooks how external forces condition the subject. Conceptions of self and human flourishing have a particular historical origin and developmental pathway.<sup>105</sup> They are conditioned by environment and history (both personal and societal) to a greater degree than the liberal individualist account recognizes.<sup>106</sup> For Li, liberalism is a particular historical stage in the development of human social life, shaped by capitalism (2016, 1132), and not the final one.

The Confucian tradition offers an alternative account of the relation between external forces and inner subjective life. This relation generates different forms of subjectivity and flourishing. Confucian ritual is one source of this alternative subjectivity. The emotions, neglected by theorists of liberalism and its moral frameworks, are particularly prominent; they are central to the harmony that Li places above justice.

### **What is harmony? Harmony as “emotionality”**

Simply stated, harmony for Li is the “integration of emotion and reason” in determining practical judgment (Li 2016, 1069). Li believes that the liberal concern with principle-based impartial justice neglects the role of the emotions. Although their relation to abstract normative principles is often unclear, emotions can offer reliable guidance in concrete social situations. Emotion, and affective experience more generally, should thus play a greater role in individual practical judgment, at least in everyday life.

Li’s rationale for this claim is that, in the Confucian tradition, emotional experiences or feelings reliably align with the contours and demands of social practice. Two points in particular underlie this claim. First, in classical Chinese thought, the term *qing* (情) means both circumstances (or situation) and emotion. The translation “emotionality” (Li 2016, 1070), or “affect-laden circumstance” captures this dual meaning. Emotional responses are grounded in objective circumstance and inhere in the relations between subject and surrounding world; this mirrors the linkage between external social world and inner subjective life that Li also finds in Marxist thought.

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<sup>105</sup> This is Li’s theory of “sedimentation” (*jidianlun* 積澱論); see (Li 2016; D’Ambrosio et al 2016, 1064).

<sup>106</sup> That the human subject is conditioned and formed by culture, material forces and history does not equate to determinism, however. Li endorses a broadly Kantian account of an inner rational capacity to evaluate and direct those external forces; this implies a dialectical account of human action.

Second, Li foregrounds the classical conviction that a viable social order is rooted in the emotions or emotionality: “The *dao* (way) begins in emotion” (道始於情),<sup>107</sup> “ritual regulations are generated from emotionality” (礼生于情)<sup>108</sup> (Li, 1070). Rituals are social practices constitutive of the community, but they emerge in response to underlying situations or circumstances that already evoke certain emotional responses. While rituals incorporate such responses, flourishing requires properly cultivated emotions. Hence, in texts like the *Xunzi*, ritual cultivates and directs incipient feelings and desires (Li 1094), thereby coordinating people’s affective lives for the sake of social harmony.

The classical Confucian practice of mourning illustrates how social practices shape the affective lives of a community (Li 1095). Mourning is structured around the mourners’ different relationships to the deceased. Distinctions were marked by differences in clothing and mourning rites: the closer the relation, the plainer the clothing and the more intense the grief. Social practices thus direct emotions. Another example is how appropriate music and ceremony cultivate desirable shared pro-social emotions among listeners.<sup>109</sup>

However, conversely, social practices must accord with the contours of emotional life.<sup>110</sup> Feeling has a role in determining what is “reasonable”; people’s affective responses are as important to practical judgment as more explicitly reasoned or principle-based judgments. Mencius 4A18, for example, notes that while fathers are responsible for their sons’ education, they do not teach them. Correcting sons causes resentment, which disrupts the socially vital father-son bond (Li, 098). This is why others teach the sons. Emotions are malleable, but their natural contours and limits shape social practices.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Found in the pre-Qin bamboo text *Xing zi ming chu* (*Dispositions Come from What is Allotted*; 性自命出).

<sup>108</sup> From the pre-Qin bamboo text *Yucong er* (*Thicket of Sayings*, Part 2 語叢二).

<sup>109</sup> For example, *Xunzi*’s “Discourse on Music” chapter notes the shared effects of music on listeners: fathers and sons will come to have the same desirable emotion of “harmonious affection” (Hutton trans., 2014, 283). For a detailed discussion of how music can produce physiological and behavioral changes, see Ulrike Middendorf (2008). See also Michael Nylan (2001; 2018).

<sup>110</sup> Li recognizes both naturalistic or biologically determined traits and historical forces as shaping human action. The relation between these is not clearly specified, but presumably biological factors establish the limits of possibility, while historical and social factors shape action within that range of possibilities.

<sup>111</sup> Another example is the three-year mourning period in classical Confucianism, which reflects the natural affection between father and son (Li 2008, 46; Li 2016, 1093).

The texts also suggest that different relationships and degrees of closeness should evoke different emotions. Moral emotions coalesce around embodied, lived relationships, and are morally basic – i.e., fundamental to a subject’s practical judgment. Li develops this analysis further, into an account of the self characterized by social bonds and relationships. He quotes the “Li Yun” chapter of the *Book of Rites [Liji]*, which explicitly equates emotional responses with particular types of relationship:

What are human emotions? Happiness, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate, and desire — these are the seven emotions; people are capable of these seven without having to learn them. What are human obligations? Parents’ affection, children’s filiality, older brothers’ care, younger brothers’ respect, husbands’ proper conduct, wives’ obedience, elders’ gratitude, juniors’ obedience, rulers’ humaneness, ministers’ loyalty. These are the ten human obligations. (quote in Li 1097)

Human relations are not conceived as generic and between equal rational agents; rather, relationships are differentiated by biology, instinctive response and social role, and are often naturally unequal and hierarchical. More importantly, each type of relationship is distinguished by a particular attitude or emotion, such a care, respect or loyalty. In this account, moral obligation is experienced as affective disposition – not as rational compulsion or social requirement. This is a model of action in which felt emotions legitimately guide practical judgment. Often the actions they evoke are tailored to the situation and person with whom one is interacting. By highlighting this aspect of the Confucian tradition, Li aims to show how historically-rooted forms of life and concrete social existence can generate a robust, action guiding set of affective responses. These complementary patterns of interaction secure collective and personal flourishing. This approach contrasts with the desire-driven and reflective deliberation of the individual liberal subject.

The role of the emotions in Li’s critique of political liberalism is further clarified by Li’s contrast between emotion and desire. Political liberalism’s theory of the subject foregrounds desire while neglecting the emotions. Classical utilitarianism, for example, regards the desires for pleasure and to avoid pain as the two great motivating forces in human conduct. In Bentham’s classical account (though less so in Mill’s perfectionist liberalism), desires are treated as essentially alike – though differing in formal properties such as intensity or duration - and as the basis for calculations of utility. An impartial moral viewpoint is then needed to confirm the morally right action. The difficulties of measuring desire has led modern theorists

to focused instead on measurable public expressions of preferences, but the underlying principle remains the same. Individual desires or preferences are fundamental ethical data.<sup>112</sup>

Li's account distinguishes desire and emotion. This distinction is not absolute, as the two overlap, but it captures a difference in practical reasoning. Desires are a less trustworthy basis for action, while emotions are more complex states – they cannot be reduced to desire and have a more nuanced relation to action. Li (2016, 1075) follows Liang Shuming (1949), and the Buddhist tradition, in treating desires as the result of the senses coming into contact with stimuli of the external world. A person sees and smells chocolates in the store window, and then desires chocolate. Desires also arise as untutored or innate instincts, such as the biologically-grounded desires for food and sex recognized in the *Mencius* (6A4). In addition, in traditional belief-desire models of action, desires are basic motivational drives of unknown origin. They might be countered by other desires or regulated by reason; however, especially under the liberal doctrines of no-harm and toleration, their origins do not require explanation.

Treating such naturalistic and bodily desires as the basic engine of motivation is problematic, Li claims. People readily identify with their desires, but such identification produces a sense of self that is not reliably connected to the social world:

“Desires are directly linked to the sensory feelings (pleasure and pain) of the individual's body. Theoretically this means that they can be elevated to conceptions of absolute, transcendental “selves” or atomic individuals that are independent of other people and other similar principles of pure reason. This is modern individualism.” (Li, 2016, 1080)

Since desires are experienced privately, linked to the individual body and its sensory experiences, this generates the sense of the self as an independent or “transcendental” entity, with its own life plans. This is the self that features in liberal political theory. However, such desires are largely insular, separated from the surrounding social environment and insensitive to the latter's many nuanced connections to the individual. As a result, such “transcendent” desires of unknown provenance are susceptible to manipulation, and lack the order and

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<sup>112</sup> Kantian philosophy, another influential conception of morality, does not begin from desire and makes it subservient to the dictates of reason. However, reason in that account is defined problematically, in terms of universality or impartiality, i.e., what is acceptable to all rational agents. Furthermore, that approach has only limited awareness of the role of emotion in practical judgment and action.

coherence provided by the conditioning effects of social life and practice. Consistent with his free market critique and use of Marxist theory, Li believes that desires are easily commodified and subsumed under the logic of exchange relations, further reinforcing the notion of an atomic self.

In contrast to desires, emotions have greater practical and moral worth in Li's thought. Emotions are sources of motivation distinct from desire and, as noted in the previous section, serve to integrate the subject into the surrounding social world.<sup>113</sup> These emotions have various characteristics. First, they can override more instinctive or "natural" desires, such as for pleasure; also, as responses evoked in particular situations, they motivate independently of an explicit sense of self-interest or personal projects. Here, Li points to acts of kindness or self-sacrifice, such as diving into a river to save a unfamiliar drowning child (LI 1124); powerful affective responses can overrule desires, such as to avoid harm, and even self-interest. Ritual – including ceremony, customs and manners – "directly shapes emotions" (1013), creating a psychology of action different from what desire alone can generate. Thus, in these ways, emotional or affective responses differ from desire; emotions guide judgment and action in more nuanced ways, which both further social harmony and bring their own reward. Well-conducted daily greetings, for example, bring their own affective or emotional satisfactions while also maintaining social order.<sup>114</sup>

The cultivation of character produces a range of refined and morally discerning emotional states that guide practical judgment in specific contexts. These include, "respect, reverence, self-assurance, self-abasement, self-respect, self-blame, shame, sympathy, anger, envy, hate, and jealousy" (Li 1013). These "thick ethical concepts", to use Bernard Williams' phrase (Williams 1985, 141-52), are both inherently motivating and also allow for a degree of historical and cultural specificity. What is a cause for shame or reverence in one culture might be regarded differently in another. Thus, while variations across time and place make appeals to universality or impartiality less plausible, the reliable connection between external social life and emotional response can guide action.

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<sup>113</sup> Li does not attempt an exhaustive analysis of emotion, but rather highlights the origins and practical effects of certain kinds – particularly those relevant to human relationships and interactions.

<sup>114</sup> Integral to Li's moral theory are what he calls the "supra-biological" (*chao shengwu* 超生物) aspect of human life (Li 2016 20; Rosker 2019 39-40). This includes emotions that the individual is not capable of from birth, but which become possible through the cultivation of character. Cultivated emotional responses inform the subject's sense of what is reasonable, and also moral judgments.

Returning to the starting claim that harmony is above justice, we can now see that the claim is about the nature of practical judgment. Reason and emotion, both conditioned by the material and social conditions into which the subject is born, function in a complementary manner to guide and motivate action. Conforming with emotion (*heqing*) (Li 2016, 1119) is central to good practical judgment. This is the “harmony” that Li is referring in “harmony is higher than justice.” Li claims to offer a more realistic picture of the psychology of human action, in comparison to self-understandings that begin from equal, self-interested rational agents bound by abstract principles of justice. Furthermore, this richer picture of practical judgment, Li believes, better addresses the profoundly social nature of human life. It is ordinary social contexts and dealings with other people that present the bulk of practical and moral decisions – not difficult moral dilemmas that few ever face, such as abortion, euthanasia, the trolley problem, etc. The rightness or wrongness of abortion, for example, is not obviously settled by appeal to any general moral principle. As Bernard Williams noted, willful decisions that end painful reflective deliberation can fail to dispel uncertainty and to generate conviction; motivation often comes from elsewhere. Li’s acceptance of emotional response as providing a decisive force in judgment coheres with such meta-ethical observations. The insight of traditional Confucian thought is its defense of the situation-specific linkages between emotion, reason and social practices.

### **Assessing Li’s account of emotions and harmony**

Li’s arguments for the role of emotion in practical judgment, and his objections to market-based relations as the paradigm for understanding ethics and the self, are wide ranging and sometimes lack detail.<sup>115</sup> This makes their assessment challenging. It is helpful to remember that Li does not dismiss liberalism but commends it as the best available account of *public reason*; public discourse and political relations should be structured around fairness, tolerance, and freedom (of speech, assembly, religion, etc.) (Li 1130). The problem arises when these values are (voluntarily) imposed on more personal or local situations and even self-understanding. This brings inappropriate appeal to formal and procedural justice, the atomic individual, and autonomy. While important in public debate about policy or law, appeal to them as justifications in personal affairs can be misguided. If a family member expresses concern about someone’s alcohol consumption, rejecting such advice on the basis of an assertion of

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<sup>115</sup> As Paul D’Ambrosio notes, Li’s writing bears comparison to the pre-Qin Masters’ text, being suggestive yet gnomic; he “offers space for readers to reflect” (D’Ambrosio 2020, 141).

personal freedom is to resort to an impoverished self-understanding and neglect the range of responses available (including cultivated emotional reactions such as being moved by the concern of loved ones). Here, appeal to abstract principle is wrongly taken as sufficient justification. Li's appeal to emotion, operating in harmony with reason, is thus an answer to how practical judgment should work in these more local and personal contexts.

That said, however, Li's qualified acceptance of liberalism pairs with his claim about the correlation of objective social situation or practice and inner affective response. Li's attempt to integrate social practice, emotion and reason invites various objections.

First, he is overly confident about the degree to which emotions reliably cohere with and are cultivated by specific social practices. The ways in which an individual's personal sensibilities interact with shared social practices appear harder to predict or regulate than Li recognizes. Consider polarizing moral issues such as abortion or euthanasia. Li suggests that, in liberal democracies, the conflict stems from (pro-life) religious moralities that appeal to transcendent concerns (such as souls)(2016, 1125); without such history there would be less disagreement. But even without such metaphysical commitments, it's doubtful whether the emotions involved in such difficult choices are clear and unambiguous, such that they can generate consensus within a single tradition. Such practical dilemmas are complex and prone to division. Perhaps, then, we should understand emotion operating within practical judgment at a personal level, idiosyncratically, rather than somehow reflecting shared social practices or cultural history. Here emotion could still function alongside reason to determine practical judgment of right action. However, variation in emotional responses at the individual level makes it hard to see any meaningful correlation between established social practices and the people's psychological responses. Indeed, it is precisely the intractable variability in personal response and feeling that drives the liberal search for impartial principles to guide judgment. Thus, Li appears too optimistic about the coherence between emotion, social life and subjective experience.

Perhaps these difficulties with finding emotional consensus arise mainly or only in special cases – those involving difficult ethical choices. Disparities occur when technological advances run ahead of intuitive ethical judgments or emotional responses that have been cultivated slowly and refined over time. In everyday life, however, emotions might be more reliable. Consider the widespread expectation of feelings of loyalty and warmth towards friends. But here, too, questions arise. Social practices such as theft might reliably invoke common emotional reactions such as indignation or contempt. But what about responses to greed? Or to

the destitute? Or competition? It's not clear that even long-standing social issues have produced shared emotional responses. Even if it might be true that long-established and stable patterns of social interaction can give rise to shared affective or evaluative responses (everyone thinks friends should be trustworthy), this leads to another problem. It threatens to disrupt Li's attempt to both remain liberal while also appealing to emotional responses and traditional Confucian social thought. Li's account of emotionality seems suited to a social order more conservative than he recognizes.

The concern here is whether Li's ideal of emotional-rational harmony assumes a static social world, whose stability over time is what enables emotional responses to become mutually coordinated and reliable. Such a society could be hierarchical, as in traditional Confucian thought: one in which each person knows their place, submits to the duties and demands of their station, and develops an emotional life that both reinforces structured relations and offers satisfaction in fulfilling one's role. Li's skepticism about appeals to general moral principles to regulate social life, could itself be interpreted as conservative. Removing the appeal to abstract norms and rights deprives social reformers of a powerful form of moral argument. Change could then only emerge organically, with the gradual evolution of communities' existing social practices (rituals) and social attitudes. This could be consistent with oppression or domination, in so far as people's emotional responses are habituated to long-standing structural inequalities or unfairness, and even express tacit acceptance. Can Li's emphasis on the gradual accumulation of collective wisdom across generations, also ensure sufficient degrees of fairness?<sup>116</sup>

Recall the earlier discussion of market-based relations. In distinguishing market-based rationality and self-understanding from a historically conditioned subject whose responses to the local life are informed by emotional responses, Li over-estimates the extent to which emotions are insulated from market-based reasoning. Emotions are not independent of the logic of market relations; they, too, are shaped by the functioning and expansion of markets, and the internalization of the relevant conceptual frameworks. This includes the monetization of more areas of human life; previously discrete and incommensurable features of the world are viewed in terms of a common metric, which enables identification of maximal utility or return, and thus "rational" choice. Consider, also, the greater prevalence of feelings of blame towards

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<sup>116</sup> To be clear, Li's appeal to Kant and his qualified backing of liberalism enables him to reject individual injustice; but such commitments make the practical implications of his claims about emotion, historicism and *guanxiism* somewhat unclear.

individuals in free market thinking, even within close relationships, on the assumption that individuals are (morally) responsible for their choices. Emotions can be influenced by social systems; they are not an independent force in practical judgment that resists market-based conceptions of self and of reason. They can reinforce such ideas.

In summary, the relation between emotion and social practices remains unclear, and so also the role of emotion in good practical judgment. Li's broader point is that traditional Confucian thought about flourishing can offer an alternative to liberalism, with the good life inhering in personal connection, social relationships and the emotions that sustain them. But can this vision of the good life, in which interpersonal emotions such as respect, shame, love and feelings of attachment are central, generate an effective critique of entrenched social practices and their influence in subjects' conception of what is reasonable?

### **Extending Li's approach: Everyday Aesthetics and Flourishing**

Despite these reservations about Li's alternative to rational individualism in market-orientated liberalism, Li's account of emotion and harmony can still yield a significant insight – a novel conception of human flourishing. This alternative account retains the primacy of human relations and social life, consistent with the original Confucian social vision presented by Li. Also, practical judgment and morality are still informed by social relationships and roles, and different types of relationship or roles are still distinguished by particular emotions, affective experiences, and concomitant obligations. However, Li's emphasis on relationships, social interaction and on "emotion as substance" (or "emotion as what is fundamental"; *qingbenti* 2016, 1080) hints at a different way in which affective experiences constitute a form of flourishing. Ontological claims about the formation of human subjects by social forces, and how social practices shape emotion, are set aside; what matters is an ethical ideal that guides practical judgment: positive affective experiences and feelings of accord realized through social interaction.

Rather than understanding good practical judgment as the balancing of emotion with reason, the goal of action becomes the generation of certain kinds of (desirable) emotional and affective states (including aesthetic experiences). Such felt experiences are treated as markers of success or good conduct, realized when personal and social interactions are conducted well. This is consistent with Li's theory of *guanxi-ism* or *persons-as-relationships* (*guanxi zhuyi*) (2016, 1076-80): the relevant emotional and affective experiences are generated between people in everyday concrete social interactions. As Li notes, "... {I}t is in such relationality that people

achieve and experience meaning as moral human persons, including values and attitudes toward life” (1096). This interpretation is consistent with interpretations of Confucian thought as presenting a relational self and a role ethics (Roger Ames 2011; Aaron Stalnaker 2019). This account, however, focuses on the affect-laden connections that characterize such networks of human relatedness.

In this account, the experiences of emotional accord in everyday social interaction (from close family to mere acquaintances) is a desirable end of conduct, at which practical judgment aims. This requires a cultivated capacity to act in social interactions such that each episode, as far as possible, is distinguished by certain emotional or aesthetic experiences. These include the “satisfaction associated with wisdom, pleasure accompanying morality, and aesthetic enjoyment.” (Li 2016, 1113). Another feeling or emotional experience that characterizes such ‘success’ would be the feeling of being at ease (*an* 安) that results from appropriate performance in these interactions. Another relevant feeling would be that, considered as whole, one’s life exhibits a pleasing coherence and unity, which derives from well-conducted social interactions. In fact, the early Confucian texts have a sophisticated vocabulary to describe a range of similar experiences, which might be described as “delight-like states” (Lambert 2020).

Consider the affective experience of enjoyment.<sup>117</sup> It has a certain structure or form. Enjoyment might be characterized in several ways: as becoming immersed in a task or interaction, as it holds one’s attention; as feeling energized; as successfully coordinating one’s actions with others in an interaction; or it might be characterized by “forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment” (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 46). Given their ubiquity, human social interactions provide perhaps the fullest opportunities to realize emotional goods such as enjoyment, and thus make this form of flourishing widely available to all. The Confucian placement of human relatedness at the heart of moral thought is apt in that daily social interactions are an ideal context for the generation of such experiences, since they make use of shared social understandings and social practices.

This account of flourishing is contingent upon the development of a personal sensibility that is sensitive to the nuances and particulars of social interactions. Flourishing might also require the cultivated capacity to draw, in real time and without reflective deliberation, on both

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<sup>117</sup> This approach also develops Li’s notion of *legan wenhua* (“a culture of optimism” or “a sensitivity to delight”); see Lambert (2018). For a related discussion of the importance of pleasure in traditional Chinese thought, see Nylan (2018).

creative and customary responses to interlocutors. That is, both precedent, ritual and habit might be utilized, as well as imagination and personal interpretation. In this way, responses are found that generate the relevant emotional experiences for interlocutors, thereby elevating the interaction. These experiences might also emerge as the subject comes to experience customary social practices differently or in new and more satisfying ways. It is also ethically important that these experiences can be shared, even if the two parties find different affective rewards (a father finds affection for a son, while the son feels gratitude). In summary, starting from a practical outlook that is constituted by relational attachments, the aim is to find felt satisfaction in everyday life. The sustained experience of such goods is a form of flourishing. Furthermore, in so far as relationships and daily social interactions make up a significant portion of people's lives, then such flourishing gains in importance. Remaining within a stream of such experiences might be more important to some than structured longer term projects.

In so far as such experiences rely on ritualized or habitual forms of interaction – including (Confucian) social roles – then the earlier objection reappears: that such emotional goods are complicit in social oppression or inequality. However, these affective experiences do not *require* adherence to traditional role-based behavior. Actions can be idiosyncratic to particular relationships, since what matters is the generation of these affective experiences, not social norms or expectations. It is an open question whether, for any given interaction, appropriate action would entail conformity to traditional expectations. Tradition may be helpful or suggestive here, but it is not the source of the good.

Admittedly, pursuing such flourishing might not address injustice in the way that liberal public reason does. However, different forms of personal flourishing can be pursued within a single life. After all, Li's broader goal is not to overturn liberal individualism, but rather to make room for the good life as conceived in traditional Confucian thought (and various interpretations of that tradition). Different forms of flourishing can co-exist alongside each other; and in Confucian social ethics, the emotional goods realized through social interaction might sometimes take priority. These goods can be pursued without much concern about abstract questions of justice (though a lack of concern for fairness in interaction might preclude the desired affective goods). Indeed, if the goods realized in everyday day social life are sufficiently rewarding, this might justify the recourse to social consensus and shared social understandings (including social roles), and skepticism about the incommensurability of liberal ends. This would be an illiberal but still meaningful conception of flourishing.

This account of flourishing as everyday social interactions that yield emotional or affective goods can only be sketched here. But it might be developed by drawing on recent work in the developing field of everyday aesthetics (Yuriko Saito 2007, Sherri Irvin 2008, 2010). Therein, the central concern is the “the expansion of the concept of the aesthetic” (Irvin 2010), beyond the traditional concern with art and the category of the beautiful. Increasing attention is being paid to the texture and qualities of everyday experiences, both sensory and felt; and this closely mirrors harmony as a focus on everyday social interaction and the quality of experience realized therein. Following Irvin, the realm of the ethical might be expanded to take greater account of felt or aesthetic experiences; that is, the qualitative feel of everyday experience might inform theories of good conduct and personal flourishing. Li is well placed to contribute to work on this new frontier. He has written extensively on Chinese aesthetics and how aesthetic experience can be derived from the materials of everyday social life (Li 2006; 2010). Such areas of overlap suggest fertile ground for further research.

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## **LI Chenyang: A Deep Harmony Account of Justice**

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Harmony and justice are two primary human values.<sup>118</sup> Their relation is an important metaethical question. While John Rawls regarded justice as “the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls 1971, 3), Li Zehou famously asserted that “harmony is higher than justice”. There are also thinkers who hold that harmony and justice are equally important, as will be discussed below. In this paper, I utilize a conception of deep harmony to develop a view that, on fundamental levels, harmony grounds justice and justice serves the purpose of harmony. This paper comprises three parts. The first part presents and problematizes Li Zehou’s view that “harmony higher than justice”. Part Two examines alternative views. In the last part, I advance a view that, from the perspective of Confucian deep harmony, harmony serves both as the metaphysical foundation and as the ultimate goal of justice. That is, ontologically, deep harmony accounts for the existential context in which justice is to be established; metaethically, justice as instituted in the form of norms and rules ultimately serves the purpose of social harmony.

### **Harmony higher than justice**

Unlike those Chinese thinkers who have gravitated toward harmony in philosophical reconstructions, the contemporary thinker Li Zehou held both harmony and justice as important concepts.<sup>119</sup> These two concepts perform different functions in Li’s grand philosophical system. Harmony belongs to the category of “transforming people through morals”, whereas justice belongs to the category of “rule by law”<sup>120</sup> (Li Zehou 2014, 46). However, Li did not take harmony and justice on equal footing. As Paul D’Ambrosio has aptly observed, “Li Zehou proposes the idea that ‘harmony is higher than justice’ as a way towards thinking about a more collaborative interaction between the two notions” (D’Ambrosio 2020, 129). In his *Constructing Harmony on the Foundation of Justice*, Li Zehou explained,

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<sup>118</sup> Freedom is another concept often perceived as in tension with harmony. For a recent discussion of how freedom can be congruent with harmony, see Pettit (2022).

<sup>119</sup> For a systematic study of Li Zehou’s philosophy, readers can see Rošker (2020).

<sup>120</sup> “和谐”属于“以德（教）化民”，“正义”属于“依法治国”。

There are inter-personal harmony, harmony between the mind and body, and *tian-ren* harmony (harmony between humanity and the natural ecology). As the guiding principles for and proper constructions of modern social morality on the basis of the “emotion-rational structure” and relationism (*guanxi*-ism), these are the highest and the most fundamental form of “the common good” and “the good life” that sustain the continuity of humanity. These are what the ultimate goal consists in.<sup>121</sup> (Li Zehou 2014, 46)

As Jana Rošker has properly reminded readers, here we should not confuse Li Zehou’s reference to harmony with a frequent misconstrual of the notion in terms of conformity. For Li, harmony is “harmony in diversity” (Rošker 2020, 140). In Li’s view, the Chinese culture heavily values the role of emotions in human society, in comparison with Western emphasis on rationality. The importance of the role of emotions is manifested in the Chinese way of life where social relations or *guanxi* are central. In this way of life, harmony plays a leading role. Yet, the rational is not missing in the Chinese culture. As Rošker explains,

While the Western concept of justice is linked to rational approaches, Li’s harmony does not only pertain to emotion, but rather to the complementary relation between reason and emotion. (Rošker 2020, 81)<sup>122</sup>

In Li Zehou’s words, the Chinese culture has maintained an “emotion-rational structure”, which enable Chinese people to incorporate both harmony and justice in their lives. However, justice itself is not the ultimate goal of society; harmony is. Hence, harmony reflects the “emotion-rational structure” and relationism (*guanxi*-ism), which Li held to be the backbones of the Chinese culture.

He further clarified,

Harmony is higher than justice that clearly discriminates between right and wrong and maintains fairness and reasonability. But harmony cannot replace

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<sup>121</sup> 我提出“和谐高于正义”是认为：人际和谐、身心和谐、天人和谐（人与自然生态的和谐），它们作为“情理结构”、“关系主义”对现代社会性道德的“范导和适当构建”，才是维系人类生存延续的最高层也是最根本的“共同善”和“好生活”，才是“目的”所在。Jana Rošker has translated 范导和适当构建 as “guide by example and appropriately construct” (Rošker 2020, 45).

<sup>122</sup> Here Rošker makes a reference to Li Zehou and Liu Yuedi (2014), 195.

justice. Rather, harmony is to be achieved on the basis of justice. Hence, harmony can only channel and properly construct justice; it cannot determine or control justice.<sup>123</sup> (Li Zehou 2014, 46)

Bearing this in mind, we can accept Keping Wang's description of Li's view of harmony and justice as "hierarchical" (Wang 2020, 103). That is, harmony is placed at a higher position than justice even though it also dependent on justice. In Li's view, justice serves the goal of the human life but is not its goal in itself. The real goal is harmony. Because harmony has to be achieved on the basis of justice, it presupposes justice.

Li Zehou held that the Chinese culture is characterized with an "emotion-rational structure", which maintains not only the connection but also the consistency of the emotional and the rational. It accommodates both justice and harmony. In such a structure, Li emphasized, the emotional is the "root", the "substance" (Li Zehou 2014, 12). In Li's view, that ideal combination of justice and harmony leads to a social order. In criminal punishment, for example, criminals of capital offense are executed both on the ground of the law and that of the emotional responses of the public when public outrages cannot be extinguished without carrying out an execution (Li Zehou 2014, 59).

What remains unclear, however, is whether Li Zehou's system can accommodate a robust concept of justice. It is a plain fact that justice sometimes contradicts harmony, at least under certain circumstances. It may be argued that an orderly society needs a robust justice system, which may at times operate against strong public opinions; a capital punishment can be spared in accordance with justice regardless of strong public opinions to the contrary. In stressing the consistency between the emotional and the rational (合情合理, literally, in accord with both emotion and reason), between harmony and justice, Li Zehou has left many questions unanswered.

### **Reconciling Tension between Harmony and Justice**

Various efforts have been made to balance harmony with justice. In an article entitled "Connecting Harmony and Justice: Lessons from Feminist Philosophy", Dascha Düring problematizes a tension between harmony and justice. She argues, justice may have to be

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<sup>123</sup> 它高于是非明确、公平合理的“正义”，但又不能替代正义，而是在“正义”基础上的和谐。所以它只能“范导和适当构建”而不能决定、管辖“正义”。

rigorously revised if it is to be compatible with harmony. In her view, there are two ways harmony and justice can be compatible. First, we may consider harmony and justice to offer complementary hermeneutic and normative frameworks in the sense that these are taken to apply to different domains of human life. For instance, it may be the case that harmony pertains to such realms of human life as personal virtues and emotional attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and social institutions insofar as these concern informal rites, practices, and roles, whereas justice may provide a framework for interpretation and normative reasoning concerning the basic structure of society or its major social institutions. The second way to make harmony and justice compatible is to revise the way we understand justice and related concepts. On such a reading, Düring writes,

Confucian harmony and Rawlsian justice are thus not held to be compatible (let alone mutually enhancing) as it stands, but are thought to possibly be made compatible when the conceptual framework of justice is reinterpreted and integrated within the larger hermeneutic and normative model of harmony.  
(Düring 2020, 55-56)

Düring argues for tackling the issue at both ends. On the one hand, justice needs to be reconceptualized without a rigid separation of the public and private spheres, as usually assumed in Rawlsian justice. On the other hand, Confucian harmony needs to adequately and effectively address issues of social inequalities, including gender inequality. Thus, by making adjustments on both sides, justice and harmony can be made compatible. Düring holds that feminist philosophy has an important role to play in the process (Düring 2020).

Along a similar line of pursuing compatibility, but in a much broader scope, Joshua Mason argues for a sweeping reconceptualization of harmony and justice. In his recent book—to my knowledge the first book specifically on the relation between harmony and justice—entitled *Justice and Harmony: Cross-Cultural Ideals in Conflict and Cooperation*, Mason argues that justice and harmony are to be made complementary. He maintains that harmony and justice are two greatest human ideals. It would be too much a loss in our cultural heritage if we let justice be limited to merely a procedural mechanism, or if we allow harmony to be taken as excessive censorship (or even suppression for the sake of conformity, one may add) as found in some parts of the world today. Mason writes,

My considered conviction is that these are beautiful ideals that should continue to shine forth as inspirational forces. I hope we can find ways of thinking about

and working towards cross-cultural conceptions of justice and harmony that honor the breadth and the depth of these ideals. (Mason 2022, ??)

While taking harmony as the fundamental “root” of human value, which stands prior to all other moral notions, Mason conceptualizes justice in terms of harmonic justice, harmony as just harmony. For him, root harmony is the ideal that expresses the felt goodness of one’s interpenetrating embeddedness in tradition and community; harmonic justice is justice conceived in view of the human condition situated in human history; just harmony is adjusted harmony that has taken up the demands of justice. Mason places root harmony at a more fundamental level than harmonic justice and just harmony. This seems to be consistent with Li Zehou’s view that harmony is higher than justice. However, Mason’s harmony is to be completed in just harmony, harmony of a “higher-quality”. In other words, for Mason, the Confucian idea of harmony needs to be transformed by incorporating justice. This view seems also resonates with Li Zehou’s view that harmony has to be realized on the basis of justice.

In her nuanced study of the sense of justice in Confucianism, Erin Cline calls readers attention to the Confucian idea of justice, which had been understudied, while highlighting its importance. In her discussion, Cline raised questions regarding the consistency between harmony and justice. Kongzi said, “When the multitude hate a person, you must examine them and judge them for yourself. The same holds true for someone whom the multitude love” (*Analects* 15.28). Cline interprets this as suggesting that Kongzi holds a good society requires its members to judge situations in a fair and balanced way, even when their judgment goes against the majority (Cline 2013,144). This raises questions for the goal of harmony in society. Cline comments:

The problem, however, is that it simply does not seem to be the case that judging situations in a fair and balanced manner and defending one’s judgments against the objections of others always is a means to harmony, unless one thinks of harmony as a long-term goal that can be achieved only by challenging norms and standards and encouraging certain virtues in members of society despite their resistance to it. (Cline 2013, 144)

Here Cline refers to harmony in the sense of social harmony as people usually have in mind when discussing harmony. She does not elaborate on the possibility that harmony as a long-term goal is to be obtained only by challenging social norms, and if so, under what conditions such challenges can be justified for the sake of harmony. She reads the passage as suggesting that Kongzi values fairness and good judgment even when they do not help to preserve harmony. Cline writes,

Indeed, harmony could be attained fairly easily in some cases simply by going along with the judgment of the majority. But what Kongzi indicates in these passages is that he thinks it is wrong to sacrifice one person for the sake of harmony. Or, perhaps more accurately, if one person's well-being is sacrificed in the name of preserving harmony among the majority, then the state of affairs is not really harmonious at all. (Cline 2013, 144)

The question raised here is important for our understanding the relation between harmony and justice. If justice sometimes requires us to go against harmony, how can these two fundamental concepts be reconciled? Li Zehou did not address such a question, even though it is unavoidable as we examine how justice relates to harmony. Cline's question requires an answer from anyone who takes the connection between harmony and justice seriously.

### **A deep harmony account of justice**

In principle, I agree with Li Zehou that harmony is higher than justice. I take this to mean that, on the level of social practice, even though justice is a precondition for harmony, our ultimate goal should not end with justice; we should strive for harmony. The good life is realized through intrapersonal harmony between the mind and the body, interpersonal harmony in society, and harmony between humanity and nature. I also agree with Dascha Düring and Joshua Mason that, one way or another, harmony and justice can be compatible. To put it another way, "a harmonious society is a just society" (C. Li 2014, 120). Beyond the practical level, however, I hold that, ontologically, harmony is more fundamental than justice. That is to say, harmony is higher than justice not only in the sense Li Zehou has advocated, as a higher goal of human pursuit, but also higher on a conceptual level; any current form of social justice has to be built on the concept of harmony as its ultimate grounding. In order to account for harmony and justice at both the practical and ontological levels, we need a concept of "deep harmony".

The Confucian conception of harmony, as I advocate here, represents the process of the bringing-together of different elements to generate a co-existence through mutual enhancement, mutual accommodation, mutual adjustment, and mutual transformation (C. Li 2014, 9). Through such processes, each party realizes its own potential while contributing to the larger collective whole in which each is a participant, or as Roger Ames has characterized, harmony is "the art of optimal contextualizing within one's roles and relations" (Ames 2011, 84). "Deep harmony" stands for the idea that harmony is the driving force for the formation, transformation, and the operation of things in the world at all levels (C. Li 2014, 28-29, 167-168). In this view,

harmony accounts for all forms of existence. At each subsequent level, harmony takes place in generating new forms of existence and in sustaining the present forms of existence in the context of previously generated conditions that have also been products of prior processes of harmonization. Thus, harmony penetrates all spheres of existence in the world.

The idea of deep harmony is traceable to a view of ancient Chinese cosmogony that the world emerged from the primordial chaos (*hundun* 混沌) through processes of harmony, or more accurately, of harmonization. The *Jing: Guan* 經:觀 article of the Mawangdui Silk Texts, for instance, quotes the Yellow Emperor speaking of the state of the original chaos (*hundun*) and the beginning of the world:

There was neither darkness nor brightness, neither yin nor yang. With yin and yang not being set, I have nothing to name for. Then it started to be divided into two, as yin or yang, and further divided into the four seasons. (Chen 2007, 210)

On this cosmogenic account, the original chaos self-differentiates into the two forces of yin and yang; the interactive processes of these two forces lead to the generation of all subsequent things in the world.

The Daoyuan 道原 article of the Mawangdui Silk Texts similarly describes the original state as the undifferentiated primordial Oneness:

In the very beginning, all things were undifferentiated and unsubstantiated. The undifferentiated and unsubstantiated is the One; the One perseveres... Its name is One, its home is non-substantiation, its nature is effortless action, and its function is harmony. (Chen 2007, 38)

This “One” is the original whole of the chaos. The author of the text explicitly designates the working of the One as *he* 和. In this view, the “One” does not have a pre-given form. The subsequently formed world is generated through a process of harmonization. Contemporary philosopher Ding Sixin 丁四新 writes,

In the Daoyuan text, the idea of “harmony” is not about harmonious relations among formed things. Rather it is the necessary and sufficient condition for generating the myriad things. Fundamentally speaking, without harmony there cannot be the generation of concrete things. (Ding 2015)

Such a cosmogenic view of harmony presents the idea on an ontological level. Harmony of the original One is prior to harmony between or among formed things on the practical or ontic level.

According to such a view, each subsequent level of formed things is cosmologically nested on a prior level and process of harmony, so on so forth, traceable all way to the very beginning of the world, the One. This kind of harmony is deep harmony. Taking into consideration of such a view, harmony takes place among existing conditions (e.g., people and things) for their optimal co-existence and further regeneration; in the meantime, it also accounts for the existence of these conditions themselves as they are products of prior processes of harmony.

On the issue of whether we can come up with a uniform and universal scheme of justice merely by thinking rationally, as John Rawls held, his critics offered different views. Michael Sandel has argued that the answer to the question of justice has to do with “the circumstances of justice”. The circumstances of justice refer to a society’s background conditions that necessitate certain mechanisms in order for the society to function properly (Sandel 1998, 31). For example, in a more or less familial setting where people are closely bond with affections, justice is less relevant.<sup>124</sup> Even though Li Zehou disagreed with Sandel in many ways, he nevertheless shared such an insight with Sandel but went a step further. Li said,

Justice is not the contract between individuals; it comes from the historical situation or context of people’s collective existence.<sup>125</sup> (Li Zehou 2014, 20)

For Li Zehou, schemes of justice may change not only because social circumstances in the same society vary as Sandel has pointed out, but also because each historical phase of society may be different. As a qualified Marxist and a historicist, Li Zehou held that the purpose of morality is for the continuation of human existence, and he took today’s human society as an outcome of its historical evolution. For Li, the historical context of justice includes not only different social settings today, but also different types of societies throughout history. Thus, in comparison with Sandel who launched a sociological argument against Rawls, Li Zehou’s argument is anthropological and historicist. Or, to borrow from Jana Rošker, Li’s approach is based on his “anthropo-historical ontology” (Rošker 2020, 7). In Li’s account of justice, history and culture play important roles. I believe, however, in order to show that Rawls’s scheme does

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<sup>124</sup> Similarly, Aristotle famously held that there is no need for justice between friends (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, Chapter 1).

<sup>125</sup> “正义”不是来自个体之间的约定，而是来自群体生存的历史情境。

not work, we can go yet another step further. We can go ontological. For that, we need to appeal to the concept of deep harmony.

From the perspective of deep harmony, justice has to be defined in the context of the human condition and its overall environment in which human beings find themselves to be. On the deep harmony account, the present set of the human condition and its overall environment is not an eternal given; rather it is the outcome of prior processes of harmonization in the world. Had the prior processes of harmonization been different, our present situation would have also been different. Hence, justice would have been different. In primitive societies, polluting the air was simply not a problem because people had not developed such capacities back then. But now, polluting the air has become an issue of justice. Furthermore, on the deep harmony account, the operating mechanism of the atmosphere of the earth today is an outcome of prior processes of harmony in the cosmological sense; had it been able to absorb pollutions instantly without limits, we would still have no issue of justice with pollution even though we possess the current capacities to produce toxic material.

Then, in the context of our discussion of Rawls, Sandel and Li Zehou, what is the point of appealing to the concept of deep harmony? In the direction that Sandel and Li Zehou have worked, the perspective of deep harmony further broadens our horizon and enables us to further see why Rawls' approach falls short in figuring out what justice is. If humanity and indeed the entire world could have been different, our conception of justice would also have been different. Merely thinking from a unitary rational mind presently possessed by humanity does not give us a uniform and universal scheme of justice. The view of deep harmony may not directly affect how people pursue justice in society; it does offer a different philosophical perspective and let us see that harmony is more fundamental than justice and is higher than justice on a conceptual level.

Now I turn to the issue raised by Erin Cline. Cline detects a tension between justice and harmony. At least in some circumstances, pursuing justice does not promote harmony (Cline 2013,144). In fact, at times justice requires us to breach harmony. How can we account for such divergency of justice from harmony? Does it mean that justice and harmony are not compatible after all?

I would like to resolve this problem by developing an account of justice along the line of rule utilitarianism but on the basis of deep harmony. Utilitarians hold that moral actions are ones that maximize utility. If every action maximizes utility, then the totality of all actions will

also maximize the overall utility in the world. Yet, sometimes, an action that immediately maximizes utility goes against justice. For instance, sacrificing an ordinary person by using his organs to save the lives of five others may maximize utility in the world, but it clearly violates our sense of justice. One way to get around this kind of problem without giving up entirely on the meta-ethic notion of utility is to adopt a different way of counting utility. Thus, there is rule utilitarianism. Rule utilitarians hold that the overall utility can be maximized when society sets up moral rules for people to follow. The appropriateness of moral rules is determined on the ground of whether by following them people will act to maximize utility. Once these rules are determined, society can judge particular actions by seeing whether they conform to these rules. Even if a particular action does not maximize utility in itself, it is nevertheless moral as long as it conforms to a moral rule. Take the case of sacrificing one healthy individual's life by taking his organs to save the lives of five others, for example. Rule utilitarians do not necessarily deny that such an action in itself may maximize utility. However, they will maintain that such practice as a rule will not maximize social utility. Instead, a rule that prohibits such practice will maximize social utility and therefore such a rule is nevertheless justified on the ground of the principle of utility. On such an account, the principle of utility is used to evaluate moral rules instead of particular actions. Compliance with these rules, therefore, provides the standard for evaluating particular actions. There is a vast amount of literature on rule utilitarianism, both pros and cons. Here I only tab into the main idea to make my argument for justice in view of deep harmony.

Justice, from the perspective of deep harmony, is manifested in a set of rules that society devises to regulate human behavior for the purpose of overall harmony and harmony in the long run. Under a social system of justice, an action is just if it complies with rules of justice. This is the case even if a particular action in compliance with rules of justice disrupts harmony in a particular situation and context. Take the example from Erin Cline on *Analects* 15.28 again (Cline 2013,144). In Kongzi's view, virtuous persons should make a judgment for action in accordance with the actual situation even if that goes against the majority and may cause disharmony in the immediate environment. Cline's challenge may be addressed in two ways. First, from a Confucian perspective, judging things differently from the majority may not necessarily cause disharmony. Confucius advocated "harmony with differences" 和而不同 (*Analects* 13.23). A healthy society should maintain adequate space for people to disagree without causing disharmony. Second, even when disagreements at times may cause disharmony

as Cline has properly observed, allowing people to disagree as a rule will contribute to social harmony in the long run and on a larger scale.

Ancient Chinese thinkers have repeatedly advocated instituting social rules for the sake of harmony even though they did not directly address the issue in terms of the relation between harmony and justice. For example, the philosopher Shi Bo referred to the ancient kings' various efforts to promote harmony, including their "establishment of the nine social rules to uphold pure virtues, and putting together the ten offices to regulate the multitudes". Shi Bo claimed that, by doing so the ancient kings "achieved harmony at the highest level"<sup>126</sup> (Lai 2000, 746-747). In ancient China, social rules were mostly in the form of the rules of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). Chapter *Liqi* 禮器 of the Confucian classic *Book of Rites* 禮記 states, rules of ritual propriety are "the rules for the multitudes; when the rules are loose, the multitudes fall into chaos"<sup>127</sup> (TTC, 1434). In order to prevent chaos and to achieve harmony, rules of ritual propriety are necessary. Kongzi's disciple Youruo 有若 is recorded as saying that "of the functions of the rules of ritual propriety (*li*), harmonization is the [most] precious" (*Analects* 1.12).<sup>128</sup> In such an understanding, rules of ritual propriety are indeed for the purpose of harmony.

The Confucian notion of ritual propriety implies justice in the broad sense even though it is by no means equivalent to our contemporary concept of justice. Xunzi's theory of the establishment of *li* is relevant to the issue of our discussion. Xunzi said,

From what did rules of ritual propriety arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rules

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<sup>126</sup> 建九紀以立純德，合十數以訓百體...夫如是，和之至也。People often follow the annotator Wei Zhao 韋昭 (201–273ACE) and interpret *ji* 紀 as physical "organs". However, saying that ancient kings "established nine physical organs" hardly makes sense, unless the term is used as a metaphor. I translate *ji* as rules. For other uses of *ji* as rules in ancient texts, see my next reference to the *Book of Rites*.

<sup>127</sup> 眾之紀也，紀散而眾亂。

<sup>128</sup> Youruo's statement can also be interpreted as meaning that, when practicing *li*, we must not violate harmony. For additional discussion of *li* in relation to harmony, readers can see Li (2014), Chapter 4.

of ritual propriety and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They made sure that the pursuit will not be confined to existing material things and material goods will never be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and grow together. This is how ritual propriety arose. (Xunzi, Chapter 19; Hutton 2014, 201, modified)

For Xunzi, establishing social rules is for the purpose to prevent disharmony. Once rules of ritual propriety have been established, society can achieve harmony. In his view, without rules of ritual propriety, things can be done right (*yi* 義). *Yi*, as in the Chinese expression of *zhengyi* 正義 (justice), stands for what is right. It has been translated as “righteousness” in English, even though “rightness” or “appropriateness” may be more apt translations due the religious connotations associated with “righteousness”<sup>129</sup>.

The Quli Chapter of the *Book of Rites* states,

Without *li*, there can be no morals or rightness. Without *li*, there can be no education or correct custom. Without *li*, there can be no solution to disputes and litigation. (TTC, 1231)

Such matters in society as determining morals and rightness, and settling disputes and litigation, are matters of justice. Along these lines, the *Quli* Chapter of the *Book of Rites* stipulates that old people in their eighties and nineties are not “to be subjected to corporal punishment even if they have committed crimes” (TTC, 1232). Chapter *Xianggong 19* of the *Zuo Commentary* stipulates against “severe corporal punishment of women” (TTC, 1968).

For these ancient Chinese thinkers, rules of justice are justified only if they serve the purpose of achieving social harmony and harmony between humanity and nature in a holistic way and in the long run. For example, criminal law punishes perpetrators for their offenses. Punishment in itself is not harmony. But it gives perpetrators what they deserve and helps reduce similar offenses in society. In these ways, it contributes to harmony in society. Without such law, society will be disharmonious. Seen this way, rules of justice are needed for harmony.

To summarize. On the connections between harmony and justice, I have argued for three points. First, I agree with Li Zehou that harmony is higher than justice because harmony is a

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<sup>129</sup> Another ancient discussion of rules that gets close to the sense of justice is found in the Lunwei 論威 chapter of *Lüshi Chunqiu* (呂氏春秋): “*Yi* is the principle for the myriad affairs” (義也者，萬事之紀也).

higher goal for human society and it takes justice as a component for its realization. Second, I hold that harmony is higher than justice also on a conceptual level. Philosophically, harmony is more fundamental than justice because deep harmony provides the ontological grounds for social justice. Third and finally, on the level of social practice, even though actions in compliance with justice may not contribute immediately to “local” harmony or harmony in the short run, from a metaethical perspective these actions nevertheless contribute to maintaining rules of justice, which ultimately contribute to harmony in the long run and on a large scale. The last point also serves as a justification for Li Zehou’s claim that harmony cannot replace justice and has to be achieved on the basis of justice. In the Confucian view of deep harmony, justice serves the ultimate purpose of harmony.

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TTC, see *Thirteen Classics with Commentaries*.

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## Jordan MARTIN: Sedimentation and Gene-Culture Coevolution

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### Introduction

In one of the final interviews given before his passing, Li Zehou placed great importance on the validation of his sedimentation theory generally, and specifically on the confirmation of the proposition that “culture influences the brain”, even going so far as saying: “if [that proposition] were to be proven, I think it would be of greater significance than all of my books put together.”<sup>130</sup> This was in fact a recapitulation of a hope he had expressed ten years previously, at age 80:

*I want to confirm whether or not culture influences the brain, whether or not in a few hundred years vestiges of Chinese culture will be discoverable in [the brain], and used as proof of my sedimentation theory.*

Had Li merely been hoping that his sedimentation theory would be recognised by future scientists as being an early formulation of a by-then widely accepted scientific truth about phylogenetic-level effects of culture on hominin brains in general, then ‘tis a consummation devoutly to be wished that before his passing he had occasion to feel bolstered in that hope by Marthe Chandler’s recent (and to my mind quite correct) verdict that “sedimentation is consistent with much of anthropology and social psychology”.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, Chandler’s paper does a fairly comprehensive job of presenting the scientific evidence (although not necessarily the underlying theory) supportive of Li’s ideas about “sedimentation of species” (*yuanshi jidian* 原始積澱),<sup>132</sup> in which social imitation in tool use and manufacture among our hominin ancestors

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<sup>130</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations by the present author. Ma, Qunlin 馬群林. 2022. *Chronicle of a Life: A Virtual Dialog With Li Zehou* 人生小紀：與李澤厚的虛擬對話. Nanjing 南京: Nanjing Daxue Chubanshe 南京大學出版社.

<sup>131</sup> Chandler, Marthe. 2018. “Li Zehou, Kant, and Darwin: The Theory of Sedimentation.” In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Jia Jinhua. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, p. 279.

<sup>132</sup> I have adopted this flexible rendering of *yuanshi jidian* from Jana Rošker as suited to context here. Other common alternatives are “elementary sedimentation” and “primitive sedimentation”, but I have generally preferred to use the pinyin directly. See Rošker, Jana. 2019. *Following His Own Path: Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese*

led gradually to “theory of mind” and language. Apart from the phylogenetic-level effects of *yuanshi jidian*, however, it seems from the above passage that Li was also interested in effects at the level of ontogeny – do specific cultural traits and praxes affect individual brains in a way that correlates with some physical observable? Again, we can answer this question in the affirmative right here and now. Given the great store Li explicitly placed in the question itself, it seems like an answer well worth giving in some detail.

Before we adduce all the supporting empirical evidence, however, it will be necessary to first outline the basics of both the sedimentation theory and of one of contemporary science’s leading interdisciplinary research paradigms which probe and explain the causal factors underlying the influence of culture on the brain, namely gene-culture coevolution (GCC). To my knowledge, despite a documented familiarity with the evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson (whose passing came approximately a month after Li’s),<sup>133</sup> Li doesn’t seem to have been particularly aware of the development of GCC. Despite this, there are significant areas of agreement shared by GCC and sedimentation theory, and both GCC and sedimentation theory seem like useful cross-disciplinary bridges for those familiar with one but not the other. As we will see in section 3, the introduction of GCC also helps resolve an apparent contradiction in Li’s published views on biological evolution. Finally, however, some dissonance and ambiguity arises from the juxtaposition of sedimentation theory with GCC. The dissonance is instructive, and useful for sharpening our awareness of some of the internal tensions in Li Zehou’s thought which have been pointed out previously. In section 5, we also clarify an ambiguity, albeit in a necessarily speculative manner.

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*Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 48. For other key terms and phrases I will generally (but not always) default to Rošker’s glossary at the end of Rošker, Jana. 2020. *Becoming Human: Li Zehou’s Ethics*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 320-332.

<sup>133</sup> On the issue of E. O. Wilson’s status as a proponent of GCC, despite his having coauthored a book entitled *Genes, Mind, and Culture: The Coevolutionary Process*, there have been those such as Feldman and Laland who have preferred to see him as representative of the sociobiological tradition, which is certainly also how Li Zehou saw him. Whatever one may think of how far *Genes, Mind, and Culture* and his later writings in *Consilience* distanced him from the stereotypical notion of sociobiology and how closely the results approximate to what we now recognise as GCC, it is nevertheless difficult to paint Wilson as having been on the theoretical forefront of GCC as it developed rapidly after the turn of the millennium. See Li Zehou 李澤厚. 2016. *A Theory of Anthropo-Historical Ontology 人類學歷史本體論*. Qingdao 青島: Qingdao Chubanshe 青島出版社, pp. 118-120; and Feldman, Marc W. and Laland, Kevin N. 1996. “Gene-culture coevolutionary theory.” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 11.11: p. 453.

## **Sedimentation and Gene-Culture Coevolution: Two Theories in Outline**

It will of course be necessary to sketch a brief outline of the two theories we will be comparing, although fuller summaries of both sedimentation theory<sup>134</sup> and GCC<sup>135</sup> are by no means difficult to find. Let us begin with sedimentation theory. Li analogises the formation of human nature to geological processes. In geology some particular episodes of relatively short periodicity may bring about radical change in terrain features, while more ubiquitous features closer to the bedrock are the result of processes of longer periodicity. The high variance superficial features are of course, more malleable, but even the deeper and less malleable structures are nevertheless in constant flux. As for geology, so for human nature: nothing is absolutely fixed and invariant, and a range of different technological, cultural, social and indeed biological factors influence the constitution of one's human nature, but this doesn't mean we can't meaningfully speak of a common human nature if we drill down deep enough:

*... to repeat, the common human nature I'm talking about here, I don't think it's an endowment of Heaven, nor is it something had from the outset, but is rather the product of anthropo-historical [processes of] accumulation.*"<sup>136</sup>

The core idea here is that what is “transcendental with respect to the individual, is still formed via accumulative (*jidian* 積澱) [processes] that are empirical with respect to humankind in the aggregate.”<sup>137</sup> Different aspects of this core idea are reflected in a range of pet phrases Li

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<sup>134</sup> For sedimentation theory, the obvious jump-off point in the secondary literature would be the treatment given by Rošker in the second chapter of *Following His Own Path*, pp. 47-65.

<sup>135</sup> For GCC, apart from the by now somewhat dated review article authored by Feldman and Laland and cited in a footnote above, the entire sixth chapter of Richerson and Boyd's *Not By Genes Alone* provides a good general outline, but in particular pp. 191-195. See Richerson, Peter J. and Boyd, Robert. 2005. *Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 191-236.

<sup>136</sup> “我這裡講的共同人性，重複一下，是認為它並非天賜，也不是生來就有，而是人類歷史的積澱成果。” Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 475. “Sedimentation” is the established rendition of Li's neologism 積澱 as referring to the theory itself, although I have translated it differently here to better fit the context.

<sup>137</sup> “對個體來說是先驗的，對人類總體則仍由經驗積澱而成”，Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 88. I have followed Rošker's renderings of 經驗 and 先驗 respectively as “empirical” and “transcendental”. For a detailed treatment of the reasoning behind these choices, see Rošker, *Becoming Human: Li Zehou's Ethics*, pp. 184-197.

employs, such as: “the empirical becomes the transcendental”,<sup>138</sup> “culture influences the brain”,<sup>139</sup> “intelligence is produced via culture”,<sup>140</sup> “humankind created itself”<sup>141</sup> and so forth.

For Li, experiential praxis is the link between aesthetics and human nature, the link between *Four Essays on Aesthetics* and *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*. One of the most important such praxes (although far from the only relevant one) which influenced our common human nature was the manufacture of tools, an endeavour in which our Pleistocene (and arguably even late Pliocene) ancestors spent many countless millennia engaged:

*Aesthetics (or a sense of beauty) originally didn't have anything to do with art, it showed up in the process of humankind's operations/labours in using/manufacturing tools ... during the operations and activities of using/manufacturing tools, more types of the psychological functions we possessed were reinforced. Among these, the functions of imagination and comprehension particularly need to be mentioned. Together with the instinctual animal desires and perceptions, they produced a greater complexity of combinations, interweavings and infiltrations, upon which they gradually formed the chimerical and almost unfathomable changefulness of the cultural-psychological formation (wenhua xinli jiegou 文化心理結構).<sup>142</sup>*

Some Chinese scholars have found the sedimentation theory's leap from aesthetics to palaeoanthropology and/or philosophy to be overly theoretically difficult;<sup>143</sup> others have found

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<sup>138</sup> “經驗變先驗”, Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 109.

<sup>139</sup> “文化影響大腦”, Ma, Qunlin, *Chronicle of a Life*.

<sup>140</sup> “智力產生於文化”, Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 109.

<sup>141</sup> “人類本身創造了自己”, Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 4.

<sup>142</sup> “審美（或美感）本與藝術無干，它出現在人類使用—製造工具的操作—勞動過程中……在於使用—製造工具的操作活動所擁有更多種類的心理功能在這裡得到了確認。其中，要特別提到的是想象功能和理解功能，由於它們與動物本能性的情慾和感知覺產生了更為複雜的組合、交織、滲透，便逐漸形成了變化多端似乎難以窮盡的心理結構”，Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 490. Being one of Li's technical terms, I once again follow Rošker in the translation of “wenhua xinli jiegou” (see the above-cited glossary).

<sup>143</sup> Xue, Fuxing 薛富興. 2003. “Intrinsic Contradictions in Li Zehou's Later Period Practical Aesthetics” 李澤厚後期實踐美學的內在矛盾. *Qiu Shi Xuekan* 求是學刊 30.2: 101-102.

its “content motley, indistinct, and difficult to grasp”.<sup>144</sup> As to the former, for better or worse, similar such charges are frequently to be heard leveled at interdisciplinary projects; as to “indistinctness”, it seems evident from title headings such as “the formation of the human hand needs to be taken seriously”<sup>145</sup> that Li was from quite early on unabashed in deriving empirical predictions from his theory. And “motley” is really just a pejorative term for “diverse”. But we need not get into the weeds with a comprehensive analysis of the sedimentation theory’s merits and defects. What we’ll mainly be concerned with here is to facilitate the comparison with GCC, and also to ask whether the evidentiary landscape has changed with respect to the propositions “culture influences the brain”, “the empirical becomes the transcendental” etc. since the year 1994, a year in which Xu Mengqiu declared that “neither contemporary psychology and neurobiology, nor indeed anthropology, have thus far provided results or data sufficient to clarify this issue.”<sup>146</sup> (Sneak preview: “it has”.) Of course, these evaluations are mainly in respect of phylogenetic *yuanshi jidian*. Li’s conception of sedimentation comes in three types, however: in addition to *yuanshi jidian*, the accumulative processes also occur both at the ontogenetic level of the individual, and at the intermediate level of human cultures. When we come to review the influence of culture on the brain, we will make our analysis at all three such levels.

What is gene-culture coevolution? As a research paradigm, its nascent period began with the work of Luigi Cavalli-Sforza and Marcus Feldman in the early seventies, and through the efforts of Robert Boyd, Peter Richerson, Joseph Henrich and others in recent decades, has by now entered its mature period. The core idea of GCC is that *Homo sapiens* (and other hominid species prior to their extinction) reliably inherit(ed) not only a biological endowment but also a cultural endowment, and that these two sources of inheritance<sup>147</sup> mutually influence(d) each other. Readers of Li Zehou would be familiar with one particular example of such influence in which the direction of the causal flow runs from biology to culture: cultural norms which accommodate rather than negate the kin-oriented partiality observed ubiquitously in the

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<sup>144</sup> “內涵駁雜、模糊，難於把握”，Cao Junfeng 曹俊峰. 1994. “Interrogating this ‘Sedimentation’ Idea” “積澱說”質疑. *Xueshu Yuekan* 學術月刊 7: 103.

<sup>145</sup> This was translated from a 1964 paper. See Li, Zehou. 1999. “An Outline of the Origin of Humankind.” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 31.2: p. 20.

<sup>146</sup> “無論是當代心理學、神經生理學，還是人類學，都尚未提供足以說明這個問題[的]成果和材料”，Xu Mengqiu 徐夢秋. 1994. “Sedimentation and Intermediaries” 積澱與中介. *Xueshu Yuekan* 學術月刊 7: 108.

<sup>147</sup> GCC is also sometimes known as Dual Inheritance Theory.

biological domain are more likely to be successful,<sup>148</sup> biology influences culture. For this exact reason, as Donald Munro initially argued<sup>149</sup> and Li Zehou with some qualification agreed,<sup>150</sup> the Ruist strategy of grounding human-hearted love (*ren'ai* 仁愛) in biologically-supported partiality towards kin was a good one. But crucially, the causal flow can also run in the other direction, from culture to biology: inherited cultural praxes and norms can bring about intergenerationally stable alterations in the selection pressures faced by genomes, and indeed these selection pressures can be quite strong. Cultural norms can thereby potentiate non-Lamarckian functional adaptation across shorter periodicities than would be possible in many cases via natural selection alone.

The emergence of lactase persistence is the canonical “proof of concept” example of gene-culture coevolution. The reason the majority of the global adult population exhibit lactose intolerance at differing levels of severity is that intolerance to lactose is actually the default condition for physiologically mature individuals of the vast majority of mammalian species, *Homo sapiens* included. Unweaned mammalian infants secrete the enzyme lactase which is necessary for uncomplicated digestion of the lactose in milk, but will cease the (usually unnecessary) production of lactase after weaning. *Homo sapiens* are one of the rare species of which some substantial subpopulations continue to rely on lactose as an energy source after weaning, generally obtaining it from domesticated ungulates. Prior to the domestication of these ungulate species and the development of a considerable body of cultural knowhow pertaining to dairying on the part of prehistoric human populations, the production of lactase in humans did not persist past weaning. Even for contemporary populations, those without a history of dairying – which is the greater half of humanity – are not generally possessed of the mutated alleles which confer lactase persistence. The frequencies of incidence of lactase persistence

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<sup>148</sup> This is not to say it is impossible for norms which push directly against this particular causal flow from biology to culture to achieve short-term fixity in a certain population. But stochastically speaking, in the long run, we would expect institutions such as the kibbutz which attempt to mandate such norms to fail to achieve widespread uptake – and this is in fact what we do see.

<sup>149</sup> Munro, Donald. 2005. *A Chinese Ethics for the New Century: The Ch'ien Mu Lectures in History and Culture, and Other Essays on Science and Confucian Ethics*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, pp. 49-51.

<sup>150</sup> See Li, Zehou 李澤厚. 2009. “Explanatory Addendum to the ‘Questions and Answers on Ethics’” 關於《有關倫理學的答問》的補充說明. *Zhexue Dongtai* 哲學動態 11: p. 30. See pp. 26-27 for the qualifications. For a further discussion of Li’s reception of Munro’s ideas, see sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 of my doctoral dissertation: Martin, Jordan 馬兆仁. 2022. “An Evolutionary Perspective on Divergence and Concordance in Mencius and Xunzi” 演化論視域下的孟荀異同 Ph.D. Diss., Hunan University, Yuelu Academy.

alleles for various populations are strongly correlated with that population's history of dairying,<sup>151</sup> and this is an example of cultural traits changing the strength of selection pressures faced by genomes. That is to say, this is an example of causal flow from culture to biology. This example of GCC is admittedly unrelated to the brain, but it is the unambiguous proof of concept for GCC as a scientifically-legitimate process by which the human brain (as proponents will further stipulate) has been powerfully sculpted during prehistory.

Lastly, before moving on to a further underscoring of the consonances between sedimentation theory and GCC, it would seem to be in the interests of fairness and thoroughness to point out that the story Li tells about *yuanshi jidian* is also broadly compatible with other rival models of the development of intelligence in the *Homo* lineage, models such as, for instance, Steven Pinker's "cognitive niche" hypothesis. This model also emphasises coevolution between genes and the various human cognitive innovations,<sup>152</sup> but GCC differs from this model crucially in GCC proponents' affirmation of cultural traits as themselves being the targets of Darwinian evolution (in addition to the genomes of their bearers). We mention this here as an important feature of GCC which it seems appropriate to background here in the outline, but in section 5 we will scour the available textual evidence and attempt on that basis to sketch out a projection of what Li might have thought of such an idea.

### **Sedimentation and Gene-Culture Coevolution: Consonance**

Let us return now to the apparent contradiction in Li's views on biological evolution, alluded to briefly in the introduction. The deployment of GCC allows for a cogent resolution of this ambiguity, so this is a good place to start in discussing the consonance between GCC and sedimentation. Li frequently makes assertions such as "that by which humans love each other ... comes from an upgrade of natural biological emotions",<sup>153</sup> and refers to human nature as being "mutable, evolutionary and molded by humans themselves from their animal biological

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<sup>151</sup> Mace, Ruth. 2010. "Update to Holden and Mace's 'Phylogenetic Analysis of the Evolution of Lactose Digestion in Adults' (1997): Revising the Coevolution of Human Cultural and Biological Diversity", *Human Biology* 81.5/6: pp. 621-624.

<sup>152</sup> Pinker, Steven. 2010. "The cognitive niche: Coevolution of intelligence, sociality and language", *PNAS* 107.2: pp. 8995-8996.

<sup>153</sup> "人之所以愛人.....是由生物性自然情感提升而來的", Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 101.

base”,<sup>154</sup> quite evidently recognising humans and their emotional dispositions as having evolved from an “animal biological base”. Does Li, then, concur with the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community that biological evolution occurs via the operation of selection upon the variation provided by genetic mutation? This is actually a surprisingly difficult question to answer. His references to DNA are more often figurative than literal,<sup>155</sup> and his “Response to Paul Gauguin’s Triple Question” contains the following *prima facie* confusing exchange (emphases mine):

*[Li Zehou]: ... First, let’s talk about Gauguin’s first question: Where do humans come from? There are generally two answers. The first is that God created humans ... Second, since Nietzsche declared that God is dead, [sociobiology] has become rather popular in academia. This theory holds that human beings come from animal gene mutation. Consequently, human society is merely a continuation of the animal world.*

*[He Daolin]: That is to say, humankind is a sort of hairless ape, and we are no different from animals. Animals too have social organizations and ethics. They even have some sort of political machinery. You can find plenty of literature on this topic. Books such as Desmond Morris’ [The] Naked Ape and Frans de Waal’s Chimpanzee Politics are well-known, popular, and very influential.*

*[Li Zehou]: Since the theme of the conference was Confucian philosophy, I remarked that Chinese Confucianism agrees with neither of these two answers. Rather, it regards civilization and culture as historical products with a historical progression of formation and development. To put it briefly, it can be said that the human race creates herself. I’ve been maintaining this view for decades.<sup>156</sup>*

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<sup>154</sup> Li, Zehou. 2018. “Response to Paul Gauguin’s Triple Question.” In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Jia Jinhua. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, p. 23.

<sup>155</sup> See Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, pp. 329-330; Li, “Response to Paul Gauguin’s Triple Question”, p. 25. See also his early notion of an “aesthetic double helix”, Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 490.

<sup>156</sup> Li, Zehou. 2018. “Response to Paul Gauguin’s Triple Question.” In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Jia Jinhua. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, p. 19.

The assertion that human society is *merely* a continuation of the animal world is indeed very much at odds with the views of both Li and of Ruism more broadly, this seems unproblematic. But it seems very much implicit in Li's response that he (and Ruism more broadly) *also* disagree(s) with the idea "that human beings come from animal gene mutation". Was Li, for all his recognition of humans as beings evolved from an "animal biological base", nevertheless genuinely denying that evolution occurs via the operation of selection upon genetic mutation?

Despite the above exchange, I think we can answer this question with a confident "no" – he wasn't. GCC helps fill in the details of how this could be so. Firstly, let's examine a couple of pieces of countervailing textual evidence. Firstly, in a chapter of *An Outline of Ethics* dating to 2006, Li asserts that "recently, it has become something of a fashionable stance in contemporary ethics to be ... anti-evolution, anti-science, anti-history and anti-individual."<sup>157</sup> Li shortly afterwards confirms that he "opposes this trend or fashion".<sup>158</sup> This double-negative opposition to opposition to evolution and science is encouraging, but not quite conclusive – perhaps Li's understanding of evolutionary science could be quite different to that of the scientific community. Later, however, in another chapter of the same work, this time dating from 2012, he also states that "reason is that by which humans broke with the natural processes of evolution which arise via genetic mutation in animal genera",<sup>159</sup> confirming that he does see evolution in non-human animals at least as driven by genetic mutation, that is to say, he accepts the basic premise of mutation-driven evolution.

How, then, should we understand Li's above-cited rejection of the idea that "human beings come from animal gene mutation"? In the context of the said rejection of sociobiology's (purported) description of humans as *mere* extensions of the animal world, and also in the broader context of the centrality of the notion of subjectivity (*zhutixing* 主體性) qua "productive practice"<sup>160</sup> as opposed to "pure bestial physiological 'existence'"<sup>161</sup> in Li's thought, my abductive faculties suggest to me that in the above-cited dialogue Li isn't really

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<sup>157</sup> "今天，反進化論、反科學、反歷史和反個體……已經成了當代倫理學的時尚風景", Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 107.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> "人以理性突破了動物族類基因突變引起進化的自然過程，開創了不同於其他動物的人的歷史", Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 168.

<sup>160</sup> See Li, Zehou 李澤厚. 1985. "Explanatory Addendum on Subjectivity" 關於主體性的補充說明. *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan yanjiushengyuan xuebao* 中國社會科學院研究生院學報 1: p. 15.

<sup>161</sup> "純動物生理性的'存在'", Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 449.

espousing the (frankly preposterous) idea that mutation-driven evolution played no role in transforming australopithecines into *sapiens*, but is rather opposing the idea that our hominin ancestors were merely *passive* participants in the evolutionary process, merely that one blithely lucky primate species which just so happened to win the mutational lottery and retain the few serendipitous “silver bullet” mutations which would then propel us inevitably and unstoppably along the path to anatomical modernity. What Li rather wants to emphasise is that in the course of many hundreds of thousands of years of tool manufacture, our ancestors were *active* participants in techno-social praxes from which eventually sprang forth full-blown subjectivity, language, theory of mind, and rapid encephalisation, and without which even a few advantageous genetic mutations would still have been insufficient for the human race to have “create[d] herself”.

GCC provides the theoretical vocabulary to flesh out Li’s ideas and resolve this ambiguity. The GCC model would agree with the gist of Li’s ideas on *yuanshi jidian*,<sup>162</sup> but it has the additional merit of specifying in greater detail precisely the causal pathways by which “culture influences the brain”, precisely how “the empirical becomes the transcendental”: the reliable intergenerational presence of “empirical” techno-social praxes such as tool use creates the sustained selection pressures which help sweep favourable mutations (whether favourable for encephalisation, memory, fine motor control, impulse control etc) to fixity in a population, making improved performance of the techno-social praxis “transcendental” for subsequent generations.<sup>163</sup> Such improved performance in turn strengthens the selection pressures to which further such favourable mutations are subject – such is the “ratcheting”<sup>164</sup> process of gene-culture coevolution. Importantly, without active participation in the techno-social praxis, the ratcheting process cannot get started – it requires humans to “create themselves”, otherwise the favourable mutations will be unable to sweep to fixity. Equally, without the mutation-driven genetic evolution, the ratcheting process cannot get started – without the strengthening influence of biological evolution, the techno-social praxes will remain impotent, local, even

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<sup>162</sup> Though the GCC story may have a slightly larger abundance of factor inputs to the “sedimentation” process: see, for instance, the chart on p. 300 of Henrich, Joseph. 2016. *The Secret Of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

<sup>163</sup> Of course, such latent facility still requires practice and use over the course of ontogeny in order to realise, so we are speaking of the “transcendental” in a weaker sense than it is used in many philosophical contexts.

<sup>164</sup> See the fifth chapter of Henrich, *The Secret Of Our Success*, esp. pp. 56-58.

more vulnerable to loss via adverse extrinsic shocks,<sup>165</sup> and fail to be amalgamated into mental structures. Such a picture validates Li's intuitions about the active participation of human subjects in the evolutionary process without placing Li's published views on *yuanshi jidian* at odds with the basic principles of evolution via genetic mutation. This is the first point of consonance we wish to highlight, although its generality means it applies to various subdomains of the sedimentation theory.

Before moving on to the current evidence for the influence of culture on the brain, let us dwell a little longer on the consonance evident in one of those subdomains in particular, that being the formation of a panhuman "cultural-psychological formation". Li's ideas on universal human nature as sketched in the previous section clearly bear a resemblance to those of Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, and especially to the following well-known and highly revealing scribble in his "Notebook M": "Plato ... says in *Phaedo* that our 'necessary ideas' arise from the preexistence of the soul, are not derivable from experience – read monkeys for preexistence".<sup>166</sup> As the alert reader will not have failed to notice, Li's notion of the "transcendental" as used heretofore in this paper differs from both Platonic necessary ideas and also Kantian antinomies – the constitution of the "cultural-psychological formation" is indeed much closer to what Darwin had in mind, with the aggregate of the experiences during the evolutionary history of our hominid, primate ("monkeys for preexistence") and even mammalian ancestors substituting respectively for *anamnesis* and pure reason. Rošker clarifies Li's view as follows:

*In the transformation of empirical into transcendental, reason can ... only be constructed through the social and material objective nature of historical development, because it is derived from human experience ... In this model, in which no transcendental formations can exist completely detached from experiences because they are constituted and shaped through sedimentation of historical practice, reason is constructed through the historical activities of practice, which is then integrated into mental structures ...*<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> See, for instance: Henrich, Joseph. 2004. "Demography and cultural evolution: how adaptive cultural processes can produce maladaptive losses – the Tasmanian case", *American Antiquity* 69.2: esp. pp. 198-200.

<sup>166</sup> Darwin, Charles. 1987. "Notebook M." In *Charles Darwin's Notebooks 1836-1844*, edited by Paul H. Barrett et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 551.

<sup>167</sup> Rošker, *Becoming Human: Li Zehou's Ethics*, pp. 195-196.

For Li, rather than being a necessary condition of reasoning or sensibility, the “transcendental” is an “empirical” part of universal human nature in that it derives from experiential evolutionary history and has been functionally integrated into mental structures, ready to be drawn out by experiences across the lifespan of the individual without being either reflexively innate or necessary.

An example may be useful here. On Li’s account, such qualities as loyalty and trustworthiness are (in his sense) transcendental, and he is quite explicit that they are not just some “abstract inheritance”, but through the process of sedimentation have actually been physiologically integrated with our “neurons and synapses”.<sup>168</sup> Li also makes clear, however, that they are not reflexively innate or universally necessary – there are certain occasions, for instance, on which one may legitimately demur from “the famous ‘do not lie’ of Kantian ethics”.<sup>169</sup> Even more telling, though, is Li’s account of the reasons why loyalty and trustworthiness are neurophysiologically “baked in” (albeit still overrideably so): even admitting that there are significant regional, cultural and religious differences revealed in the anthropological record, Li avers, “there are yet simultaneously many commonalities, which are precisely the shared requirements for supporting the continuation of humankind’s common form of group[-living] existence (*qunti shengcun* 群體生存)”.<sup>170</sup> As for Li here, group-functional explanations of both cultural adaptations and the biological adaptations that they facilitate via GCC are, for many GCC theorists, a critical part of the causal picture for the emergence of large-scale human cooperation and prosociality<sup>171</sup> - this is another point of consonance. We will come back to this issue of group-functional adaptation in Li’s ideas about sedimentation at the end of section 5.

### **Culture Influences The Brain**

Having made the case for the consonance of sedimentation and GCC, we now turn to enumeration of the empirical evidence for the influence of culture on the brain, some (but not

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<sup>168</sup> Abstract inheritance (*chouxiang jicheng* 抽象繼承) was a concept and/or phrase due to Feng Youlan 馮友蘭. See: Li Zehou 李澤厚. 2018. “An Explanation of the ‘Schematic Overview of Ethics Chart’ 關於“倫理學總覽表”的說明. *Zhongguo Wenhua* 中國文化 1: p. 11.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> ... 但同時又仍有許多的共同點，即維持作為人類所共同擁有的群體生存延續的同樣要求, *ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> See Richerson et al. 2016. “Cultural group selection plays an essential role in explaining human cooperation: A sketch of the evidence”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39.e30

all) instances of which are unambiguous examples of gene-culture coevolution, the underlying causal machinery of which we have by now obtained a clearer understanding. As foreshadowed in section 2, we will structure this attempt to validate the proposition (so highly-valued by Li Zehou) that “culture influences the brain” by reference to all three of Li’s types of sedimentation: *yuanshi jidian* at the phylogenetic level, individual sedimentation at the ontogenetic level, and also cultural sedimentation. Before commencing with the enumeration, it may pay to spend a few more sentences discussing individual and cultural sedimentation, given that the foregoing sections have mostly focused on *yuanshi jidian*.

“Cultural sedimentation” describes the process by which the non-universal traits of cultural phylogeny stably propagate intergenerationally through various populations, resulting in a “diversity [which] necessarily emerges among different cultures, producing different kinds of psychological sedimentation”.<sup>172</sup> This is due to “substantial differences among social institutions, human relations, ideologies, religious beliefs, lifestyles, values, thinking patterns, and expressions of emotions”.<sup>173</sup> For some such cultural traits (such as, for instance, knowhow associated with the dairying lifestyle), the genetic side of the gene-culture coevolution equation may have produced associated biological adaptations which are genetically heritable, whereas in other cases what is intergenerationally inherited will mostly be cultural – this will depend on the complexity of the biological adaptation, and the strength and duration of the selection pressure.

“Individual sedimentation” is the product of more or less idiosyncratic life experiences (many of them culturally-mediated) across the course of the ontogenetic development of a given individual; according to Li it is “the first two levels of sedimentation ... applied to the individual mind”,<sup>174</sup> and that whereby “each individual enjoys a multivalent and variant development ... which makes the intricacy of individual differences incomparable with that of any other animal”.<sup>175</sup> It seems quite feasible at this ontogenetic level of individual sedimentation that, should they be searched for either with present-day or future technology, physical signatures of the effects of a specifically isolable culture could show up in the brain, although, as we shall see, genetically-heritable biological adaptations evolved in the brain due to selection pressures imposed by specific cultural traits and corresponding to Li’s notion of cultural sedimentation

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<sup>172</sup> Li, “Response to Paul Gauguin’s Triple Question”, p. 24.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

have also been demonstrated – no doubt these also would have been of interest to Professor Li. We will begin our survey of the current evidence with those results which correspond to individual sedimentation.

To begin with, culturally-transmitted praxes such as music, reading, counting and so forth undoubtedly affect the “software” of the brain. For proficient abacus users, the regions of their brains responsible for visual working memory are often imprinted with a “mental abacus”, the rapid and accurate deployment of which is often accompanied by unconscious movements of the fingers.<sup>176</sup> Whether there is<sup>177</sup> or is not<sup>178</sup> a meaningful distinction between software and wetware is a matter of some dispute, but what is not in dispute is that the influence of culture on the brain extends well past what we might folk-neurologically label “software upgrades” to the brain (as exemplified by the mental abacus), and in fact extends to physical changes to wetware which are well within the capabilities of present-day technology to detect: the (cerebral hemisphere-linking) corpora callosa of readers and writers are thicker than those of illiterate individuals;<sup>179</sup> for musicians, not only are their corpora callosa thicker, but their cerebella are larger, and they have “brain areas of greater size or grey matter density in the medial portion of primary auditory cortex (Heschl’s gyrus), inferior frontal gyrus and superior parietal cortex”.<sup>180</sup> Causality flowing from the cultural praxes to neurophysiological changes should not, of course, be inferred directly from such correlations, but it seems more likely than not to be a relationship at least partially of causality, given that longitudinal studies have also shown that, for instance, grey matter density in areas of the brain responsible for processing visual-motion information observably increases after beginner jugglers undertake an intensive training programme of three months’ duration.<sup>181</sup> It seems quite reasonable to conclude then, that the abovementioned are

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<sup>176</sup> Frank, Michael C. and Barner, David. 2012. “Representing Exact Number Visually Using Mental Abacus”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 141.1: p. 134.

<sup>177</sup> Dennett, Daniel. 2014. “The Software/Wetware Distinction: Comment on ‘Toward a computational framework for cognitive biology: Unifying approaches from cognitive neuroscience and comparative cognition’ by W. Tecumseh Fitch”, *Physics of Life Reviews* 11.3: p. 367-368.

<sup>178</sup> Fitch, W. Tecumseh. 2014. “Toward a computational framework for cognitive biology: Unifying approaches from cognitive neuroscience and comparative cognition”, *Physics of Life Reviews* 11.3: p. 334.

<sup>179</sup> Castro-Caldas, A. et al. 1999. “Influence of learning to read and write on the morphology of the corpus callosum”, *European Journal of Neurology* 6.1: p. 23

<sup>180</sup> Mithen, Steven and Parsons, Lawrence. 2008. “The Brain as a Cultural Artefact”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 18.3: pp. 417-418.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

examples of cultural praxes influencing the brain, corresponding to Li's notion of individual sedimentation at the ontogenetic level.

Let us move past ontogeny and “appli[cation] to the individual mind”, and on to results corresponding to Li's notion of “cultural sedimentation”. As for the lactase persistence case, so too for the two examples that we will discuss here: they can be interpreted as examples of specific cultural traits influencing heritable genetic features which affect the brain. Relative to panhuman *yuanshi jidian*, this level of sedimentation seems to tally more closely with the target of Li's expressed hope that “vestiges of Chinese culture” in his brain would be legible to scientific investigation. The first example concerns the negative correlation between tonal languages and derived haplogroups of the *ASPM* and *Microcephalin* genes.<sup>182</sup> These two genes are both associated with development of the brain. In general, most correlations between linguistic types and genetic variants are spurious, non-causal correlations due to historical and environmental factors. One particular study, however, found that after statistically controlling for such factors, the negative correlation described above remained statistically significant, indicating a likely causal connection.<sup>183</sup>

Is this a case of culture affecting genes or vice versa? If, as the researchers conclude to be likely, this correlation is indeed non-spurious, then regardless of the direction of the causal flow, this would in either case be an instance of brain-affecting gene-culture coevolution. The researchers themselves conclude that this may be a case of small biases introduced by brain-affecting genetic variants gradually exerting an influence on cultural transmission at the population level (“the brain influences culture”);<sup>184</sup> on the contrary, Harvard evolutionary biologist Joseph Henrich suggests it may have been linguistic variants which furnished the conditions enabling the derived haplogroups to propagate (“culture influences the brain”).<sup>185</sup> Again, either scenario constitutes a valid instance of GCC, but the latter scenario is the one which matches Li's “culture influences the brain” proposition as an instance of cultural sedimentation.

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<sup>182</sup> An interesting but not directly-relevant implication of this negative correlation is that tonal languages (like Chinese) are phylogenetically ancestral to non-tonal languages (like English).

<sup>183</sup> See Dediu, Dan and Ladd, D. Robert. 2007. “Linguistic tone is related to the population frequency of the adaptive haplogroups of two brain size genes, *ASPM* and *Microcephalin*”, *PNAS* 104.26

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10947.

<sup>185</sup> Henrich, *The Secret Of Our Success*, p. 255.

There is less room for disagreement regarding the direction of the causal flow in the second of our examples: Joan Chiao and Katherine Blizinsky have found that occurrence frequencies of one of two allelic variants of 5-HTTLPR were strongly correlated with measured levels of collectivist (as opposed to individualist) values for subjects sampled from various nations.<sup>186</sup> 5-HTTLPR is a polymorphic region in a serotonin transporter gene, the concentration of serotonin in the brain's synaptic clefts being significantly determined by whether the individual in question has the so-called "long" (higher concentration) or "short" (lower concentration) version of the allele. This in turn has effects upon – although (obviously) does not entirely determine – a range of psychological characteristics, including one's affinity for collectivist/individualist values. In this case, the researchers hold not only that the correlation between collectivist/individualist values and allelic distribution is the result of GCC, but also that the causal flow is from culture to genes, with collectivist cultural values militating for the selection of the short allele.<sup>187</sup>

How could this be the case? There are three scenarios worth canvassing here, all of which are characterised by this causal flow from culture to genes. The first is the scenario to which Chiao and Blizinsky took their results to be complementary,<sup>188</sup> that is, the well-known hypothesis advanced by Corey Fincher and Randy Thornhill, wherein collectivist/individualist values are predicted by pathogen prevalence in the regions to which the populations are resident. According to this theory, supported by data analysis performed by Fincher and Thornhill, collectivist values play a functional role as cultural antipathogen mechanisms. In a second scenario advanced by Henrich and Daniel Hruschka, however, governmental efficacy is a better predictor of collectivist/individualist values, though they admit a potential role for pathogen stress at deeper (presumably prehistoric) time scales.<sup>189</sup> In a final scenario, researchers drawing specifically on data sampled from various regions inside China avoided the statistical confounding of pathogens with rice cultivation (due to heat), and argued that labor-intensive rice cultivation requiring highly-coordinated irrigation systems (as against the much less

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<sup>186</sup> Chiao, Joan Y. and Blizinsky, Katherine D. 2010. "Culture-gene coevolution of individualism-collectivism and the serotonin transporter gene", *Proc. R. Soc. B* 277, p. 532.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>189</sup> Hruschka, Daniel J. and Henrich, Joseph. 2013. "Institutions, Parasites and the Persistence of In-group Preferences", *PLOS One* 8.5.e63642: p. 7.

interdependent and less labor-intensive cultivation of wheat) predicts collectivist/individualist values better than the pathogen prevalence theory does.<sup>190</sup>

The final two scenarios exhibit a more clear-cut causal flow from cultural factors (governmental efficacy and agriculture type) to collectivist cultural values to selection of the short allele of 5-HTTLPR being favoured. In the absence of any causal role for pathogen prevalence, it would be highly implausible to suppose that, in the pre-agricultural period, short allele bearers just so happened to already predominate in the regions in which they would eventually come to be favoured after the dawn of agriculture. However, even allowing for some small causal role to be played by pathogen prevalence in the pre-agricultural period just drives the *terminus post quem* for the emergence of collectivist values further back in time – in the end, it is the cultural values driving selection of the genetic variant, later to be further strengthened by agricultural developments. This is therefore an example of “culture influencing the brain” via cultural sedimentation, and via GCC.

Finally, let us raise some specific examples of culture’s influence on the brain corresponding to *yuanshi jidian* (“species sedimentation”). Just as the lactase persistence case is the canonical “proof of concept” for GCC, so the cases raised above in which we see causal flow from culture to genes can be taken as a “proof of concept” for the sedimentation theory at the two levels below *yuanshi jidian*. However, when dealing with *yuanshi jidian*, evidence pertaining to whether in particular it was culture or genes that *first* kicked off the ratcheting process has become irretrievable. Given that it is unclear which of culture and/or genes was the causal prime mover, let us first get some facts about human neurophysiological evolution on the table, and then we can interpret them (necessarily speculatively) as cases of “culture influencing the brain”. What is not in dispute, however, is that as discussed in section 3, causal flows in both directions will be required for further ratcheting, regardless of whether culture or genetics was in fact the prime mover.

*Australopithecus afarensis* had a mean brain mass of 442 grams, whereas several significant advances in brain mass have endowed modern male *Homo sapiens* with a mean brain mass of 1450 grams; by way of comparison, modern male chimpanzees have a mean brain mass

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<sup>190</sup> Talhelm, T. et al. 2014. “Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture”, *Science* 344: p. 603-608.

of 406 grams.<sup>191</sup> Of course, absolute brain mass is far from the only factor influencing functional performance – after all, elephant brains weigh two or three times as much as human brains do, and the brains of some cetaceans are heavier again<sup>192</sup> - but human brains do have a unique structural attribute in that their neocortices have “apparently evolved an unprecedented level of direct access to the motor neurons”, and this “increased access of the neocortex to diverse lower motor neurons probably made humans more dextrous in a variety of realms, ranging from hand movements to vocalization”.<sup>193</sup> Humans do indeed exert excellent motor control over the tongue, face, maxilla, mandible, vocal cords and hands: we humans are far weaker in general than chimpanzees, but our evolutionary cousins cannot thread a needle,<sup>194</sup> let alone sing a song while doing so.

FOXP2 is a gene associated with brain development and possessed by many different vertebrate species, and the FOXP2 protein is highly-conserved, having only undergone a single amino-acid change in the 130 million years of evolutionary history which separated the chimpanzee-human last common ancestor (CHLCA) from the mouse. In the mere 4.6 – 6.2 million years separating the CHLCA from modern humans, however, the FOXP2 protein has already undergone two fixed amino-acid changes.<sup>195</sup> After it was discovered that precisely those members of a four-generational family who have a mutation in this gene all demonstrate severe verbal dyspraxia,<sup>196</sup> FOXP2 became popularly known as “the language gene”, but apart from being heavily implicated in orofacial and vocal control,<sup>197</sup> it is also expressed in many other parts of the body. One influential early study suggested that the derived alleles of FOXP2 in human populations rode a selective sweep to fixity within the past 200,000 years,<sup>198</sup> which is

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<sup>191</sup> De Sousa, A and Wood, B. 2007. “The Hominin Fossil Record and the Emergence of the Modern Human Central Nervous System.” In *Evolution of Nervous Systems (Volume 4)*, edited by Jon H. Kaas and Todd M. Preuss. London: Academic Press, p. 327.

<sup>192</sup> Herculano-Houzel, Suzana. 2012. “The remarkable, yet not extraordinary, human brain as a scaled-up primate brain and its associated cost”, *PNAS* 109.1: p. 10661.

<sup>193</sup> Striedter, Georg F. 2005. *Principles of Brain Evolution*. Sunderland MA: Sinauer Associates Inc, pp. 324-325.

<sup>194</sup> Henrich, *The Secret Of Our Success*, p. 282.

<sup>195</sup> Enard, Wolfgang et al. 2002. “Molecular evolution of *FOXP2*, a gene involved in speech and language”, *Nature* 418: p. 870

<sup>196</sup> MacDermot, Kay D. et al. 2005. “Identification of *FOXP2* Truncation as a Novel Cause of Developmental Speech and Language Deficits”, *The American Journal of Human Genetics* 76.6: p. 1074.

<sup>197</sup> Xu et al. 2018. “*Foxp2* regulates anatomical features that may be relevant for vocal behaviors and bipedal locomotion”, *PNAS* 115.35: p. 8799.

<sup>198</sup> Enard, Wolfgang et al. 2002. “Molecular evolution of *FOXP2*, a gene involved in speech and language”, p. 871.

to say, very approximately around the time anatomically modern humans began their exodus (yes, plural) from Africa. This 200,000 year timeframe has by now been widely rejected following the discovery by palaeogeneticists of the fact that the derived FOXP2 allele was shared with Neanderthals,<sup>199</sup> indicating that the selective sweep had occurred before the split of humans from our common ancestor with the Neanderthals (approximately 600,000 years ago). Endocasts reveal ongoing development of the language-critical Broca's area from virtual absence in australopithecines to a reasonably well-developed level in *Homo ergaster* to highly-developed in *Homo sapiens*; the language-critical low larynx position exhibits the same pattern of development, *Homo ergaster* being at an intermediate level of development between australopithecines and *Homo sapiens*.<sup>200</sup>

How would the above-summarised neurophysiological infrastructure facilitating both advanced motor facility and linguistic capacity have come about? Are the two connected? Li is one in a long line of thinkers beginning with Darwin and Engels to have thought that tool use and manufacture was the link between advanced motor control and language, and he emphasises both the social-pedagogical and semantics-through-motor-activity aspects of a coevolutionary scenario driven by tool praxis.<sup>201</sup> As it turns out, contemporary neuroimaging has indeed revealed significant functional and anatomical overlap of both language and manual praxis centred on Broca's area and the inferior frontal gyrus, and this

*... provides support for a 'technological pedagogy' hypothesis, which proposes that intentional pedagogical demonstration could have provided an adequate scaffold for the evolution of intentional vocal communication.*<sup>202</sup>

The idea here is that cultural knowhow ensured a consistency of techno-social praxis which helped mature and solidify the relevant neurophysiological infrastructure through "behavioural co-optation of truly pluripotent (multifunctional) structures"<sup>203</sup> which continued thereafter to be functionally and anatomically associated through to their present level of development. The

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<sup>199</sup> Krause, Johannes et al. 2007. "The derived FOXP2 variant of modern humans was shared with Neandertals", *Current Biology* 17.21: p. 1908.

<sup>200</sup> Klein, Richard G. 2009. *The Human Career: Human Biological and Cultural Origins (Third Edition)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 411.

<sup>201</sup> See Li, "An Outline of the Origin of Humankind", pp. 22-24.

<sup>202</sup> Stout, Dietrich and Chaminade, Thierry. 2012. "Stone tools, language and the brain in human evolution", *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B.* 367: p. 82.

<sup>203</sup> That is, the structures of the inferior frontal gyrus, *ibid.* p. 77.

motor control neuro-infrastructure required for early gestural communication may thereby have gotten a “free ride” due to selection for tool praxis, or even vice versa.<sup>204</sup>

Is this still too hand-wavy? A certain amount of hand-waving is unavoidable in dealing with the entropy-tarnished record of events stretching back to the Pleistocene and even late Pliocene, but the greater resolution which Li supplied to the picture sketched by Engels has become yet clearer again: firstly, neuroimaging has confirmed Li’s prediction of a connection between language and tool praxis in the form of incontrovertible functional and anatomical overlap; secondly, GCC fills in an important gap existing between prehistoric cultural praxis and contemporary functional neuro-infrastructure in Li’s overall causal picture, a gap which was previously filled for better or worse by the sedimentation metaphor alone – as described in section 3, cultural praxis acts on the brain by way of providing sustained selection pressure on the neuro-infrastructure, which then in turn makes the cultural praxis “transcendental” (in Li’s sense) for subsequent generations, thereby initiating a mutually-reinforcing virtuous spiral, one in which “culture influences the brain” regardless of which of the two was in fact the prime mover. Does this, then, fulfil Li’s prediction that “the neuroscience of the future will be able to give a fundamental explanation”<sup>205</sup> of the cultural-psychological formation as sedimented by *yuanshi jidian*? Future technology – whether operating on Li’s brain or some other brain – may well give a higher resolution explanation with more empirical detail fleshed out, but what GCC has already provided is the “fundamental explanation”, that is, the theoretical foundations upon which that explanation is constructed.

### **Sedimentation and Gene-Culture Coevolution: Dissonance and Ambiguity**

Having already shown how GCC is not only consonant with the sedimentation theory, but indeed can usefully strengthen its theoretical foundations in a way that (if our suppositions in section 3 are correct) is faithful to Li’s central commitments, we now finally turn to two points of dissonance or at least ambivalence which arise from the juxtaposition of GCC with Li’s thought. The first concerns the role of Kant in Li’s thought. The second concerns the notion of cultural evolution as foreshadowed at the end of section 2, which is a major point of difference

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<sup>204</sup> Henrich, *The Secret Of Our Success*, p. 251.

<sup>205</sup> Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 490.

from rival theories of the role of culture in hominid evolution. How would this aspect of the GCC paradigm fit with Li's thought?

Let us begin with Kant. Despite having written a monograph entitled *Critique of the Critical Philosophy*, there is good reason why the subtitle of this work (康德述評) as translated by Rošker is “*A New Approach to Kant*”<sup>206</sup> and why the English title of the Sanlian edition is (albeit rather airily) translated as “*Kant in a New Key*”: despite the critiques, Li Zehou clearly also thought of himself as building upon Kant's philosophical enterprise in some way. Is this even a theoretically coherent way of conceiving of Li's ideas though? Both Andrew Lambert<sup>207</sup> and Jana Rošker have given good reasons for reservations on this point, the most compelling of which is possibly Kant's explicit prohibition on historicising or empiricising the rational, which, as Rošker avers, “would probably [have led Kant to] regard Li's approach as pure nonsense”.<sup>208</sup> These are existing known tensions in Li's ideas, which I think the GCC perspective helps clarify further, and perhaps even to “resolve” to some degree of satisfaction for some readers. But first let's go for a quick snorkel through the primary literature to get a better handle on Li's affinity for Kant.

Perhaps oddly, Li's view of Mencius is a good place to start this particular discussion. Li's ethics are self-professedly Xunzian in orientation,<sup>209</sup> and he is often to be found defending the rehabilitation of Xunzian thought.<sup>210</sup> Conversely, Li struggles to find anything particularly complimentary to say about Mencius. There is a chapter in his *Outline of Ethics* entitled “Mencius' Immense Contribution”, but one immediately suspects this purported “immensity” is rhetorically compensatory for the degree to which Li damns Mencius with faint praise in the chapter.<sup>211</sup> Using very direct language, he repudiates the core Mencian ideas of innate

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<sup>206</sup> Rošker, *Becoming Human*, p. 300.

<sup>207</sup> Lambert, Andrew. 2018. “Determinism and the Problem of Individual Freedom in Li Zehou's Thought.” In *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Jia Jinhua. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, *passim*.

<sup>208</sup> Rošker, *Becoming Human*, p. 258.

<sup>209</sup> Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 177.

<sup>210</sup> See most obviously Li Zehou 李澤厚. 2017. “Raise the Mencian Banner, Practice Xunzian Philosophy: A Defense of the *Outline of Ethics*” 舉孟旗 行荀學——為《倫理學綱要》一辯. *Tansuo yu Zhengming* 探索與證明 4: pp. 58-62;

<sup>211</sup> This chapter is in dialogue form, so it seems quite probable that Li himself was not responsible for the titling, although he does indeed use the phrase “immense contribution” in the dialogue. Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, pp. 176-179.

knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知)<sup>212</sup> and four sprouts (*si duan shuo* 四端說),<sup>213</sup> and apart from a brief nod to Mencius' prioritisation of populace over ruler (*min gui jun qing* 民貴君輕), the only other “contribution” of Mencius' that Li cares to point out is his championing of a “character of individual autonomy” (*geti duli renge* 個體獨立人格), especially as reflected in the well-known Mencian aphorism “[h]e cannot be led astray by riches and honor, moved by poverty and privation, or deflected by a power or force”.<sup>214</sup> When further pressed as to whether that represents the entirety of Mencius' “contribution”, Li replied simply that “that one single point [was] enough”.<sup>215</sup> Why does Li single out this one particular point alone?

In short, it is because this autonomy and self-reliance in moral decision-making, this willpower (*yizhi liliang* 意志力量)<sup>216</sup> which is virtually the only thing of value Li can find in the *Mencius*, is precisely also the thing that he most values in Kant. As Li tirelessly recapitulates,<sup>217</sup> the morally commendable quality he praises in Mencius and labels “condensation of reason” (*lixing ningju* 理性凝聚)<sup>218</sup> is precisely the wherewithal to submit to the categorical imperative regardless of the cost to one's own interests, and it is also that which separates humans from the beasts. Elsewhere, Li explicitly links that same Mencian aphorism to the notion of “free will” (*ziyou yizhi* 自由意志) which allows humans to carry out the dictates of the categorical imperative.<sup>219</sup> The contemporary philosophical literature on free will is sufficiently copious to get a whole herd of oxen sweating, but Li never really engages with it, and the fundamentally unKantian empiricising of free will becomes an acute issue again here: Li in fact has a genealogical story to tell about the “condensation of reason”, one which he

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 176. Interestingly, Li rejects the four sprouts idea on the supposition that, of the four, only the “mind of compassion” (*ceyin zhi xin* 惻隱之心) could plausibly be an “animal instinct” (*dongwu benneng* 動物本能). Kin selection is of course the basis for much of the “compassion” evident in the animal kingdom. I have elsewhere made a full analysis of the relationship between kin selection and the Mencian four sprouts idea, see: Zhu Hanmin and Martin, Jordan 朱漢民、馬兆仁. 2021. “Is Kin Selection Confirmatory of the Mencian ‘Four Sprouts’ Idea?” 親緣選擇能否印證《孟子》之四端說? *Zhongguo Zhexue* 中國哲學 10: pp. 57-64.

<sup>214</sup> “富貴不能淫，貧賤不能移，威武不能屈”，Bloom, Irene (trans.). 2009. *Mencius*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 62. See Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 176.

<sup>215</sup> “... 這一點就足夠了”，Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 176.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>217</sup> On these points, see: *ibid.*, pp. 131-133, p. 166, pp. 487-488.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

expects to be validated some day by neuroscience.<sup>220</sup> Very well, so where is the dissonance here with GCC?

The dissonance, in fact, only arises if we take Li to be proposing some form of Kantian doctrine of free will. Kant's doctrine of free will springs forth from pure reason, but proponents of GCC will tend rather to agree with the verdict of mainstream evolutionary psychology that "[f]rom an evolutionary or biological standpoint, the capacity to override an initial response and substitute another response is an immense step forward and can be powerfully adaptive".<sup>221</sup> That is, proponents of GCC will agree with the evolutionary genealogical account which Li does in fact support. Free will for Li is a GCC-compliant psychological attribute which is an evolutionary adaptation for hominid social life – this is not at all Kantian. Given that Li's notion of free will (and indeed his notion of the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental more broadly) is not at all Kantian, why do we see such frequent laudations of Kant and Kantian free will in his corpus?

I think Ryan Nichols has provided an excellent template for understanding Li's appeals to Kant. Building upon but also diverging quite markedly from the ideas of David Hall and Roger Ames, Nichols has advanced what he calls an "influence principle" as crucial to understanding the projects of some early Ruist figures:

*According to the influence principle, the primary aim of the early Confucian writers, editors, and redactors was to influence people so as to increase the probability that Chinese society would ... achieve peace and stability. The aim of their recorded reflections about morality is neither to believe the true and disbelieve the false nor to construct a theoretical architecture of mutually supporting ethical commitments about right action ... Envisioning Confucius and Mencius as a pair of theory-makers with roughly the same goals as an Aristotle or a Kant unavoidably and unjustly diminishes their reputation.*<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 490.

<sup>221</sup> Baumeister, Roy F., Schmeichel, Brandon J. and Vohs, Kathleen D. 2007. "Self-Regulation and the Executive Function: The Self as Controlling Agent." In *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, edited by Arie W. Kruglanski and E. Tory Higgins. New York: Guilford Press, p. 519.

<sup>222</sup> Nichols, Ryan. 2015. "Early Confucianism is a System for Social-Functional Influence and Probably Does Not Represent a Normative Ethical Theory", *Dao* 14: p. 513.

I think the same applies *mutatis mutandis* to understanding Li's scholarly project. He is not attempting to construct "a theoretical architecture of mutually supporting ethical commitments" which add up to a form of Ruicised Neo-Kantianism which could occupy an irreproachably coherent compatibilist position in the theoretical landscape of western philosophical discourse on free will. No, rather he is inventing and deploying catchy neologisms, telling a grand narrative beginning from human prehistory, augmenting it with a stupendously erudite range of anecdotes and intriguing marginalia, marshaling in authoritative names like Hume and Kant to bolster it all, weaving in his quasi-encyclopaedic knowledge of the intellectual history of the east and west, and joyfully but not necessarily fastidiously deploying scientific results where they seem useful to the cause. GCC helps smooth the path leading to this understanding of Li as writing mainly under the aegis of the influence principle: once we start seeing "condensation of reason" and "free will" etc as functional social adaptations with an evolutionary history and stop seeing them as items of theoretical philosophical componentry, we can thereby obviate the "unjust dimin[ution of Li's] reputation" as a shoddy theory-maker and appreciate his suasive genius.<sup>223</sup>

Finally we turn back briefly to the idea, accepted by many proponents of GCC, that culture itself evolves under the influence of processes of Darwinian selection. Again, as for the core ideas of GCC, so too for cultural evolution: excellent<sup>224</sup> summaries<sup>225</sup> abound,<sup>226</sup> but we will supply a very brief one. In principle, Darwinian selection can operate upon any substrate which exhibits variance, differential fitness and heritability of fitness. This includes not just the DNA molecule, but also information. Memes will therefore become adapted to their environment via a process of multigenerational selection, just as genes do – such is the core idea of memetics. Cultural evolution theory differs from classical memetics significantly in the emphasis it places on continuous (rather than discrete) cultural traits (rather than memes)

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<sup>223</sup> As someone presently working in Chinese academia, I offer the following piece of completely unsupported personal anecdote: I believe I have seen Li's suasive genius at work in convincing some humanities scholars (particularly those with a primary interest in Chinese philosophy) of the value of stepping out of the confines of the disciplinary boundaries of "literature, history and philosophy" (*wenshizhe* 文史哲) and making a little more frequent contact with consilient reality at its joints.

<sup>224</sup> Mesoudi, Alex. 2016. "Cultural Evolution: A Review of Theory, Findings and Controversies", *Evolutionary Biology* 43: pp. 481-497.

<sup>225</sup> Richerson and Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone*, pp. 58-98.

<sup>226</sup> Lewens, Tim. 2018. "Cultural Evolution", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/evolution-cultural/>>.

tending in the long-term to confer benefit on the groups who possess those traits. The removal of group-deleterious traits from the pool of cultural variants and optimisation of the group-beneficial ones will be expedited by between-group competition (i.e. “cultural group selection”), such that in the long-run cultural traits become well-adapted to the cultural and physical environments of their possessors. They are blindly-but-intricately “designed” by an entropy-subverting and Designer-less process of multigenerational selection, the operations and even results of which are often causally opaque to the trait’s possessors. Many proponents of GCC also hold that Darwinian selection operates upon cultural traits in this way.

Whether or not Li would have accepted such a notion is something of an ambiguity. As argued in the foregoing sections, there seem to be compelling reasons and plenty of textual evidence to indicate that Li would have been amenable to GCC, and in fact did have something quite similar in mind. Can the same be said of him with respect to the evolution of group-beneficial traits by cultural group selection as described in the above paragraph? The textual evidence for such a view is much more thin on the ground. There is still a case to be made, but we must assign lower credence weightings to conclusions drawn.

The first point is a little vacuous, but still worth making: as shown above, Li not only accepts but actually accords significant importance to biological evolution, indicating that he understood the explanatory power of Darwinian selection. This alone doesn’t get us very far though. However, Li also uses some very suggestive language and concepts in his discussions of the origins of ritual (*li* 禮). I have argued elsewhere that an incipient form of cultural evolution which is discoverable in the *Xunzi* provides a good answer to this question of the origins of ritual,<sup>227</sup> and Li – who is, non-coincidentally and as noted above, a self-professed Xunzian – gives a very similar type of answer to this question, using distinctly Darwin-tinged language to do so. Consider the following sentence, which is preceded in the previous paragraph by the assertion that “religious morality” (*zongjiaoxing daode* 宗教性道德) is just a type of “social morality” (*shehuixing daode* 社會性道德) prescribing the norms which allow human groups to sustain their way of life under given temporal and environmental constraints:

*At its root, morality is the norms and criteria which sustain within-group interpersonal relations, it is the gradually-forming and constantly evolving product of the constantly changing habitat [in which one] survives and to*

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<sup>227</sup> Martin, Jordan. 2022. “Incipient Cultural Evolution in the *Xunzi* As Solution To The *Liyi* Origin Problem”, *Dao* (forthcoming).

*which [morality must make] constant and subtle adaptations, [thereby] becoming a type of long-enduring and non-artificially-designed custom.*<sup>228</sup>

It would be rather unsound to seize on the use of the word “evolution” here and triumphantly conclude this to be an unambiguous invocation of cultural evolution theory, *quod erat demonstrandum*. In Chinese as in English, the word “evolution” is often used in a manner quite free of any Darwinian connotations to mean simply “change”. It seems pretty clearly Darwinian, however, in this context, accompanied as it is by talk of environmental conditions, non-artificial design of customs,<sup>229</sup> adapting to the habitat in which the group survives and so forth. Both memeticists and cultural evolutionists could probably see silhouettes of their own theories in Li’s assertions here.

Li goes on, however, to tip the scales in favour of cultural evolution over memetics. Recall that theorists of cultural evolution generally expect evolution to select for group-beneficial traits in the long run, whereas memeticists generally see memetic selection as favouring the propagation of only the meme itself, or at most the meme in tandem with the individual whose brain harbours it. Now consider the following statements made by Li:

*From apes down to humans, Homo from the beginning have been a type of group-living biological genus in which individual survival has been tightly linked together with group survival. To struggle for their own survival, individuals must also struggle for the survival of their group (the clan, the household, the organisation, the nation, the class, the state). This type of struggle or even sacrifice became the final ethical reality which made humans human. Any group will need these types of ethical imperatives, and will turn them into a conscientious awareness which restrains and rules over*

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<sup>228</sup> “道德本是維繫群體人際關係的原則、準繩，它是一種逐漸形成並不斷演化、微調以適應不斷變化著的生存環境的產物，成為一種非人為設計的長久習俗”，Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 33.

<sup>229</sup> Elsewhere, Li talks about how shamanism and social rituals were crucial in shaping human nature, and in this connection quite specifically asserts that it was “not the individual creation of some sage, worthy or prophet” (非某個聖賢先知的個體創作). This seems very much like a rejection of the Xunzian “sagely creation” story (see *inter alia* the first few sentences of the “Discourse on Ritual” chapter of the *Xunzi*) in favour of a cultural evolution narrative. See Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 474.

*the individual in order to sustain the continued survival of the group and the genus.*<sup>230</sup>

Taking this passage together with the previous one, from which it is only separated by approximately a page, the following picture emerges: without having been artificially designed for the purpose, cultural traits pertaining to moral norms nevertheless evolve to adapt themselves to local conditions gradually and subtly over time, and in doing so they don't necessarily benefit the individual, but they do benefit the group and promote its survival. This doesn't quite pass muster as a rigorous formulation of cultural evolution theory, but it is sufficient to suggest that Li had some homologous idea in mind, and perhaps even (though much more speculatively) to suggest that he may have accepted the operation of Darwinian processes on cultural traits. With much more certainty, though, it also suggests that even if he would have rejected the idea of Darwinian processes operating on culture, he certainly tended towards group-functional explanations of culture rather than the meme-functional and individual-functional explanations of classical memetics.

## Conclusion

What have we shown in this essay? Firstly, that a review of the present evidentiary state of play with respect to the proposition that “culture influences the brain” – a proposition the confirmation of which Li Zehou regarded as “of greater significance than all of [his] books put together” – indicates strongly that this proposition is already confirmed for all three types of sedimentation described by Li: *yuanshi* sedimentation, cultural sedimentation and individual sedimentation. Perhaps our focus on this evidentiary landscape will sharpen even further with the advance of investigative technologies, but Li's prescience on this particular point is already well-established.

Secondly, that there are significant consonances between gene-culture coevolution and Li's sedimentation theory, and indeed, that GCC provides a theoretical model which can supplement and augment Li's causal picture of the evolution of the hominin cultural-psychological formation. Supplementing it in this way helps clarify the apparent contradiction in Li's view on hominin evolution whereby he appears to reject the scientific principle of evolution via

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<sup>230</sup> “從猿到人，人類一開始便是某種群居生物族類，其個體生存是與該群體生存緊密連接在一起的。個體為自己也就必須為群體（氏族、家庭、團體、民族、階級、國家）的生存而奮鬥。這種奮鬥甚至犧牲，成了人之所以為人的最後的倫理學的實在。任何群體都需要這種倫理要求，其將它變為自覺意識來約束、統治個體，以維護其群體與族類的生存延續。” Li, *A Theory of Anthro-Historical Ontology*, p. 34.

selection acting upon mutational variants – in fact, what Li wishes to emphasise is the crucial role of our ancestors’ *active* engagement in techno-social praxes without which the *passive* acquisition of lucky mutational variants alone would have been insufficient to sustainably drive the neurophysiological changes evident in the course of evolution from australopithecines to *sapiens*. The core logic of GCC suggests that active engagement in techno-social praxis changes the strength and duration of the selection pressures which sweep beneficial mutations to fixity. This core logic also provides a more scientifically explicit picture of just how “culture influences the brain”, how “the empirical becomes the transcendental” *sensu* Li Zehou.

Thirdly, the introduction of GCC clarifies our understanding of one of the known tensions in Li’s corpus, that is, the fact that his “empiricisation” of Kantian rationality is illegitimate from a strictly Kantian point of view. GCC affirms and fleshes out the picture which Li evidently had in mind of “free will” as a sort of Mencian-flavoured psychological adaptation to hominid social life, the ability to override initial responses and submit selflessly to ethical norms. In this connection, I have suggested that Li’s scholarly project in general and his treatment of “free will” and the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental in particular is oriented by an “influence principle” whereby Li prioritises suasive efficacy over absolute theoretical consistency.

Finally, we have discussed an ambiguity with respect to Li’s potential views on cultural evolution, a thesis theoretically separable from GCC itself but nevertheless also upheld by many proponents of GCC. We have shown that Li prefers group-functional explanations for the sedimentation of the human cultural-psychological formation, which suggests (but does not conclusively prove) that Li may have accepted the notion that culture evolves via Darwinian processes. In our view, this in turn suggests that cultural-evolutionary and GCC models are respectively more consonant with Li’s ideas on sedimentation than are memetic and cultural niche models.

**Michael NYLAN:**  
**Li Zehou, the Voracious Pupil and Radical Conservative**

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Li Zehou's thinking rests upon three legs:<sup>231</sup> a firm commitment to early Marxism, to democracy, and to a type of Chinese enlightenment, through art and philosophy, "with Chinese characteristics." These are the three legs of Li's tripod, to use the favorite early Chinese metaphor for stability. Yet one could, with equal justice, style these as three broad layers of sedimentation contributing to Li's psycho-social formation, using his own imagery. This draft paper aims to explore each of these three areas of Li's activities in turn. But before plunging in, it seems wisest to state the obvious: that in the PRC, as in modern EuroAmerica, not all self-styled "liberals" or "neoliberals" have been pro-democratic, whether one conceives "democracy" to mean "representative democracy" or greater egalitarianism. Perhaps, in a curious way, the profound contradictions that undergird modern liberal-democratic thinking, however dimly felt,<sup>232</sup> have played a part in leading many intellectuals, inside and outside the Party, to prefer a more robust and sustained political authoritarianism invoking paternalistic political values. As their neat narratives go, embrace of paternalistic values offers better odds than democracy for a brilliant revolutionary future of unimaginable promise that simultaneously re-establishes an immensely valuable link (without it, irreparably broken) to a unitary pre-1911 "tradition" (aka the good ole days). Often, they cite historical or pseudo-historical anecdotes in defense of such political values. I note this, because we cannot take Li's three commitments for granted, nor can we presume that they would not have generated major tensions within Li's thinking, even if Li had happened to live through less tumultuous times.

At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party's own claims to legitimate power have relied on the fiction that it is both democratic and Marxist (and thus "scientific" and "historical").<sup>233</sup> Accordingly, this first section devoted to Marx and Marxism aims to provide evidence for two rather simple observations, the first being that a paternalistic vision can in no way reasonably

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<sup>231</sup> The three legs of the tripod ensure its stability.

<sup>232</sup> At the heart of Western liberal democracy there exist key contradictions, as pointed out by numerous writers, mostly trenchantly, to my mind, in the writings of Raymond Geuss and Ci Jiwei. See *History and Illusion*, for Geuss; *On Chinese Democracy*, for Ci Jiwei.

<sup>233</sup> Recall that Marx himself never used the dogmatic term "historical materialism." See *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) [hereafter Carver], p. 32.

be traced to Marx (as opposed to Lenin or Stalin), and the CCP must, in consequence, distort some basic aspects of Chinese history after 1921 (the date of the founding of the Communist Party in China), just as it must distort Chinese history prior to 1911. As a trained historian, I am no stranger to the idea that modern nation-states continuously engage in myth-making, in aid of forging a more unified imagined community and, less overtly, to provide the rationale for keeping the current powerholders firmly in control. So the CCP's propensity to distort the past does not come as a shock, and yet an awareness of the deadly consequences of this propensity pervades Li's thinking, as it did the thinking of other senior intellectuals of his day who had lived through the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).<sup>234</sup> Secondly, I want to argue that Li Zehou saw in Marx (probably correctly) an aesthetic interest in a type of "self-created" and "creating" human being that other experts on Marx have also discovered in the rather unsystematic writings by the early Marx devoted to humanity.

### **On Marx and Marxism**

I am no expert on Marx, but every reputable expert unambiguously insists that one must separate the early Marx seen in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1843] and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*<sup>235</sup> from the later phase, when he cooperated with Engels in several joint publications, most famously, *The German Ideology* [1845–46], the *Communist Manifesto* [1848], and *Capital, I* [1867]), and take the later volumes of *Capital* as almost entirely the work of Engels, who wanted to simplify and strengthen Marx's rhetoric. Experts concede that "Marx's intellectual energy was not matched by a comparable level of discipline,"<sup>236</sup> with the result that Engels had his work cut out for him. But, far more importantly, those two sightings of Marx must never be conflated with the curious amalgamations of nationalism and peasant revolution that have invoked Marx posthumously and quite selectively under slogans espousing a hyphenated "Marxism-Leninism" or "Marxism-

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<sup>234</sup> Here I think immediately of Yu Hua and of Dai Houying, to take two examples. In English, the best account of Dai is that by Caroline S. Pryne, *Humanism in Modern Chinese Literature* (1988), later accused of "spiritual pollution"; and for Yu Hua, we are fortunate to have *China in Ten Words* (trans. from *Shige cihui li de Zhongguo* 十個詞彙的中國, 2010).

<sup>235</sup> Aka the *Paris Manuscripts*.

<sup>236</sup> Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) [hereafter Elster], p. 2; cf. Plamenatz, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) [hereafter Plamenatz], p. 453, calls Marx "perceptive but muddled"; Carver, p. 18. The reader then strives for plausible readings, not certainties.

Leninism-Stalinism," in one-party dictatorships that took control leading "unfinished revolutions" in multiple countries, starting with the Soviet Union and proceeding to countries influenced by the Soviet model, such as the People's Republic of China, North Korea under the Kims, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua.

For historical reasons, then, it is no easy task to arrive at a clear understanding of Marx's central ideas, including such key concepts as alienation and fetishism (concepts closely related to that of "false consciousness"), not to mention socialist democracy — even if these are the very concepts that are most germane to Li Zehou's complex thinking.<sup>237</sup> Every student of Marx agrees that Marx used the word "alienation" in contradictory ways over time,<sup>238</sup> and "No theory seems compatible with both all the general statements and all the historical explanations, even allowing standard departures from literalism."<sup>239</sup> Such incoherence we might forgive in a lesser figure, but in Marx's case, the explanation lies in Marx's primary goal throughout his mature life: Marx sought to bring about basic social change through his writings (many of them cued to current events), rather than to articulate an ironclad set of theoretical propositions about historical change; he was a would-be revolutionary and provocateur, not a hidebound academic. He needed to ground his prognosis for humanity in a finely-grained account of the prevailing conditions in EuroAmerica, in order to convince himself and others that the underlying structure of human development he had posited was essentially correct; revolutionary activity undertaken without a thorough theoretical grounding was likely to defeat its own purpose.<sup>240</sup> But at this remove, I can but try my best to follow what most see as the main threads in Marx's writings,

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<sup>237</sup> According to Marx, religion, class mentality, and the state form for Marx the "ideological superstructure of society," and all ideology exhibits false consciousness. By Marx's account, the state by turns is an *instrument* of class rule, a *condition* or *precondition* of class exploitation, or a significant *form* or *marker* of alienated life. The state's relation to alienation by Marx's view remains fundamentally unclear, as is the term "consciousness." As Plamenatz (p. 211, and, more generally, pp. 211-16) says, "There is no part of Marxist theory more difficult to understand than the part that treats consciousness in relation to what it reflects." I shall not dwell on Marx's idea of the "surplus labor value" (see below) as it is (a) not so relevant to this discussion; and (b) disastrously wrong, if recent economic history can be trusted. Marx built upon an older notions derived in the classical economic histories of the "labor theory of value" to devise his own distinctive "labor theory of exploitation," which shares many problems with the older "labor theory of value."

<sup>238</sup> See Plamenatz, p. 11.

<sup>239</sup> Richard W. Miller, "Social and Political Theory," in Carver, p. 105.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. Thomas, in Carver, p. 32.

believing, as I do, that Li Zehou was likewise a radical provocateur who read Marx in not too dissimilar a fashion from mine.

Karl Marx saw human beings as self-conscious, purposeful, and progressive,<sup>241</sup> in that each person, feeling the pressure to supply his or her own needs, is forced to produce and use the products of others in collaborative arrangements, and this process propels needy human beings "onward and upward," as it were, into ever more intricate forms of reciprocal co-existence.<sup>242</sup> By his or her own efforts, then, the person gradually develops capacities (understanding, skills, material resources, and wants), largely through social intercourse with others of the same species, and in that strictly limited sense, the person is a "self-creative" yet co-creative rational animal.<sup>243</sup> "Man cannot realize his human possibilities except by acting upon and being acted upon by other human beings," as one student of Marx says.<sup>244</sup> (We might categorize human beings as somewhat intelligent and independent, with their environment and institutions the manmade products of those human features, but plainly, this phrasing is far less stirring than Marx's.) Cumulatively, Marx held, these individual additive processes moved history in a unilinear direction, despite occasional blips, with the continual increase and improvement of human desires providing the conditions for historical progress, in tandem with the concurrent growth in resources (psychological and material) to satisfy the multiplication and improvement in people's wants, despite their unequal control over the means of production in pre-socialist societies.

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<sup>241</sup> "Progressive" means for Marx that as each person collaborates with others, he or she has the capacity to add continually to the individual stock of capacities. Marx believed that capitalist industrial production was particularly "progressive" in two additional senses: it has enormously increased productivity for each worker and each society; by making the scale of production ever larger, as smaller enterprises succumb to competition, it makes it easier in future for either a worker or a given society to take the means of production over for the general benefit. Large-scale industry was for Marx "in some sense liberating," in that its particularly alienating forms tear away certain "veils of illusion" (see Plamenatz, pp. 141-46).

<sup>242</sup> Joseph Cropsey, "Karl Marx," in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 3rd. ed. 1987, pp. 802-28 [hereafter Cropsey]. That Marx adopts the "billiard ball" view of historical change, where change is assimilated to physical motions," is unfortunate; see Cropsey, p. 811.

<sup>243</sup> Of course, both Aristotle, in his *Politics*, and Hegel had insisted that human beings are social beings. Scott Meikle argues that Marx's economic and social theories are closer to those of Aristotle than to those of Hume. Unfortunately, Aristotle's characterization of man in his *Politics* describes man as "man having language" (*zoon logon echōn*), not "rational man," but this nuance was lost to philosophers long before Marx.

<sup>244</sup> Cropsey, p. 808.

Notably, while Marx's writings focused on the analysis of the industrial societies of his own day, he ascribed this "self-creative aspect" to human beings in all times and places, including the distant past and dim future.<sup>245</sup> Nevertheless, in describing the future replacement of capitalism by the post-capitalist historical phase, Marx assigned a unique role to the industrialized urban proletariat (i.e., factory workers, many of them former members of the bourgeoisie in reduced straits), since only and always through the armed uprisings this group fomented would post-capitalist forms of humanity manage to reassert a greater measure of control over the means of production currently in the hands of the capitalists, and thereby greatly diminish the degree to which all workers in general are alienated.<sup>246</sup> "The accumulation [and concentration] of wealth at one pole is, therefore, ... the accumulation [and normalization] of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole."<sup>247</sup> Admittedly, by Marx's historical schema, in no society can self-realization by a "self-creative" human being ever be entirely "full" or perfect, yet a post-capitalist world must bring comparative "freedom," Marx argued.<sup>248</sup> True, in that future few people may consistently choose the single best mode of action, but so long as they consciously choose a mode of action, they will experience some measure of satisfaction from the choice itself, on the grounds that they have exerted some measure of control in their lives, howsoever small. Moreover, the socialist society for Marx would be built on a fraternal order whose ruling imperative was, "For each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."<sup>249</sup>

For all that Marx borrowed from earlier thinkers such as Hegel, Marx's writings represent a profound rethinking of humanity's historic role, and his distinctive notion of the "self-creative" human seems at once the most obscure claim that Marx ever made, the claim least rooted in social realities, and nonetheless the most rhetorically powerful claim Marx ever asserted to

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<sup>245</sup> Plamenatz, p. 1.

<sup>246</sup> Marx deemed alienation so much worse under capitalism that humans intent upon ridding themselves of the most oppressive forms of alienation would have to rid themselves of the capitalist order altogether. NB: By Marx's account, societies can grow *worse* (i.e., more alienating) as they grow more *affluent* in the aggregate. Cropsey, p. 807, observes that we should not be so benighted as to think class struggle for Marx was a mere skirmish; it would be a fight to the death.

<sup>247</sup> See *Capital, I*, IV, xv .4 (pp. 708-9). The material in brackets has been added by me.

<sup>248</sup> Self-realization can never be "full" since no human being has an infinite number of capacities to be realized and no human being lives without practical constraints upon him. In addition, as Rousseau showed, a person individual can be at odds with him- or herself or with society *in several different ways*.

<sup>249</sup> Here I have not attempted to degender Marx's language.

motivate others to undertake revolutionary action.<sup>250</sup> But Marx (unlike Mao) was no utopian. In his telling, neither the owners of the means of production nor the workers are ever totally free "agents" in the sense of "fully independent actors," as both parties, whether users or used, are condemned to play out the inner logic of their own historical stage: "Are men free to choose this or that form of society for themselves for themselves? By no means!"<sup>251</sup> In the capitalist phase, restless industrialists seek new material resources to exploit, new outlets for its products, and new innovations to mechanize the workplace, in hopes of maximizing profits in grueling competitive conditions. Under capitalism, workers are condemned — more by the "force of circumstances" than by outright coercion — to work for wages and capitalists feel no less compelled to lower capital costs (principally, where possible, workers' wages) in an increasingly globalized world of ruthless, degraded and degrading exchanges.<sup>252</sup> Yet it is in capitalism that the most momentous break in human history will occur.

The foregoing may explain why Marx often seems far less interested in lives and outcomes of individual human beings than in the progress of humanity (aka "Man") toward a better socialist future that would supersede the contemporary capitalist phase. As one expert on Marx writes with considerable asperity,

Indeed, only with the exploitation<sup>253</sup> of the many could class societies create the free time in which a few could contribute to the progress of civilization. The

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<sup>250</sup> See Plamenatz, vii-viii, for the first two statements, to which I have added the third ("the most rhetorically powerful" ...). Plamenatz remarks that Marx's writings on humanity are particularly difficult to understand, insofar as ideas Marx borrowed from Hegel and other previous thinkers Marx used to reach conclusions that are antithetical to those the thinkers advanced (p. 4). Marx was a romantic, if a far less pessimistic romantic than Rousseau, who offers a similar portrait of human beings.

<sup>251</sup> See Marx's letter to P.V. Annenkov, dated December 28, 1846.

<sup>252</sup> Many other costs are fixed or comparative fixed, in Marx's view, including the cost of buildings, semi-processed or unprocessed materials, equipment, and transporting finished products.

<sup>253</sup> "Exploitation," by Marx's definition, refers to one thing only: a worker is exploited if he or she performs more labor to make a product than is strictly necessary to produce the goods that that same worker consumes to make a living; two factors to be reckoned in any picture are, in consequence, productivity and consumption. In Marx's picture of primitive societies, the goal is to achieve a minimum standard of living (consumption) with a minimum of labor input and surplus products are thrown away or offered to the gods (which is as good as throwing them away), making the role of exploitation far less relevant. But in capitalist societies, where the government protects the capitalists, the exploited and exploiter are co-created and co-dependent. As Elster explains (p. 84), Marx's view of exploitation contrasts with that of the neo-classical economists, who imagined perfect competition in

attraction of communism in his eyes was to allow the self-realization of each and every individual, not just a small elite. As a *by-product*, there will also be an unprecedented flowering of mankind, but this is not [in his schema]... *in itself* a source of value.<sup>254</sup>

Colonization of Asia by Europe actually would prove to be a historical benefit for the colonized, breaking down an older mode of existence.<sup>255</sup> Nor was community a value in itself for Marx, who parted company with Hegel on this very point. What Marx really aimed to describe persuasively in "scientific" or "functional"<sup>256</sup> terms was the historical stage of his own day, that of industrial capitalism, and the reasons underpinning its probable transition to a more free and equal future.<sup>257</sup> To Marx's mind, despite the civilizational advances it had wrought, capitalism had three fatal flaws: it was inefficient and plainly exploitative, and so it produced degrees of alienation that were appreciably higher than previously felt. The last flaw in particular made industrial capitalism a cultural or even *spiritual* affront to human dignity.<sup>258</sup> Dehumanization

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capitalism, which they believed obviated opportunities for exploitation, unless some firms find a way to exert some outsized influence or power on prices and wages (as when there are monopolies). Of course, workers may be forced to sell their labor, even when there is perfect competition. It is fair to say that Marx tended to use "general concepts, like *alienation*, rather than specific ones, like *exploitation*, to outline his critique of the way that contemporary society was developing. For many readers, "this resonantly humanist vocabulary posed fewer problems than did the ... conceptual analysis of *Capital*" (Carver, p. 15).

<sup>254</sup> Elster, p. 25. Italics added by me. Marx's idea of exploitation needed to support the civilization of the few recalls that of Aristotle's *Politics*, which justifies slavery.

<sup>255</sup> Marx thought the European domination of the colonies – particularly the British involvement in India – to be a necessary measure or, in his words, a "double mission [...]: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia." See the short history of "The Concept of 'Oriental Despotism' from Aristotle to Marx," by Rolando Minuti, posted May 3, 2012 on <https://brewminate.com/the-concept-of-oriental-despotism-from-aristotle-to-marx/>

<sup>256</sup> By "functional," I mean that Marx focused on the question of which institutions would benefit which classes, and why. Like other classical economists, Marx utilized fixed co-efficients in his mathematical modeling, over-estimating the significance of what he deemed "objective factors" and woefully under-emphasizing the subjective factors; he therefore had little understanding of what we might deem the conceptual "feedback loop" and even less of game theory or "rational choice" thinking.

<sup>257</sup> Marx generally thought a particular sequence of five stages had to exist in history, even if he also sometimes entertained the idea that some "advantages of backwardness" might allow certain societies to leapfrog one or more historical stages.

<sup>258</sup> In Marx's writings, there are mainly two social sources of alienation in industrial capitalism: the reduction of labor to commodity and workers' abject dependence on social processes outside their control (e.g., capital).

signaled by a loss of creativity was the inevitable result of the servile dependence of some members of the human race upon their masters; debasement was exacerbated by the poverty inflicted upon the exploited.

Alienation arguably constitutes Marx's single most important contribution to contemporary discourse.<sup>259</sup> Alienation, as Marx defined it, was a failure or lack of self-realization, experienced by many as dim or acute feelings of depression, dissatisfaction, and dislocation.<sup>260</sup> Extreme feelings of alienation may translate into forms of fetishism, as both imply an inability to discern the hidden relations implicit in the core socioeconomic arrangements and the concurrent illusion that commodities, money, and capital have properties and powers of their own that can actually "save" people.<sup>261</sup> To take one egregious example, money tends to assume far more weight than its direct purchasing power or intrinsic value as currency warrants. Accordingly, learning, in an ideal world, would mean learning to recognize the basic facts of socioeconomic relations, stripped of these illusions. Marx was therefore driven by the perception that he must communicate to workers and capitalists alike the particulars of their own dire predicaments, in the belief that those who became conscious of their own deep alienation would seek to alter their living conditions, and thereby usher in successive revolutions to overturn the conditions that constrained their humanity, singly and in the aggregate.<sup>262</sup>

However, the task of self-realization proves particularly difficult for factory workers in advanced capitalism for two principal reasons: the conditions of capitalism make it ever harder for workers to recognize the finished assembly-line product as the product of their own labor (stripping them of justifiable pride in their work) and mass marketing weakens or even eliminates the link between the worker and consumer (stripping away an additional source of satisfaction). Even the most privileged in capitalist societies may find self-realization difficult to achieve, as the compulsions to consume among the members of the bourgeoisie easily

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<sup>259</sup> However, Plamenatz (p. ix) warns that academics (particularly sociologists) have often imputed to Marx more definite ideas on the subject of alienation than can be found in the writings of Marx or Marx and Engels.

<sup>260</sup> In Hegel's work two ideas are easily confounded: (1) externalization (Entäußerung); and (2) estrangement or alienation (Entfremdung). Alienation differs from externalization, though it arises necessarily in the course of externalization. Marx calls the first of these two concepts objectification.

<sup>261</sup> Cropsey, p. 827, says, astutely, "We might summarize by saying that the replacement of philosophy by history was the condition for the replacement of politics and religion by society and economics. This is the kernel of Marxism."

<sup>262</sup> For example, Marx thought colonization a good thing for the "backward" people of Asia. See below.

overwhelm the innate drive toward self-realization in the "self-creative" human being. True, the marginal utility assigned each new act of consumption wanes over time, due to hedonic adaptation, but the marginal *disutility* of eschewing acts of consumption will often offset that, given the person's addiction to consumption.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, the most pressing problem shared by workers and elites was, in Marx's view, that capitalist markets, by operating by "arm's length transactions" that substantially subvert communitarian values, turn people, regardless of class, into mere means to one another's satisfaction,<sup>264</sup> while too many workers became mere appendages to machines. In *The German Ideology*, Marx dubs this phenomenon "mutual exploitation," sanctioned by custom, law, and religion.<sup>265</sup>

Unfortunately, Marx never managed to explain why enough members of capitalist societies, and particularly the urban proletariat, would, sooner or later, come to (a) assess their own situations accurately, and (b) be motivated by their clear-eyed assessments to revolt *collectively* against the status quo on behalf of the *cooperative use and control* of economic resources.<sup>266</sup> After all, people who are unhappy can be apathetic when it comes to social action, and revolts have routinely throughout history supplanted one ruling group with a new one no more disposed to share power. And Marx could hardly say that capitalist endeavors were stagnating, since he himself described them as incessantly innovating.<sup>267</sup> Simply put, neither "nature" nor "convention" inclines the person to undertake the fairly arduous task that we call "critical inquiry," nor do moral or intellectual freedom for some necessarily coincide with or conduce to "everyone's achieving a satisfactory life."<sup>268</sup> In company with nearly all the educated people of

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<sup>263</sup> By the "marginal disutility," I refer to symptoms of withdrawal from an addiction that may easily grow worse as time accrues. "Hedonic adaptation" refers to the ever-diminished thrill of repeating the same acts that once proved intensely pleasurable: eating one's first duck pâté, drinking one's first champagne, buying one's first Dior, owning one's first McMansion, and so on.

<sup>264</sup> Here I adopt the summary in Elster, p. 53.

<sup>265</sup> Capitalism left all parties free, under custom and law, of duties and obligations to others, Marx said. Later, working with Engels to produce *Capital, I*, the division between exploiter-capitalist vs. exploited worker is emphasized rather than the horizontal relations.

<sup>266</sup> And, as Plamenatz, pp. 180-82, notes, No revolution has yet occurred in the way Marx predicted would happen. Workers tend to accept the capitalist system, as do the managerial and professional classes. Engels, looking back, said that he and Marx had wildly over-estimated the chances for a proletarian revolution in the near future.

<sup>267</sup> Then, too, Joseph Schumpeter has argued that the waste and inefficiency of capitalism is the *condition* for its *dynamic* operation. But most importantly, surpluses are needed if capitalists are to risk making innovations.

<sup>268</sup> For more on this, see Plamenatz, p. 355.

his era, Marx believed (wrongly) that scientific and technical knowledge reflects fewer illusions (i.e., is more "objectively true"), insofar as it is more closely connected with material production; ergo, Marx's claim to be writing "scientifically."<sup>269</sup> Doubtless, too, the task of joining the dots to provide a plausible explanation was made all the more difficult by the fact that in Marx's time economic and political activities were quite distinct: workers did not vote, let alone run for public office, and major capitalists did not run politics, as they do today. For whatever reason, Marx's multiple (sometimes contradictory) explanations remain teleological and driven to a large degree by technological determinism.<sup>270</sup> Readers only learn that Marx's "end of history" (i.e., the end of the capitalist relations in society)<sup>271</sup> will witness two triumphs: maximal self-realization for each individual and maximal expansion of the productive forces, as a by-product, with large surpluses required to fund the leisure activities allowed the much larger class of future workers, not just the members of the bourgeoisie.

All the while, there existed a further hurdle for those living in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Asia: as Marx firmly believed that a revolutionary change in the capitalist order would never come before the material conditions in capitalism had themselves changed, and a huge surfeit of exploited workers was necessary to create the precondition for a communist revolution, Marx was remarkably uninterested in non-EuroAmerican or premodern modes of existence. His remarks on the Asiatic mode of production are predictably sketchy, verging on incoherent.<sup>272</sup> For Marx, uninformed about conditions in Asia, Asia consisted of

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<sup>269</sup> Marx explicitly excluded science from the realm of "false consciousness," presumably because its findings ideally can be verified. (Of course, many theoretical findings cannot be immediately verified.) In *Grundrisse*, Marx went so far as to dub science "one form of the development of human productive forces," apparently conflating science with technology. See *Marx's Grundrisse*, trans. D. McLellan, p. 190. Evelyn Fox Keller and Karine Chemla are but two historians of science who have demonstrated the cultural biases introduced into the history of science in different times and places; science is evaluative and so just as liable to error as any other human endeavor. For Marx's own summary in 1852 of his contributions to political ideas, see Carver, p. 11.

<sup>270</sup> One might argue with G.A. Cohen, who wrote on *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (1978), that not only the relations of economic production, but also the legal, political, and intellectual superstructure, are *explained* through their beneficial consequences for either the *development* or *maintenance* of the productive forces (see Elster, p. 113). As for the word "determinism," Marx thought technological innovation to be "universal and autonomous." See Miller, in Carver, pp. 102-3. Still, Marx was less a determinist or an authoritarian than his later detractors would make him out to be, as he is fully aware of human variability.

<sup>271</sup> Obviously, this is not identical with Fukuyama's triumphalist "end of history."

<sup>272</sup> Of course, in an irony of ironies, most places that adopted the Marxist-Leninist model were agrarian societies deemed "backward" at the time. NB: Marx was no less disinterested in "primitive" worlds, which he deemed

"backward" agrarian societies with relatively small populations scattered in socially isolated villages, although this had not been true for much of the North China Plain since the Zhanguo period (i.e., 475–222 BC). Marx contrasted "polycentric Europe" with its many capitals with monocentric Asia, where the separate rulers in their capitals supposedly own all the land and rule despotically.<sup>273</sup> This Asiatic mode of sovereignty amounted to "landed property on a national scale," meaning, the state as the single property owner dominated small peasant-workers as it willed.<sup>274</sup> That urban intellectuals in China planned and led an agrarian-based revolution of 1949 may have obscured these aspects of Marx's theory or lessened their significance when Li Zehou came to formulating his own ideas, but theories by Marx or attributed to him were nonetheless complicating factors when the urban intelligentsia in China sought to claim a leading role in democratic revolutions, as was true at Tiananmen, I would contend.

In any event, Li Zehou and others with a strong interest in aesthetics imputed to the writings of the early Marx an equally strong interest in the psychological appreciation for the artefacts produced by human beings. In their minds, this justified their introduction of an aesthetic dimension into the proper study of human beings — and this justification Li elaborated. Here is Li late in life explaining his own work as the fulfillment of Marxist aesthetics:

In the historical context of China in the 1970s, I raised the question "What is the original meaning of 'practice' in Marxism?" and I strongly argued that as a philosophy of practice, the most important aspect of Marxism is its historical materialism. And the very core of historical materialism is not the theory of "class struggle" but of "productive forces," which is closely associated with science and technology. I have emphasized that in the theory of the structure of "productive forces," Marx states that its most active element is "productive instruments," which play a *determinative role* in the development of productive forces, the social economy, and human history....More importantly, both Marx and Engels never developed a real theory of the relation between human

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relatively egalitarian, but irrelevant to modern capitalist society. For a different view, see Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, which was too hastily written, but has the virtue of presuming earlier civilizations (or, at least, our view of them) may play a role in shaping present and future societies.

<sup>273</sup> From early times, China was the exception in Asia, in terms of its large urban populations. This Marx did not know.

<sup>274</sup> This is most clearly stated in *Capital*, vol. 3 (Penguin, 1981), p. 927.

psychology and the making and using of tools. One exception may be the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844, in which Marx talked briefly about a "humanized nature" and... "beauty of form." He claimed that the five senses in humans are the products of world history. For me, this is a crucial point for the discussion and development of Marxism.

Therefore, going "back to classical Marxism," for me, means not just a return to the old theory of productive forces, but also answering the call to create a new theory of subjectivity — a theory concerned with developing the idea of a human "cultural-psychological formation" or "sedimentation" — that is, an internal "**humanized nature**" that is relatively independent of the material world. This would be a genuine Marxist theory of psychology, and definitely not just a mixture of Marxism and Freudian psychology.<sup>275</sup>

Put simply, for Li and for Marx the goal of a self-conscious, purposeful, and progressive humanity should be to develop as fully as possible the sum total of individual productive capacities, which include, importantly for Li, the sensory capacities for appreciation of one's own and others' artistic creations. I myself follow Li's assessment until he arrives at the claim that an "internal 'humanized nature'" (i.e., individual and cultural) might come into being in a manner "relatively independent of the material world." As always, the devil is in the details, but how much independence did Marx ascribe to culture, human nature, or aesthetic creations in his writings? Very little or none, so far as I can see, and this is where Li — to my mind, but plainly not to his — diverges sharply in his understanding of the world from Marx.

Given human creativity, however, there is no real Marxian imperative to impede Li's superseding of Marx, if the spin-off is worth our consideration. As a student of Herbert Fingarette's *Self-Deception*, I do not myself subscribe to a belief in any human being's ability to fathom themselves completely, let alone give a coherent philosophical account of their disparate beliefs.<sup>276</sup> But an academic essay may pose an impolite question: whether and to what extent Li realized that he was hardly "fulfilling" Marx by abandoning Marx's central idea of the productive forces in history, or instead was seeking to adapt some widely available vocabulary, the better to persuade his Chinese readers of the "organic" "naturalness" of his new synthesis

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<sup>275</sup> "Subjectivity and 'Subjectality': A Response," *Philosophy East and West* 49:2 (April 1999), 174-83.

<sup>276</sup> This means that I am adamantly not a Kantian or neo-Kantian (or, in the US, a Rawlsian or neo-Rawlsian).

forged from "pragmatic reason" and understandable desires for "a healthy human society."<sup>277</sup> Were Professor Li alive today, I would have pressed him on this very point.

Determined to analyze some of the voluminous evidence at hand, I will address in the following two sections Li's role at Tiananmen and Li's sketches of "tradition" with "Chinese characteristics," to make some sense of how Li strove to align his actual and theoretical worlds. Following Raymond Geuss,<sup>278</sup> I see liberal democratic values as a very peculiar hodgepodge that is by no means "universally applicable," it being, in every conceivable way, the product of a specific time and place wherein the bourgeoisie deemed themselves quite exceptionally "enlightened" and "civilized," despite evidence to the contrary. Geuss's arguments will inform the segments of the paper on Tiananmen and democracy with "Chinese characteristics," as I grope for the right words to convey Li's radical variation on "cultural conservatism," which often invoked the Enlightenment.

### **Looking Back on Tiananmen (1989) and Vital Ghosts**

Jean-Luc Godard's comedy "Masculin/Feminin," released in 1966, sports the subtitle "The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola," and critics deemed the movie "naive and knowing, irritating and engaging."<sup>279</sup> The next year, Godard made "La Chinoise,"<sup>280</sup> whose plot centered on a group of pampered Parisian youths forming a Maoist collective (though physical labor was in shorter supply than Little Red Books) debating the merits of revolutionary violence in lofty style, with results by turns hilarious or sobering; that movie's epigram solemnly intones, "We should replace vague ideas with clear images!" Somehow for me, an ardent moviegoer since my undergraduate days, Godard captured a whiff of the spirit that would hover twenty-some years later over the Tiananmen protests, not to mention the anti-humanist poststructuralism and rampant consumer culture that swept the land after the "first timid step in the long march."<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> See "Conversations between Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel," in *Four Essays on Aesthetics; toward a global view* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), pp. 169-83 [hereafter Li/Cauvel], esp. pp. 182-83.

<sup>278</sup> Another influence I could also mention in this connection is that of my mentor, Henry Rosemont, Jr.

<sup>279</sup> Pierre Billard, *Masculine Feminine: a film by Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), p. 270.

<sup>280</sup> The title already spoofed Maoist slogans: "La Chinoise, ou plutôt à la Chinoise: un film en train de se faire" (The Chinese, or, rather, in the Chinese manner: a film in the making"), which emphasized "becoming" (not "being") with special Chinese characteristics. The students as committed revolutionaries determined to bring on major social change nonetheless see radical politics as a fashionable distraction from the serious business of making a living in the world.

<sup>281</sup> Talk of timidity and the Long March comes directly from "La Chinoise."

There, too, the frenzied bouts of collective activity by the children of Marx were hopelessly jumbled, at once naive and knowing, supremely wily and utterly half-baked. As readers know or will discover, Li Zehou was one of the guiding forces encouraging the young to gather at the Tiananmen protests. Yet, a Chinese friend who was born around that time put in a recent email, "Li Zehou I know had a huge influence in China in the 1980s, especially among the youngsters." To her, in her late twenties, if not to me, Li was already an old ghost inhabiting a shadowy past. How thin our present sense of culture and history is becoming.

By way of review for newcomers and outsiders to the China field, this section recalls a few dramatic events that occurred during the last three weeks leading up to June 4, 1989, events in which Li Zehou himself played a major role.<sup>282</sup> One could begin the Tiananmen story in 1988, of course, with another powerful piece of film, the six-part TV series *River Elegy* (*He shang* 河殤) that aired twice in 1988 on China Central TV, which Rana Mitter has called "perhaps the most influential TV series of all time."<sup>283</sup> From *He shang's* distinctly skewed perspective on Chinese history, a strong alliance between Chinese-style administration and Confucian tradition

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<sup>282</sup> Events had been heating up in Beijing long before mid-May, needless to say. For example, on February 26, an "open letter" emphasized the importance to modernization of democracy and science to national development, while expressing concerns "raised out of sincere patriotic feelings," which identified corruption, bureaucratic speculation, and price hikes (i.e., inflation) as immediate concerns. That Feb. 26 Open Letter, which Li also signed, suggested several positive reforms: 1. Political structural reform (i.e., political democratization), resulting in the rule of law and the reduction in corruption; 2. Freedom of speech and freedom of press as basic to structural reform; and 3. Release of political prisoners, including Wei Jingsheng. It warned that Party leaders in the post-Mao era had focused too much focus on short-term economic benefits, and had paid insufficient attention to the country's long-term future. On March 15, this letter was followed by a second "Open Letter to the Party and Government from Thirty-three Famous Chinese Intellectuals." The letter reiterated the content of the physicist Fang Lizhi's earlier letter, in saying that both science and democracy were vital to China's future development. The Letter was signed mainly by writers and artists (e.g., Bei Dao), and researchers or professors of philosophy (including Li Zehou).

<sup>283</sup> Rana Mitter (December 9, 2021). "BBC Radio 4: In Our Time, The May Fourth Movement". (*BBC*. accessed Dec. 2021). This was a powerful piece of propaganda, not a "documentary" as it is usually billed. Jin Guantao 金觀濤, an expert "advisor" to the script writers who also makes cameo appearances in *River Elegy*, exerted a powerful, behind-the-scenes influence on the film's writers. Jin firmly believed that while dynasties may come and go in China, their basic form remains the same and they always revert to their super-stable type. Trained as scientists (not as historians), Jin and his wife Liu Qingfeng 劉青峰 co-authored an essay entitled 'Traditional Society in China: An Ultrastable Structure' (1980). See <https://chinaheritage.net/journal/an-ultrastable-system/> for details. That Website speaks of "China's resilient dynastic system — and its reconfiguration under the ideological, political and military hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party."

had forged an essentially unchanging "ultra-stable" China (pre-modern and modern) that had proven to be impervious to the science and democracy, despite the critical importance of these new modes of thinking to civilizational advance.

So a set of gloomy ideological propositions that were bandied about a year earlier was prelude to the spring of 1989. The proximate context for events in 1989 was twofold. First, 1989 was the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, generally considered a cause for celebration, particularly so, in light of the success of the economic reforms that swiftly followed Mao's death in 1976. Second, the PRC looked forward to the upcoming visit to China by Gorbachev, then President of the Soviet Union, scheduled for May 15–May 18, as the summit signaled the likelihood of "normalized" Sino-Soviet relations, in yet another historic breakthrough.<sup>284</sup> While some CCP leaders were predictably fearful of what Gorbachev's "opening up" reforms might bring to China, the dissolution of the Soviet Union would not come to for two more years, so Gorbachev's visit on balance was billed as a sign of China's rising world-power status. For the first time since its founding, the PRC was operating in a relatively peaceful international environment that could only be conducive to its domestic economic goals. China was looking increasingly like a leading power in the Asian-Pacific region, a rival to Japan and South Korea, if not *the* leading power. All augured well. However, in mid-May, shortly before Gorbachev's fateful visit to the PRC, Beijing students, teachers, and workers seized the moment when all news agencies were converging in Beijing to pressure the CCP to consider a list of demands devised to usher in more democratic government,<sup>285</sup> after which negotiations

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<sup>284</sup> For the first time since the Cold War began after World War II, China was on good terms with both the Soviet Union and with the US, and was not trying to play one superpower against the other. Gorbachev's visit was preceded by three months by the visit of President Bush. Increased international standing followed, despite the horrific events at Tiananmen. Recall that foreign policy decisions typically reflect the realm of perceptions. For a hilarious reminder of this, one should watch "The Americans" TV series, which details the series' protagonists (Russian spies embedded in a Washington, D.C. suburb) struggle to "make sense" of US politics, so that they can report to their Kremlin masters. As Michael Yahuda argues, "the mythic dimensions of China's economic significance often prevail over the "hard" facts." Robert Dernberger said China had taken "the initial step" to integrating itself in the international economy after decades of relative isolation. That said, China accounted in 1989-1990 only 2 per cent of the world's total trade, and directed over 70 per cent of her trade to the Asia-Pacific region (where the China trade accounted for only 5 per cent of the total).

<sup>285</sup> How "democracy" was to be construed was never entirely clear. Chai Ling's behavior (recorded in an ABC interview) and Wu'erkaixi's appearance on CCTV in his pajamas suggests that some students simply intended to replace the senior CCP members with their own faction. Liu Xiaobo's rather immature assessment of Wu'erkaixi is significant: Liu Xiaobo on May 27, seven days after the imposition of marshal law in Beijing, commented that

quickly soured. Even with a clear memory of these events, in preparing this timetable I have been shocked to find how compressed it was, and how quickly the different actors, official and unofficial, responded to the unfolding drama before them. As has happened before, events that would shape the lives of several generations turned on a dime.

To backtrack a bit: reading between the lines, Li Zehou and many leading intellectuals — fellow signers of multiple open letters addressed to the CCP in 1989 — had come to feel that China had become sufficiently industrialized to leapfrog aspects of capitalism, one of Marx's historical stages,<sup>286</sup> by introducing a more free and equal society in the here and now. By 1989, the PRC had been liberated from semi-colonial or occupied status for a full forty years, and was therefore in a position to replace crude hyper-nationalistic appeals and a personality cult by a more nuanced pride in Chinese accomplishments.<sup>287</sup> This is something I would have asked Professor Li, if our conference in his honor had not been interrupted first by the pandemic and then by his own death: how he judged China's precise historical situation at the time.<sup>288</sup> After all, Marxian thought has been influential in three, quite separate ways: 1. as a source of ideas for students of society, including academics in certain disciplines (e.g., sociology and history);

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Wu'erkaixi spoke just like some self-important bureaucrat. Remarkably, it was that brash charisma that persuaded Liu and others to believe that Wu'erkaixi could become a true leader, i.e., one who could benefit from their direction and advice. But by June 3, in an interview, Wu'erkaixi spoke of retrogression, not progress toward democracy, as reported by FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, an arm of the CIA, and avowedly so). Wu'er Kaixi said, as one of two leaders of the outlawed Beijing Union of Intellectuals, that China didn't need reforms; it needed a revolution. This didn't leave room for negotiations.

<sup>286</sup> After all, the urban population working in factories had grown, as had the scope of mechanized agriculture.

<sup>287</sup> As Mobo Gao, *Constructing China*, wrote, "To their understanding, the Chinese May Fourth Movement that was meant to enlighten the Chinese was hijacked by nationalism/communism that was perceived as necessary to save China from oblivion. To their shock they 'discovered' that there was nothing revolutionary about the 1949 Revolution, that there was nothing modern about the CCP and that the system dictated by Mao was feudal (p. 87) [bold added]... Li Zehou... developed the idea that there was tension between the narratives of Chinese nationalism and the Enlightenment and that the tragedy for China was that the Enlightenment had to give way to nationalism amid foreign invasion" (p. 88).

<sup>288</sup> I have been looking for a copy in Chinese or in English of the May 14th, 1989 declaration by the twelve Beijing intellectuals, whose number included Li Zehou. So far, no luck. A rough translation can be found in *Beijing Spring, 1989: confrontation and conflict, the basic documents*, eds. Michel Oksenberg, et. al. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1990).

2. as a creed or "orthodoxy" to which organized bodies, including political parties and nation-states, deliberately or ostensibly have subscribed;
3. as a broader philosophy asking people to consider values and ends, public and private.<sup>289</sup>

Most of those who gathered at Tiananmen (not all) were perfectly willing to see Marxism continue in China as source of ideas or a value system, so long as it did not remain the only source or set of values on offer in the PRC. By 1989, well-read Chinese intellectuals were sophisticated enough to see that a flawed economic analysis of the previous century no longer sufficed for a comprehensive explanation of past, present, and future societies or individuals, no matter how inspiring Marx's exhortation to study real people, in their needy and sociable avatars. Yet orthodox Marxism, or indeed any fair reading of Marx, assigned a very marginal role in human history to any factors beyond material production, and thus barely considered such superstructural features as status or culture. Marx wrote, for instance, "Differences of status arise out of social relations whose character is determined above all by material production; that is to say, by how men procure or produce co-operatively the wherewithal to satisfy their wants." Above all, Marx (and Engels) wrote "to attract disaffected workers, to discourage utopian schemes, and to push the middle classes beyond constitutionalism into *economic* revolution."<sup>290</sup> And while some came to Tiananmen with utopian schemes, most came fired up such by bread-and-butter issues as worsening job prospects, rampant inflation, and pervasive corruption within the ranks of the CCP.

A decade after the failed "Democracy Wall" attempts made during the winter of 1979–1980, Li and other senior backers of the second democracy movement at Tiananmen had had time to ruminate on contradictions within Chinese society. They understood that local definitions of the terms used for "democracy" (either *minben* 民本 or *minzhu* 民主) did not necessarily mean to most citizens of the PRC "electoral" or "representative democracy," but they reckoned, quite correctly, on the broad popular appeal among many constituencies of "benevolent rule" in the

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<sup>289</sup> Plamenatz, p. 20, supplies a tripartite list, which I have modified slightly. Plamenatz thought Marxism as a creed was dying out, but I see a resurgence of interest (some definitely self-interested) in Marx in a wide range of writings in China insisting on socialism as the patriotic "roots" of contemporary Chinese. See, e.g., Nicola Spakowski, "Gender Trouble," in *Feminism with "Chinese Characteristics,"* describing theorists whose backward-looking "roots" talk plays right into the PRC ideology on "local" identity.

<sup>290</sup> Carver, p. 10.

name of the "common good" (i.e., less inequality and corruption).<sup>291</sup> They felt that while Deng Xiaoping had undertaken to begin an economic revolution under the banner of the "Four Modernizations," the "unfinished" work of revolution would need a very different kind of cultural advance than either Mao or the CCP Standing Committee had envisioned, one led by a "vanguard of the proletariat," by which they meant principally themselves.

It was Lenin who had coined the term "vanguard of the proletariat" in his eagerness to proclaim a unique status for the Party he led, but in China after Liberation it was far from clear who was the proletariat and who could become its vanguard. Consulting Marx's *The German Ideology* clarified little, for Marx stated merely, "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production."<sup>292</sup> By any broad definition, intellectuals, as "knowledge producers," do not usually think of themselves as members of the bourgeoisie, since they typically lack control over the means of their production.<sup>293</sup> Even when they are well-remunerated by institutions that contribute to sustaining class dominance by the bourgeoisie, they do not own the schools that hire them; they do not own the publishing houses they rely upon for the dissemination of their knowledge production. They, therefore, as standard bearers whose authority derives from high culture, were somehow members of the proletariat, with the urban factory workers, and primed to play the role of vanguard of that proletariat, despite Mao's suspicion that they were a breeding ground for potential rightists.<sup>294</sup> Strong alliances with the ordinary propertyless urbanites might indeed qualify the intellectuals, young and old, to play a seminal historical role on the grounds that the intellectuals were, by and large, very poor (at least by comparison with high-level cadres in the CCP). Then, too, in 1989, only the "luck of the draw" separated workers in general, but especially those working in urban factories, from China's intellectuals in the decade after China's universities opened up in 1979; reviewing old footage from Tiananmen, one is struck

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<sup>291</sup> These are old slogans in classical Chinese. My work on the *Documents* classic has led me to think about early claims for consortial governance and the common good. Most of the people on the street took "democracy" to mean "anti-corruption," rather than electoral representation, though the latter goal was announced by some students, and advertised as the goal when the Goddess of Liberty was erected at the Square. Yali Peng, "Democracy and Chinese Political Discourses," *Modern China* 24:4 (Oct. 1998), p. 433, describes *minben* as "to rule benevolently without necessarily asking the consent of the rule."

<sup>292</sup> *The German Ideology*, cited in Carver, p. 56.

<sup>293</sup> Miller, in Carver, p. 62. As Miller states, the identity of the dramatis personae who were to lead the revolutionary action was never made clear in Marx's writings.

<sup>294</sup> Of course, Mao himself was an intellectual, given his training and employment at university.

by how articulate, well-read, and sophisticated, politically and culturally speaking, were Beijing residents who worked in the city's many industries.

Perhaps because senior intellectuals, students, and workers had shared so many common experiences (including hard labor), public intellectuals still played an outsized role in the PRC imaginary in the post-Cultural Revolution climate, after being shunted to the side or even persecuted for a decade.<sup>295</sup> (That remains true today: through podcasts and WeChat, intellectuals, self-identified or not, sometimes draw hundreds of millions of viewers, in stark contrast to experts in other countries.)<sup>296</sup> Historically, elite "intellectuals" in China have longed claimed a much "thicker" identity in the production of ideological discourse than in many other places, as uniquely qualified "bearers" or "witnesses" to "historical memories" relating to Chineseness, or as the only citizens who could engage in "patriotic worrying" on behalf of the nation, either because of their higher education or their richer experiences.<sup>297</sup> And certainly many senior intellectuals who converged on Tiananmen, hoping to change the course of Chinese history or advise those who would change it, did not want to hear any more of the denigration of Chinese tradition that many leading intellectuals, beginning with Lu Xun, had become accustomed to since the "New Culture" movement of the early twentieth century.<sup>298</sup> Nor did they welcome the reduction of hallowed "traditions" to whatever latest ideological claptrap the CCP was pushing.<sup>299</sup> In this they were emboldened, since even Deng Xiaoping had admitted that the party often had talked a "lot of bluster."<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Merle Goldman 2012. One wonders whether Wang Ruoshui's "In Defense of Humanism," *Wenhui bao* (Jan. 17, 1983), did not set off the train of events that led to Tiananmen. Certainly Wang was blamed for seeing humanism as the only remedy for the socialist alienation induced by the "total dictatorship" of the Maoist regime. He was stripped of his post at the head of *People's Daily* during Deng's "anti-spiritual pollution" campaign in the summer of 1983, and the fall of his patron Zhou Yang followed. Also relevant was the CCP's own "resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party (June 1981), which pronounced Mao "70% correct and 30% wrong."

<sup>296</sup> Accordingly some of us must begin any act of historical reconstruction by willing ourselves to be transported back into an earlier, not necessarily simpler era.

<sup>297</sup> Davies 2009: this "worrying" has not diminished much in today's era when some hold globalization to threaten China's "unique" identity.

<sup>298</sup> "New Culture" was usually enfolded into the May Fourth Movement of 1919, though it began earlier and ended later. Over time, Li Zehou would lavish praise on Lu Xun, to the puzzlement of some of his devotees.

<sup>299</sup> Cf. the Confucius Institutes, begun in 2004, where the worst-run units (roughly 530-550 in number, in 146 countries) reduce Chinese culture to food and calligraphy.

<sup>300</sup> Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). The author emphasizes the importance of ideology, defined as "a set of beliefs and dogmas that both

These facts and perceptions provided the backdrop for the events of late spring, 1989, which can be summarized as follows:

By May 13, by the *Washington Post's* account, "More than 1,000 university students began a hunger strike in the center of Beijing, ... pressing their demand for a dialogue with the government." Pronouncing their love for democracy "over rice," the hunger strikers noted, "We've already demonstrated and boycotted classes. This is our last resort." On the morning of 13 May, Yan Mingfu, then head of the Communist Party's United Front, called an emergency meeting of student leaders and intellectuals, including Liu Xiaobo, Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao (both in the Beijing Social and Economic Sciences Research Institute),<sup>301</sup> to whom Yan delivered two important announcements: first, that Gorbachev's planned visit to Tiananmen Square was cancelled, neatly nullifying most of the leverage the students had hoped to exert in their talks with government and CCP officials; and second, that "the government" was prepared to begin immediate dialogue with the student leaders. (As would become clear, the PRC leaders in command after June 4th were far angrier about worker participation in the Tiananmen protests, feeling that the proletariat protesters had betrayed the very hand that had fed them.)<sup>302</sup>

**On May 14**, twelve intellectuals issued "Our Urgent Appeal for the Current Situation." That group included Yan Jiaqi (political scientist), Bao Zunxin (philosopher), Li Honglin (liberal CCP theorist), Dai Qing (reporter with the *Guangming Daily*), Yu Haocheng (former director of the Mass Publishing House), Li Zehou (then research fellow at the Philosophy Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or CASS), Su Xiaokang (one of two script writers for

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construct general outlines—rather than a detailed blueprint—of a future political order, and define specific methods—though no explicit pathways—to achieve it" (p. 8).

<sup>301</sup> Both "black hands" were rounded up and sentenced to 13 years of hard labor, given that they were unrepentant supporters of the Tiananmen Square activities. For example, on the evening of May 23, Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao had summoned the leaders of the "Command Headquarters of Tiananmen Square", the "Beijing Students' Autonomous Federation", the "Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation", the "Beijing Citizens Autonomous Federation", the "Citizens Dare-to-Die Squad,, and other organizations together and founded the "Joint Liaison Group of All Circles in the Capital for the Patriotic Upholding of the Constitution." Their role in organizing protest was singled out as especially reprehensible, and these two became the "fall-guys" accused of conspiracy against the state, as the CCP could hardly claim that it, a revolutionary party, had suppressed a popular revolt. Both men were quietly released in the spring of 1994 on the grounds of "medical parole," apparently in a deal to secure a trade treaty with the US. But Chen, who did not leave the country, remained on strict house arrest until 2002. In August 2005, a journal with which the two men's former Institute unit was associated was shut down in less than two hours after it published the essay, "A Strong Nation Cannot Eat Its Own Children."

<sup>302</sup> The sentences for students were comparatively lenient.

the influential six-part documentary "River Elegy," and lecturer at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute), Wen Yuankai (professor at the China University of Science and Technology) and Liu Zaifu (director of the Literature Institute, under CASS).<sup>303</sup> Thanks largely to the good connections of the signatories, this Appeal was published in the *Guangming Daily* and broadcast on the China Central Television (CCTV).

Very much in the manner of Yan Mingfu, the group of "concerned intellectuals" published a nuanced rhetorical appeal carefully crafted to calm tempers. On the one hand, the senior intellectuals asked that the turmoil be declared a "patriotic democracy movement" and the illegal student organization be declared legal. On the other hand, the intellectuals asked the students to show enough faith in their institutions to leave the Square to deescalate the conflict. Additionally, in this Appeal the intellectuals offered to join the hunger strike themselves if the Tiananmen demands were not met by the CCP, and they followed up the public appeal with group and individual visits to the Square to address those gathered there. As the official statement on Tiananmen by the China News Agency later reported, "*These people* also went to Tiananmen Square many times to make speeches and agitate." "They slandered our government as 'an incompetent government,' saying that, through the fasting students, 'China's bright future can be envisioned'." On May 14–15, many of the students came to question the motives of the signers of the Appeal, alleging that they, as moderates, were being manipulated by the government.

Meanwhile, on the evening of May 14, Yan Mingfu kept his promise of the previous day and met with two student leaders; in his meeting with them, he declared the student meeting "patriotic," i.e., legal, but he also pleaded with the students, through their representatives, to leave the Square. Despite Yan's major concession, the planned meeting grew increasingly chaotic as it went on. Ultimately the students decided to refuse Yan's requests/demands, for many of them were mightily displeased once they learned that the meeting was not being broadcast, as they had expected. This returned the situation to a stalemate, even after Yan went to the Square himself, where he offered to be held "hostage" by the students, as testimony to his own good faith in negotiating. Yan then conveyed the student demands to Li Peng and pleaded with him to recognize the movement as "legal and patriotic," but Li refused. That

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<sup>303</sup> Cf. [https://issuu.com/ssrcitemsissues/docs/items\\_vol43\\_no3\\_1989](https://issuu.com/ssrcitemsissues/docs/items_vol43_no3_1989). See also Michel C. Oksenberg, Marc Lambert, Melanie Manion, *Beijing Spring 1989: Confrontation and Conflict: the basic documents*.

competing student factions expressed different views did not help the situation, nor were the competing factions within the CCP in one accord.

**By May 16**, a small group had formed the "Beijing Union of Intellectuals," asserting the group's right to style itself as working class and oppressed. The same day, members of the Union circulated the "16 May Declaration"<sup>304</sup> warning that "a promising China might be led into the abyss of real turmoil," if the government did not accept the political demands made by the people brave or foolhardy enough to join the Union. Nominally headed by Yan Jiaqi and Wu'erkaixi, the Union was promptly pronounced illegal by the CCP, which did not take kindly to such threats. But apparently, in response to the Declaration, Zhao Ziyang used the occasion of his meeting with Gorbachev on May 16 to leak the information that much the CCP was still under Deng Xiaoping's direction, although Deng had officially by then relinquished all power.<sup>305</sup> (Zhao would later pay dearly for this indiscretion.) And while some professional "China-Watchers" from the United States pronounced Tiananmen to be "more like a fairground than... a site of insurrection,"<sup>306</sup> within four days, Li Peng had imposed Martial Law in Beijing, with the blessings of Deng Xiaoping and Yang Shangkun.

Over the next two weeks, from May 20 to June 4, half-hearted attempts at dialogue collapsed so often, with some of the younger ones now suspicious of any compromise whatsoever, that many came to expect that there would likely be bloodshed in the streets sooner, rather than later. What had gone so wrong so quickly? It was quite simple: "Through the highly contagious symbolic act of taking to the streets, Chinese had declared that their days of waiting compliantly for the party to reform itself democratically from the top were over."<sup>307</sup> A great many of the CCP leaders were outraged, including Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping. Such hardliners, "in the face of a mounting challenge against the regime," persuaded colleagues that nothing lay ahead

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<sup>304</sup> See Stephen Field, "He shang and the plateau of ultrastability," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 23 (1991), 4-13. For the Beijing Union, see <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/c/china/china911.pdf> (p. 12).

<sup>305</sup> Summary of events derived from the state-sponsored PRC media accounts of events relating to Tiananmen, as found in Robert F. Ash, *China Quarterly* report on Tiananmen (fall, 1990), 933-34. Right at the beginning of the meeting, Zhao supposedly said: "Comrade Deng Xiaoping's helmsmanship is still needed for the most important issues. Since the 13th National Party Congress, we have always reported to Comrade Deng Xiaoping and asked for his advice while dealing with the most important issues." He also said that this was "the first time" that this "decision" by the Party of China had been disclosed to the public

<sup>306</sup> Orville Schell, cited in Sanjib Baruah, "Considerations on Democratic Resurgence," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24:49 (Dec. 1989), p. 2726.

<sup>307</sup> N5 in *ibid.*

except "chaos, disorder, and the impending defeat" of the status quo, if they did not act swiftly and decisively to suppress the movement.

Thankfully, the literature on authoritarian regimes increasingly distinguishes Leninist-style authoritarian regimes from non-Leninist-style regimes, with the latter seeking to co-opt elections and legislatures to credibly distribute spoils while neutralizing rivals.<sup>308</sup> By contrast, Leninist-style regimes often tend to sustain themselves by creating entirely new governmental units to supplant the previous system's units when distributing portfolios, so they may appear to be super-stable, that is, until they do not, and ideological splits, purges, and coups ensue. Mindful of the CCP's propensity for violence, Li Zehou responded to the unfolding events of Tiananmen, as did many older intellectuals, by urging the groups jostling for power at Tiananmen to disperse and hence to choose quiet steady "reform" over attention-grabbing heroics. Having witnessed the fury of the CCP in earlier eras, this group wanted to avoid bloodshed at all costs, especially among the ranks of future leaders for the country, and they were fearful lest the economic reforms be scaled back, if the hardliners came into sole control of the CCP. Looking back, it seems they were right to be frightened for and by some of the younger leaders at the Square, since some of the leaders, Chai Ling and Wu'erkaixi in particular, welcomed the spilling of revolutionary blood, just so long as it was not theirs. (For those who would like evidence for this assessment, Carma Hinton's "Gate of Heavenly Peace" includes footage from Chai Ling's tearful interview on the subject.)

In the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen, Li Zehou was put on house arrest for three years, until 1992, although he was never formally arraigned on one or more charges. During that time, Li was subjected to much "heavier self-criticism" than most others, as everyone at CASS knew. Because his "crimes" were purely his own influential ideas, Li was forbidden to publish new works or to have his previous work sold in the PRC and he was denied access to overseas travel and to "dangerous" Hong Kong publications. Eventually, as his prolonged confinement became an embarrassment to the government and an impediment in international fora, Li was granted permission to see some foreign visitors, when a very few others accused of amorphous crimes against the state (e.g., Wang Shuren and Zhang Xianyang) were not.<sup>309</sup> In 1992, Li asked for

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<sup>308</sup> See, e.g., the entire March 2016 of the *Journal of East Asian Studies*.

<sup>309</sup> However, in the January 1994 issue of *Yuandao*, a chastened Wang Shuren, in what looks upon first reading to have been a complete about-face, joined Han Demin to discuss the "cultural nihilism," and the thoroughgoing anti-traditionalism that had characterized China since the May Fourth movement. See "Wenhua de weiji, ronghe yu chongjian" [The Crisis of Culture, Reconciliation, and Reconstruction], *Yuandao* 1 (1994), 95-114; and Han Demin,

and got a visa to work in the United States. During the 1990s, he mainly lived in Boulder, Colorado, where he was invited to teach at Colorado College.<sup>310</sup> In 1994, he and Liu Zaifu repeated their earlier injunctions to "say farewell to revolution," to the mingled outrage and approbation of their readers in the Sinosphere. Evincing outrage, for instance, were members of the party faithful, including Fang Keli 方克立, then director of the Graduate Program of the Academy of Social Sciences. Fang questioned the "ideological intent" behind Li's argument against revolution, accusing it (quite illogically) of subverting Marxist ideology and the regime ruling in its name.<sup>311</sup>

"The ghost of Tiananmen stubbornly refuses to leave the mansion of Chinese politics," said Timothy Brook, an assertion that is both true and untrue, depending on one's perspective.<sup>312</sup> The 1990s in China witnessed an outpouring of secondary scholarship, whose chief aim was to rewrite or whitewash the facts. Leadership by public intellectuals, workers, or students in any movement (especially Tiananmen) constituted the gravest of threats to social order; only leadership by the CCP could be trusted to steer the economy to benefit the PRC, domestically or internationally. As one commentator wrote (safely outside the PRC, it must be said),<sup>313</sup>

In contrast to this [reinforced] memory of the Cultural Revolution, no collective memory has been formed about the crackdown of the 1989 pro-democracy movement because of the absence of a public forum for such a memory. The

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"Chuantong wenhua de weiji yu ershi shiji fanwenhua sichao" [The Crisis of Traditional Culture and Twentieth-century Anti-culture Trends], *Yuandao* 1 (1994), 311-40.

<sup>310</sup> See David Kelly and Anthony Reid, "Weathering a Political Winter: the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1990," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 24 (July 1990), 347-55, esp. p. 352.

<sup>311</sup> Summary of Ben Xu, p. 184, of Fang Keli 1995: 62. Fang, a New Confucian philosopher and a member of the CCP, is best known for theories that attempt to fuse Marxism and Confucian theories. Fang has been quick to attack anyone who expressed different views of the role of Marxist or Confucian theories, including Jiang Qing. See Li Minghui, "A Critique of Jiang Qing's 'Political Confucianism,'" *Confucianism: its roots and global significance* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102-112.

<sup>312</sup> Timothy Brook, "Review" of Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen: State Society Relations and the 1989 Student Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), *The China Quarterly* 180 (Dec. 2004), 1100.

<sup>313</sup> These remarks, aside from the bracketed material written by me, are the work of Ben Xu, who is, so far as I know, Professor of English, Saint Mary's College of California (Moraga). Zhang Yiwu, a leading postmodern-postcolonial theorist in China, positions new cultural conservatism as an audacious protest against many fallacies shared by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s. "Realistic" thinking is equated with support of the status quo. Ben Xu's sharp division between "realistic thinking" and "critical thinking" flies in the face of political realities, which always require more negotiation between unequal powers.

general silence about and lack of memory of the 1989 Tian'anmen incident [in the PRC] is symptomatic of the plight in which Chinese intellectuals find themselves [as self-designated memory-keepers].<sup>314</sup>

For many Chinese intellectuals, these new historical factors are compounded by their particular sense of marginalization and disillusion. Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s played an important role in social enlightenment, not because of a strong institutional base, but because of their symbolic role as victims and cultural and moral standard-bearers in an unfree society. Cultural pluralism in the nineties has undermined this role of intellectuals. The rise of popular culture and the commercializing and commodifying forces behind it [not to mention self-conscious CCP actions] have dramatically marginalized intellectuals and their elite culture.<sup>315</sup>

In their understandable confusion and humiliation, surprising numbers of the well-educated began to repeat vast conspiracy theories that just happened to dovetail neatly with the official CCP position alleging a vast Western conspiracy to contain China, led by the United States — or at least many began to flirt with or profess such theories. (I hesitate to dub members of this group "intellectuals" on the basis of their college degrees, since that term implies more confrontational stances to the nation-state.)<sup>316</sup> Post-Tiananmen, not a few of the well-educated preferred to think of themselves as cultural "philosophers" and "advisers" to CCP technocrats, whom they deigned to serve while ever so gradually introducing Enlightenment ideas at planning sessions.<sup>317</sup> "Enlightening" unwashed peasants struck many as too daunting and

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<sup>314</sup> Ben Xu, "Contesting Memory for Intellectual Self-Positioning: The 1990s' New Cultural Conservatism in China," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11:1 (Spring 1999), 157-92, esp. p. 166. The bracketed material has been added by me, as I believe it is implied.

<sup>315</sup> Ben Xu, "Contesting Memory," p. 159.

<sup>316</sup> Early modern European intellectuals during the Enlightenment opposed absolute monarchy and fixed dogmas and thus a "disenchantment" with the worlds they knew. One may consider the growth of Orientalism and self-Orientalism from this lens. Arif Dirlik (1997), 106, sees Orientalism as primarily culturalist, "a representation of societies in terms of essentialized cultural characteristics, more often than not enunciated in foundational texts.... Culturalism... nourishes off a de-socialized and de-historicized conceptualization of culture —as 'organically and internally coherent bound together by a [single, identifiable] spirit, a Geist'."

<sup>317</sup> The parallels with the Trump Whitehouse enablers is obvious to Americans.

effortful a task.<sup>318</sup> Li Zehou was born a poor peasant and he had made it, against the odds, to university. This may go some way to explaining why he dreamed of more thoroughgoing reforms, which he came to realize, post-Tiananmen, could only be achieved by better and more broad-ranging humanistic education in the PRC.

As it turned out, then, the 1990s acquired just as pronounced a character as the 1980s, with the New Cultural Conservatism of the nineties priding itself on spurring "a rational rejection" of the alleged radicalism, utopianism, and political romanticism of the 1980s' sociocultural criticism. Presenting itself as a sane return to "realistic thinking" after "pointless intellectual turmoil" and ceaseless bickering, the New Neocons reserved their most severe hostilities for the May Fourth movement and the 1980s' sociocultural criticism, because both disturbed acceptable neoliberal pictures of a homogenized, consumer-driven, and legitimized political "reality" wherein "Chinese tradition" could be saved for posterity. Two logically separable rhetorical aims therefore drove the 1990s proposals to "rehabilitate" Chinese tradition: (1) the contention that Chinese cultural traditions and innovations have all along been just as impressive as those ascribed to EuroAmerica, despite dismissive remarks by unthinking racists;<sup>319</sup> and (2) a willingness to pave the way for greater shows of loyalty to be rendered to the CCP and its helmsmen, on the grounds that they alone could put forward a leadership style with "Chinese characteristics."

Feeding this rhetoric since the 1990s have been diverse protean forms of Chinese exceptionalism, many of which pit what they called "localism" against what they construe to be Western-style "universalism." As understood by the Chinese themselves, such

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<sup>318</sup> An astute comment is registered by Mobo Gao in *Constructing China* (2018), p. 87, who notes that while individuals who belong to the Chinese political or intellectual elite may be unaware of their class interests, the elite group *as a collective* is aware of its class interests, when it conceptualizes China and the world. Early in the post-Mao era, members of this group realized they were "backward," and they blamed their own backwardness on the semi-colonial status of China and the short-circuiting of the May Fourth reform proposals by the warlords and Japanese; May Fourth reformers and their disciples then turned to nationalism to "save China" from invasions. This did not prevent them from condemning those less fortunate than they as unwashed slobs. That said, Gao's reasoning is somewhat flawed, in casting Noam Chomsky as a "dissident," instead of a highly prominent public intellectual who was allowed to speak and travel freely. (I know this because my mentor Henry Rosemont, Jr., remarked on this.)

<sup>319</sup> "Laozi never changed world history," is how one dismissive colleague at UC-Berkeley put it, to my utter astonishment, in a faculty meeting on curricular policy. On this unthinking Eurocentrism, see Goody, Jack. *The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

exceptionalism, being a nationalistic or "patriotic" discourse, can safely navigate the tricky sociopolitical contours of Chinese identity by stressing what is "good" and "great" about China, while castigating the Other as "barbarian" and "bent on destruction."<sup>320</sup> Like white supremacy in the United States, Chinese exceptionalism in the PRC is a powerful drug that dulls the heart and brain, and as an opiate manifesting Social Darwinist and Romantic conceits, it is the very opposite, to my mind, of what Marx and Li Zehou had wished for humanity: that large parts of it would manage to wriggle out from under the institutional props designed to foster an addiction to irreality.<sup>321</sup>

So, Li Zehou played starring roles in several successive "culture fevers" speaking to real conditions "in the world of men" and yet he was, oddly, never much of a joiner.<sup>322</sup> In a country full of intellectuals boasting in media events of how much they "worried about China," Li never portrayed himself as a worrier, yet he never quit worrying about unnecessary, even counter-productive bloodletting involving real people.<sup>323</sup> In fact, Li portrayed himself as a mild-mannered eccentric, a kind of happy-go-lucky guy content to live alone, so long as he is fortunate enough to be left alone by the powers-that-be.<sup>324</sup> But Li was mindful of the conditions of his release. By my tentative reading, Li struggled throughout his work to establish a "possibilist" or "in-between" position for Chinese tradition, one that took account of constraint and creativity in each and every era of Chinese history, not just his own.<sup>325</sup> Woei Lien Chong's

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<sup>320</sup> Here one cannot but think of Carl Schmitt's odious but powerful theory of friend-enemy.

<sup>321</sup> Benjamin Ho, "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China's rise, its goodness, and greatness," *Alternatives: local, global, political* 39:3 (2014), 164-76. Originally, Chinese exceptionalism was billed as a way to provide Chinese policymakers maximum traction and legitimacy when China confronts the outside world; it has now become far more wide-ranging than that. "Addiction to irreality" is a phrase by James Baldwin, used in Baldwin's 1965 debate with William F. Buckley at the Cambridge Union, to describe white Southerners, who felt the need to portray all Negroes as shiftless and undeserving of the vote.

<sup>322</sup> In a famous move, Li refused a gift from Jin Yong, the novelist, not wanting to be beholden to Jin, whose writings and generosity he admired. Jin Yong is far more than a "martial arts novelist," as he was a fine historian as well. The phrase "in the world of men" comes from the title of a *Zhuangzi* chapter.

<sup>323</sup> See above.

<sup>324</sup> This careful self-styling is on view in the Ownby-Interview, op. cit.

<sup>325</sup> As Mobo Gao, *Constructing China*, wrote, "To their understanding, the Chinese May Fourth Movement that was meant to enlighten the Chinese was hijacked by nationalism/communism that was perceived as necessary to save China from oblivion. To their shock they 'discovered' that there was nothing revolutionary about the 1949 Revolution, that there was nothing modern about the CCP and that the system dictated by Mao was feudal (p. 87) [bold added]... Li Zehou... developed the idea that there was tension between the narratives of Chinese nationalism

appraisal got Li's love of occupying the middle just right: "Li's own life work is a consistent attempt to define the role of human agency in such a way that the extremes of determinism and voluntarism can be avoided." (Shades of Butcher Ding!) Small wonder that Li's own comments on nearly every topic that touched on the political — and *everything* was political for Li — are nearly always downright difficult-to-parse, not coincidentally like many passages in Marx that conjure humanity's inchoate yearnings to live on and to live well.

Let us begin with one of Li's artful yet provocative moves: "On the issue of social order, in some sense, I am for authoritarianism."<sup>326</sup> Li certainly figured that *for the moment, in some sense*, authoritarianism would and possibly *should* be practiced, so as to speed modernization. Given the swift and brutal crackdown at Tiananmen, chances were that the CCP's leadership would prove to be invincible in the near future and perhaps for a very long time. In formulating a *new intellectual strategy*, Li evidently trusted that those who "appreciated his tone" would find the latest iteration of his positions to be continuous with the radical social and political criticism he had uttered in the 1980s.<sup>327</sup> Tactically, the overall message conveyed by Li's optimistic symposium speech "Where the Enlightenment is Heading" (delivered in the spring of 1989) seems not too dissimilar from the central exhortation outlined in *Farewell to Revolution*,<sup>328</sup> or in numerous publications after the 1990s. Li was subtly undercutting the polemics launched by the "Asian values" crowd and the "patriotic" faction of the CCP, who insisted that China's own distinctive political culture *was* unabashedly "autocratic" and that to be authentically Chinese therefore entailed unwavering obedience to one's superiors.<sup>329</sup> For

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and the Enlightenment and that the tragedy for China was that the Enlightenment had to give way to nationalism amid foreign invasion" (p. 88).

<sup>326</sup> Li Zehou and Wang Desheng, "Guanyu wenhua xianzhuang, daode chongjian de duihua" [Dialogue on the current cultural situation and moral reconstruction] [hereafter "Dialogue"], *Dongfang* 1974:5, 69-73; 1974:6, 85-87, esp. pp. 70-71.

<sup>327</sup> "Dialogue," op. cit.

<sup>328</sup> In 1995, Li Zehou co-authored with Liu Zaifu, a book entitled *Farewell to Revolution (Gaobie geming)*, which argued that China's history of twentieth-century revolutions had brought few positive results in history and much bloodshed. An unscientific poll of several friends who lived through Tiananmen in China found them agreeing that Li had remained radical-left in his thinking after he left the PRC, despite being labelled a "cultural conservative."

<sup>329</sup> Li denied, for example, that "obedience" to superiors was China's "destiny" or "fate." On the culture of obedience in the 1990s, see John Phillippe Béja, "The Rise of National-Confucianism," *China Perspectives* 2 (Nov/Dec. 1995), p. 8.

practiced readers schooled in political rhetoric, it is hard to miss Li's quiet disgust in his concurrent statement that he sincerely hoped authoritarian rule would not be *openly* defended in China, lest it be "regulated, legitimized, and turned into an obstacle to progress."<sup>330</sup>

In this crucial respect, then, Li differed from so many other public intellectuals of the 1990s who reversed course and came to hail authoritarianism as the ideal or only guarantor for rapid modernization. Surely the context of his remarks in the first half of the 1990s should be considered, when assessing his limited approval of the center's policies: when Li made that statement, most analysts, East or West, confidently predicted a further decentralization of power away from the CCP was bound to accompany further economic reforms, and not the rapid recentralization of power that has taken place under Xi Jinping since March 2013, which has only accelerated since March 2018.<sup>331</sup> The notion that rising GNP would inevitably promote a push for democratic reforms in China has proven to be disastrously wrong in every country where liberals relied on this scenario; in place after place, demagogues have appeared. In the PRC, many, if not most citizens deemed rapid gains in GDP and GNP ample justification to give their allegiance to the sovereign leadership of the CCP, for China's economic ascent and superpower status made Chinese citizens richer and proud.<sup>332</sup>

I would argue, along with Ci Jiwei, that the Chinese elite's wholehearted embrace of neoliberal doctrines and mentality, before but especially after Tiananmen<sup>333</sup> — a version of "trickle-down" Voodoo Reaganomics larded with references to "self-made men," massive consumption, and elite "meritocracy" — has promoted a ever-widening chasm between the ideals espoused by many "civilized" Chinese and the stark realities of "nasty and brutish" competition within Chinese society.<sup>334</sup> We can now say this: within ten years after Tiananmen, a number of surveys showed that citizens in the PRC were in sharp disagreement about the best path forward to take for themselves or their country, but nonetheless tended to agree on matters more closely tied to

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<sup>330</sup> See "Dialogue." Although Li Zehou tries to keep a distance from open defenders of neo-authoritarianism, he shares with them the same logic of sociopolitical development in China, says Ben Xu (p. 181n10).

<sup>331</sup> Xi has skillfully eliminated many major rivals through targeted "anti-corruption" campaigns, campaigns that accomplish a second end as well, in co-opting the "corruption" theme advanced at Tiananmen for different ends.

<sup>332</sup> Shen Tong, "Will China Be Democratic?" *Journal of World Affairs* 154:4 (1992), 139-54.

<sup>333</sup> Wang Hui cogently argued that the Tiananmen events made the embrace of Reaganomics all the more likely, for the CCP desperately sought to divert attention from political matters by deploying rampant consumer capitalism. Readers should recall that Ci shows similarly painful contradictions within US society.

<sup>334</sup> The phrase "nasty and brutish" comes from Hobbes.

culture.<sup>335</sup> My hunch is that this pattern would be even more pronounced today in the PRC, were it possible to conduct social scientific surveys there, but Sino-American antagonisms precludes that.<sup>336</sup>

### **On Chinese culture, a unique form of "humanized nature"**

Marx wrote, somewhat confusingly, "Labour is man's coming to be for himself."<sup>337</sup> This appears to say that all kinds of disciplined and purposeful labor, including material production and self-reflective thinking, shape the life form that each individual person evolves within society and history. As Marx conceives labor, it is more than a means and an end, an input and end product, in that it contains the potential to become a dynamic medium of "self-expression" and hence "self-affirmation."<sup>338</sup> This potential looms large, because human beings feel the need to play a part in the ordered environments in which they find themselves and to have others regard them with approbation. Thus how a person envisions herself is inevitably a function of what the person has done, what others have done in the person's social and cultural environment, and how those activities in the aggregate are viewed; thus every personal experience concurrently reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, a cultural and sociopolitical inheritance.

In today's increasingly globalized and tribalized world, more and more Chinese (with Li among them until his death) ask how they can best contribute to a better (i.e., more constructive) globalized future. In the internationalist spirit enjoined by Marx and other revolutionary leaders, they want not only to "save China" from its external foes and the domestic populations they believe would deter it from achieving its age-old ideals. They want to help "save the world," by contributing their own perspectives to the overly simplistic pictures that Western modernity (especially of the neoliberal sort) devises, popularizes, and imposes.<sup>339</sup> Wittgenstein framed the problem nicely when he remarked to Iris Murdoch, "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture."<sup>340</sup> For Wittgenstein, this farcical aspect of

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<sup>335</sup> Yali Peng, esp. p. 433.

<sup>336</sup> See above, for Yali Peng's definition of *minben* as benevolent rule, without the consult of those ruled.

<sup>337</sup> *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 203.

<sup>338</sup> Here I follow Plamenatz, pp. 118-19.

<sup>339</sup> See Jack Goody (below).

<sup>340</sup> Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics," in *Metaphysics and Mystics*, ed. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 75, which formulation borrows Wittgenstein's idea, in *Philosophical Investigations*, s. 309 ("a picture held us captive"). As Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb writes in *The Women Are Up to Something* (2022), p. 139, "Wittgenstein sought release from his captivity; his primary audience was himself. His aim was to escape his own imprisoning

human endeavors represented a grave rebuke of his early work on language as play, but for Li Zehou, this endless picturing and re-picturing by the thinking person was *the* quintessential human capacity most deserving of the praise.

From the Marxian perspective, any mode of production represents two things, at a minimum: a system of behavior and the effect(s) of earlier behaviors (what people had been doing before the product came into being).<sup>341</sup> When others own the means of production, the worker does not tend to feel that his or her labor is essentially or substantially *voluntary*. In capitalist societies — and all of us, East or West, global south or global north live in such societies — what matters most is the ability and opportunity to earn a living wage, with the result that the worker easily becomes little more than a mere commodity to him- or herself, to the employer, and to society-at-large. Therefore Marx and Li Zehou inspired by Marx, tried to conceive a world where two desiderata might be achieved: first, productive work would remain self-expressive and so in some imaginary ledger the "possession" of the person working, without having its value calculated in monetary terms extrinsic to the work; second, the productive self-expression need not diminish, let alone usurp the dignity of others. In the more "free and equal" future world Marx gestured toward, workers would ideally be able to perceive their own contributions in historical and contemporary contexts and thereby gain a deeper appreciation of their own intrinsic worth. If the hopeful visions came true, the safe enclaves promised the bourgeoisie in "civil society" would become accessible to all.<sup>342</sup> Equipped with a more fine-grained sense of their own predicaments as well as their predecessors' contributions, and operating from a place of relative safety, knowledge production could accelerate, and through that very process the producers would learn to exert some degree of control over themselves, their own time, and their own bodies. The greatest obstacle to this sunny future can be traced to one fact, unfortunately: in real time, equality and freedom, though often conflated — as during the Tiananmen protests, and in multiple manifestos, past and present — are "opposed to each other in their presupposition, content, and effect." As one theorist put it, "only equality

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pictures by making them explicit, breaking their sense of inevitability" (with strong Freudian echoes); he compared philosophical inquiry to shewing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle," i.e., an endeavor equally fraught for both the fly and his would-be savior.

<sup>341</sup> A good example of this insight: a worker works all day long with her time clocked on a piece of machinery invented and produced by others before her.

<sup>342</sup> Cropsy, p. 807: "Civil society represented for Marx an individualistic enclave in society, a realm of privacy" secured by bourgeois exploitation; thus civil society is "given its essential character by the self-assertiveness of men, one against the other, in the name of their inalienable, irreducible rights."

can be considered a democratic principle within politics," whereas "freedom as an internal political matter is the [liberal] principle of the [anti-government] bourgeois legal state."<sup>343</sup> Over the last century or so, so-called "populist" leaders have availed themselves of the disconnect to curtail personal freedoms in the name of some supposed greater equality, even in defiance of the majority will. This observation must be kept in mind when we see how unhelpful are the labels "conservative" and "radical," particularly when the phrase "with Chinese characteristics" is applied to "society," "culture," or "politics."

Strikingly, throughout its seventy-year history, the CCP has seen fit to impose a highly selective version of national "traditions" on Chinese citizens as "fates" handed down from on high.<sup>344</sup> By contrast, Li Zehou, in company with other masters who immersed themselves in longstanding Chinese textual and visual cultures, were confident that authentic insights were more likely to provide a firmer foundation for PRC citizens' true "self-expression" and "self-affirmation," if only because they resonated with past experiences.<sup>345</sup> Enter, stage right, Li Zehou's culturalism "with Chinese characteristics," which enraged scolds (usually those living safely outside the PRC) who accused Li of being an "essentialist" or an accommodationist sellout. One might profitably compare the substance of Li's arguments with those of Hannah Arendt, stage left. For Arendt never assumed in *The Human Condition* that there could be a single, fixed "human condition" that determines how we can, do, and should act politically,

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<sup>343</sup> Carl Schmitt, "Constitutional Theory" (1928, *Verfassungslehre*; 2008, for Duke University Press) continues: "As the word "freedom" one has to say that freedom in the sense of an individual freedom which is owed by nature to each particular human being is a liberal principle." "The faith in parliamentarianism, in government by discussion, belongs to the mental sphere of liberalism. It does not belong to democracy. Liberalism and democracy must be distinguished, if we are to understand that heterogeneous structure that we call modern mass democracy... The conflict that cannot be overcome is that between the consciousness of the liberal individual and democratic homogeneity" ("The Crisis of Parliamentarianism," *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*, 1926; trans. 1988 for MIT Press).

<sup>344</sup> Here I think of the so-called "Asian Values" discourse, which tells citizens that one-party rule and dictatorship constitute the inalterable destiny of the "Asian Way."

<sup>345</sup> As Paul d'Ambrosio has noted in his paper, even when Li was writing ostensibly about a Western thinker (e.g., Kant), he was using Kant as a prompt or provocation to elaborate his own ideas. I would argue, along with Daniel Boyarin's *Socrates and the Fat Rabbi*, that Plato's Socrates is similarly monologic (not dialogic), and this is what philosophical masters do (as opposed to what academics do, when they take philosophical masters as their subjects)..

since the human condition for each of us is "historically specific and profoundly variable," with new features of our modern predicaments unprecedented.<sup>346</sup>

So what, when all is said and done, is this culturalist understanding of "Chinese tradition" in Li's formulations, and how does Li frame it as a fund of resources that can stimulate modern Chinese to further refine their current modes of thinking and enliven their styles of living? (To be fair, Li never discounted the potential for a non-Chinese person to appreciate *some* of the insights offered by Chinese tradition, but equally he never assumed that all aspects of Chinese tradition would resonate equally well with those whose "sedimented selves" had not been schooled by "sedimented cultures" that stressed emotion, harmony, and aesthetics to the same degree or in the same way.)<sup>347</sup> For long decades, Li was certainly arguing against philosophers who would measure the worth of Chinese traditions by the standard of "universality... grounded in the very nature of human experience."<sup>348</sup> For Li (as for every other Chinese master I can think of), all experience is un-universal, profoundly subjective and yet simultaneously shaped by the culture, the daily rituals the culture urges, and the institutions it authorizes.<sup>349</sup> Immersion in a given culture means displaying at least its characteristic airs (*fengdu* 風度) while mulling over its characteristic perspectives and provocations. Style in Chinese tradition *is* content, not some superfluous refinement; the impressive bearing, decorum, and clothing marks the *junzi* as

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<sup>346</sup> Hans Sluga blog (<https://www.truthandpower.com/blog/>), accessed 9/9/2022. As Sluga's blog notes, Arendt avoided talk of "human nature" as that catchphrase was usually taken to identify "a determinate human essence from which we can deduce both how humans act and how they should act. For Arendt, there is, in fact, no human nature, in this precise sense. There are only the varied conditions in which we find ourselves."

<sup>347</sup> I have found this concept of "sedimentation" (*jidian* 積澱) to be very rich, and not unlike the historian's emphasis on "path dependence" in history. At the same time, one wonders about the degree to which most contemporary Chinese are steeped in Chinese tradition, indeed have time to ruminate upon aspects of tradition, given the many ruptures that have occurred over the past century (e.g., the occupation of territory by the Japanese, the adoption of *pinyin*, the swing to neoliberal Reaganomics).

Re the slogan usually translated as "harmony is higher than justice" (和諧高於正義), one wonders, given Li's appreciation of emotional tone, whether this is not better expressed, in some cases at least, as "aesthetic harmony is higher than correct meaning." "Justice" is not always Li's true subject, even when he is criticizing Michael Sandel, and Li's characterizations of it (always abstract) sound very much like Xunzi's characterizations of his rivals' extreme and unworkable views. In this Li parts company often with more "academic" philosophers.

<sup>348</sup> Slingerland, "Virtue Ethics, the 'Analects,' and the Problem of Commensurability," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29:1 (2001), 118. Three-years mourning makes a poor "proof" for Slingerland's claim, since this is not the way other cultures choose to honor their dead.

<sup>349</sup> In this, he reminds me of several feminist philosophers, including Simone Weil and Elizabeth Anscombe, but this way of thinking is profoundly historical, if less common among philosophers.

much as any course of objectively observable action he or she embarks upon in this "one world."<sup>350</sup> One's daily practice is to consist largely of conscious, pleasurable conformity to, instantiation of, and expansion upon a consideration of "actual emotions and the situation as the root" (情本體),<sup>351</sup> in the serene belief that such processes engender actions that enrich the experiences of all subscribers to the community, not the least the *junzi* as a person of cultivated patterns (*wen ren* 文人).<sup>352</sup> Again and again, Li turned to the idea that we must come to trust the "dynamic, constantly shifting relationships" between emotion and reason to shape our individual and collective endeavors, as a good swimmer works with the currents.<sup>353</sup> These are the "essentials" (*yao* 要) we have to work with as human beings, and they suffice to assure our flourishings.<sup>354</sup>

None of Li's writings makes much sense, unless one accepts on faith his firm belief in salvific sedimentation, in the redeeming qualities of special aesthetic experiences. It was Freud, of course, who persuaded us that our unconscious was sedimented, not in the sense of fixed and immovable layers weighing us down, but in the manner of a Roman cityscape, wherein a single structure could conceivably incorporate parts of walls from the 8th and early 4th c. centuries

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<sup>350</sup> "One world" refers to Li's insistence that there is no reality "out there" for us to strive to model; this is the world and we are part of it and to which we respond.

<sup>351</sup> Li 2016, "A Response to Michael Sandel and Other Matters," trans. Paul d'Ambrosio and Robert Carleo, *Philosophy East and West* 66:4 (Oct. 2016), 1082. Like all Li's neologisms, this one has troubled many a translator. I just do my best here, and prefer this to Li's own account of the phrase as "substance, root, body, final reality." By adding "situation" I seek to capture Li's emphasis on the interplay between *jing* 經 and *quan* 權, the constants and the contingencies, with this type of thought elaborated early on in the *Gongyang zhuan* and *Yijing*, not to mention many masterworks. I am aware that Li decided to translate the Chinese phrase as "emotion-as-substance," and equally aware that Li and his translators disagreed about the messages that would or would not be sent to Chinese vs. Western readers. Some of these disagreements are on view in Li/Cauvel.

<sup>352</sup> In rereading several interviews with Li, I was struck how much he admits this form of belief is his own version of a religious faith (e.g., in Li/Cauvel, p. 180). That there are no certainties, only potentials for pleasure, is a classical belief, to be found in the *Analects* and *Fayan* 法言, and in many other masterworks as well. And, after all, humanity has the capacity to expand the Dao (or is it *dao*?), by the *Analects* 15/29.

<sup>353</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Li Zehou had almost no points of intersection with Jin Guantao, who was heavily invested (along with the racist Hegel, as it happens) in the idea of a "super-stable" premodern Chinese society.<sup>353</sup>

<sup>354</sup> Cf. Richard Sennett's trilogy is devoted to *homo faber*, particularly in his *Together: the rituals, pleasures, and politics of cooperation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012).

BC, the 3rd and the 18th centuries AD.<sup>355</sup> For, by Freud's powerful account, in mental life nothing that has once been formed can truly perish. Everything is preserved and in eminently suitable circumstances, with no part occluded. The result is that all parts, in their several parts and in their interconnections, impress themselves favorably on the spirit of the person traveling through the streets of Rome. Li always claimed that he was introducing psychology into philosophy, and he was also one to seriously (and positively) ponder the main message of the *River Elegy* series: that wholesale Westernization was badly needed if China was to stride into the larger world.<sup>356</sup> It is crucial, then, that Li always pushes for an integrative view of past, present, and future, rather than a reductive view, believing endeavors that reproduce rich human experiences in all their stunning diversity to be more realistic, less false, and thus more likely to conduce to liberation and to joy. Unlike Gao Xinjian, the Nobel Prizewinner, Li never trafficks in either "total wisdom" or "total detachment," intent upon lofty transcendence. Instead, he argues for layered complexities, for Kant and for Confucius, for Tao Yuanming and for Du Fu, for peasants and for intellectuals — anything that ties people to *this world of*

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<sup>355</sup> See *Civilization and its Discontents*, for example. Freud thought he knew this story (much of it now discredited): the oldest Rome was the Roma Quadrata, a fenced settlement on the Palatine; next came the Septimontium phase, a federation of the settlements on the different hills; next, the city bounded by the Servian wall; and later still, the city which the Emperor Aurelian surrounded with his walls, which bore witness to all the transformations during the periods of the republic and the early Caesars. See the *Cambridge Ancient History*, VII (1928), on the founding of Rome, p. 7.

<sup>356</sup> This documentary series took the stand that China would have to dislodge the "ultra-stable" feudal mentality and free itself from its inward-looking tendencies as a large continental power, in order to adopt some central values associated with the West; in Li's mind (and Su Xiaokang's), specifically science and democracy, as key preconditions and indicators of modernity. Li was famous for his controversial slogan, "Western ideas for the body; Chinese culture for the application," turning the old Self-Strengtheners' *tiyong* slogan on its head. Western wasn't better, just better suited to the task at hand, which was to modernize quickly and thoroughly. Perhaps the best account of the six-part documentary appears in the *Bulletin of the Concerned Asian Scholars* 23L3 (1991), 1-33, which shows that the CCP, having let the documentary air on CCTV beginning in June 12, 1988, had doubts as to whether it exhibited "cultural nihilism" within the month, and so it was banned temporarily in July; nonetheless, probably due to the personal intervention by Zhao Ziyang, the series was rebroadcast in mid-August, and re-banned by September. The CCP took the documentary to be critical of the pace and depth of modernization efforts by the CCP.

*humanity's making*. Li did not claim to be a tragic hero; he presumed parity with his critics and his interpreters.<sup>357</sup>

Let me relate my own experience: When I first stumbled upon *Reading the Analects Today* (*Lunyu jindu*), I was in awe of the pains Li took to lay out the successive phases of commentarial readings for every line in the *Analects*, from the Han to the Song to Ming-Qing, before supplying his own readings, which sometimes admit to puzzlement or boredom. I was frankly thrilled by the detailed and indisputable proof attesting how discrete those layers of commentarial traditions actually were; I quickly honed in on the conceptual gaps between the Han and Song layers. My initial reaction, I now see, was a rather superficial understanding of Li's larger project, as what Li actually did, in *Lunyu jindu* and in other writings, was to demonstrate just *how many* Chinese pasts are available to readers of Chinese today, and indeed to anyone who cares to contemplate China and its modern fate.<sup>358</sup> China is ample beauty incarnate, by this view, which hardly precludes the claims of other ethnic or national groups to locate beauty elsewhere.<sup>359</sup> To be quickened and enlivened by humanity does not require genius, thank god, only a love of beauty.

With aesthetics, Li kept insisting that he did not agree with Nietzsche's vision of aesthetics, which was "to study the creation of art from the perspective of the will to power," i.e., from a male point of view, rather than from the female "appreciation of art," which Nietzsche characterized as passive.<sup>360</sup> Li wanted to understand "beauty itself" and set aside Nietzsche's ugly binary to focus on humanity's basic need to create or appreciate great art when making things, an idea he got from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Fine Art*. Li's preoccupation with needy humanity ultimately led him to denounce any idea that beauty and a sense of beauty are somehow "mechanical reflections" of the material conditions, and not a human compulsion to a specific mode of thinking and practice (in Li's memorable phrase, the "self-creative" and

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<sup>357</sup> For this reason, I am unconvinced by part of his friend Liu Zaifu's account of "Li Zehou's Aesthetics: moving on after Kant, Marx, and Confucianism," as Liu seems to merge his own self with that of Li Zehou in dubious ways.

<sup>358</sup> I have never been sure China is "Confucian China" but I am certain that thinking about the questions raised by Confucius, among others, never stopped.

<sup>359</sup> To my mind, Li Zehou's sense of China recalls Sima Qian's sense of China, as both approach the "spiritual" or "sacred" character of the human. See Nylan, "Sima Qian: A True Historian?" *Early China* 24 (1998) [published 2000]), 1-44.

<sup>360</sup> Liu Zaifu, "Li Zehou's Aesthetics," citing Li on Nietzsche, p. 255.

co-creative will to humanize nature) that is both prior to the material conditions of artists and viewers and shaped by those material conditions.

### Several radical moves

Feuerbach and Marx had agreed that man's "peculiar capacities are developed only in intercourse with his fellow human beings" and "a belief in God is nothing but the belief in human dignity."<sup>361</sup> This Li felt, too, and strongly. But to facilitate his own project, Li dramatically reversed three items of hallowed Chinese tradition. The first radical reversal was to the *tiyong* 體用 dichotomy proposed by the "Self-strengtheners" of late Qing, and specifically Zhang Zhidong (d. 1909): "Chinese Learning for the substance, Western learning for the application." In Li's view, the slogan ought to read instead, "Western learning for the substance, and Chinese for the application." By this, Li means that science and democracy must be prime concerns in the development of the PRC as a modern nation-state. Ostensibly Li's slogan echoed Deng's famous formula "socialism with Chinese characteristics," but in fact Li aimed to complicate or undercut Deng's slogan, by arguing that modernization, technocratic and cultural, will only prosper in China when the old autocratic powerholders with their anti-scientific and anti-democratic policies are removed from office.<sup>362</sup>

True, there are passages in which Li's traditionalism makes him sound as if he belongs firmly in the camp of the *guocui* 國粹/ *guoxue* 國學 figures from Wang Guowei on. I would push back against this label, for Li felt, deep in his gut, that if China had survived the depredations by the Japanese and Great Powers, it would surely survive its own autocrats, though it might not survive a second Cultural Revolution. Li is little bothered by the fact that the historical origins of science and democracy are claimed by EuroAmerican boosters; all he cares is that today's Chinese hasten to avail themselves of the benefits of science and democracy.<sup>363</sup> Besides,

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<sup>361</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (Kegan Paul, 1893), p. 32.

<sup>362</sup> There is some indication that Xi Jinping wants to follow Mao in "guiding" the scientific and technology sectors; much remains to be seen, however. See Li Yuan, writing August 28, "Xi Jinping's Vision for Tech Self-reliance Runs into Reality": "Since 2019, the phrase 'new whole nation system' has also started appearing in Mr. Xi's speeches and party documents in the context of conquering key tech challenges. The system is a relic from China's planned-economy period between the 1950s and 1970s, during which the government mobilized and allocated resources through administrative command. The new whole nation system will combine the benefits of government command and market forces, many party theorists have argued."

<sup>363</sup> Here Li in his pragmatism could not differ more from the anthropologist Jack Goody, who tried to counter every clever move made in the shell game arranged by EuroAmericans, to no avail, so far as I can see. Jack Goody,

Li knows his world history well enough to know that (a) those claims look ever-more laughable under close examination, and so may "wither away" like the old-time religions, with a little luck;<sup>364</sup> and (b) each EuroAmerican country that embraced science and democracy did so in its own unique way. Therefore, despite fearmongering by CCP apparatchiks, there is no reason why China cannot develop its own distinctive style of Enlightenment science and democracy, he proudly proclaims, without incurring the taint of "spiritual pollution." However, Li cautions, in the China Century the world's second largest economy needs to reframe its task going forward: its present urgent task is no longer to "save" itself from extinction or dismemberment by enemy powers, contrary to the CCP propaganda. It now needs to consider how best to satisfy its own citizenry in enlivening ways.

To that end, Li Zehou happily upends an article of faith first articulated by Marx but greatly elaborated by vulgar Marxists: that all local culture (including local religion) is but the superstructure (i.e., pale reflection generated), whereas the dominant form of material production determines the precise structural forms taken by all human activities. Li finds this structure/super-structure distinction unhelpful, if not dumb. As we have seen, for Li subjective and objective conditions co-exist in dynamic interplay, driven by a "foundational" human will that is a necessity for human beings: to humanize nature and imbue ordinary life with beauty. In Li's narrative, beauty thrills us because it instantiates, conveys, and satisfies that need for the creator of a piece of art and equally for whoever appreciates the creation; creator and connoisseur are then bound inextricably together by invisible ties. Humanity itself (and indeed beauty itself) has primacy, and secondary is any specific form that material production assumes in any given era. Li's ambition was boundless: he wanted to give humanity the tools to create and enjoy beauty, with history itself one of those tools.<sup>365</sup> This was no "academic argument"

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*The Theft of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). The official summary of the book begins this way: The 'theft of history' ... refers to the take-over of history by the west. That is, the past is conceptualized and presented according to what happened on the provincial scale of Europe, often western Europe, and then imposed upon the rest of the world."

<sup>364</sup> See the forthcoming essay on majority rule, to be published in a new *Cambridge History* devoted to democracy before AD 1350; the essay has been co-authored by Nylan and Shoufu Yin (University of British Columbia).

<sup>365</sup> Marx and Li emphasized tools, a great deal more than rationality: "Marx says, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, that "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist." See Marx's 2nd observation. The manmade environment is the expression of the society and its institutions demonstrate that people are capable of independence and intelligence.

for Li. To advance his ideas, he had to go against the two reigning experts in the field of aesthetics in the PRC, Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986) and Cai Yi 蔡仪 (1906–1992).

Li Zehou was also one of the most prominent theorists to insist that nationalist agendas and Enlightenment values were diametrically opposed, even if the latter sometimes had to yield to the former during indisputable crises over individual or national survival. At the same time, Li resolutely opposed post-modernists who decried the many entanglements of the Enlightenment ideals with colonial hegemonic projects. As briefly mentioned above, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the May Fourth Incident in 1989, Peking University organized a symposium, and many people gave speeches, which was the occasion for Li's analysis of "Where the Enlightenment is Heading." (Note that this symposium took place as the occupation of Tiananmen Square by students and workers was building force.) In his rousing talk, Li optimistically proclaimed national salvation and enlightenment to be "mutually reinforcing" goals, but Li then promptly had the temerity to decouple "national salvation" from "leadership by the CCP," even as he refused to equate all May Fourth-type struggles for greater autonomy with "the best interests" of "the people." (He had discerned the split between freedom and equality, it seems.) A man of passion himself, Li said he preferred rational to passionate changes, and above all, he condemned violence (as very likely to beget more violence), to the intense irritation of a great many people in the audience.<sup>366</sup>

Plainly, no one can predict when the country will move from "developing" to "developed" nation-state status, but intellectuals who once sympathized with protests against authoritarian leadership have grown increasingly comfortable moving in neo-authoritarian circles,<sup>367</sup> particularly when Confucian learning is to be reduced to a managerial technique for industrial firms on the Singaporean model, supplemented by a method for conflict resolution aiming to "avoid the problems afflicting the West."<sup>368</sup> (So far as I know, there are no Peace and Conflict Studies programs or institutes in the PRC, to address China's international role.) With this

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<sup>366</sup> This is reported in "Interview with Li Zehou, *Southern People Weekly*, 'Li Zehou Thanks his Readers in his Final Interview,' introduced by translated by David Ownby ([www.readingthechinadream.com/interview-with-li-zehou.html](http://www.readingthechinadream.com/interview-with-li-zehou.html)) [hereafter Ownby-Interview].

<sup>367</sup> Rong Jian is one example.

<sup>368</sup> Incidentally, this model didn't work so well when it tried to introduce Confucian learning as a religion in Singapore. See Jean-Phillipe Béja, "The Rise of National Confucianism" *China Perspectives* 2 (Nov.-Dec, 1992), 6-11.

limited "management" Confucianism, the teachings of Confucius, the social critic and reformer, have been repackaged for political purposes so that they boil down to:

obedience to one's superiors in the hierarchy (chiefly parents and bosses),  
devotion to the nation-state, here equated with the CCP, and  
protection of the family by the family, rather than by work units or the state.

I imagine that Li would counter this portrait of unthinking deference by an enthusiastic endorsement of a statement Hannah Arendt made in her *The Human Condition*:

What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears....  
What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think about what we are doing.

The most compelling aspects of Li's vast output are his wide-ranging erudition, his willingness to query longstanding commonplaces, and his propensity to juxtapose categories that others box themselves in with.<sup>369</sup> I am sure we would be falsifying our sense of the man, if we tried to apply the usual labels to Li Zehou in the usual academic fashion, casting him as cultural conservative or as anti-radical,<sup>370</sup> and equally sure that we would be unwise to "read into" Li's own psycho-social formation any one set of enthusiasms. By my reading, Li's intention was always to probe the current consensus understanding (parts of which he shared and parts of which he questioned) in ways that would engage his Chinese audiences, especially.<sup>371</sup> In stark contrast to Liu Xiaobo, the *enfant terrible*, Li did not adhere to any one thinker or any one line (and especially not that of Nietzsche, with his nihilist superman).

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<sup>369</sup> His treatment of Chinese classical thought keeps taking thinkers out of their assigned boxes and showing them off to our delectation.

<sup>370</sup> As Ben Xu did in an intemperate essay, written from the safety of the United States. See Xu's "Contesting Memory for Intellectual Self-Positioning: The 1990s' New Cultural Conservatism in China," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11:1 (Spring 1999), 157-92.

<sup>371</sup> Lin Tongqi and Li Minghua, "Marxism and 'The Spiritual' in China Since Mao," PEW 44:4 (Oct. 1994), 609-46, esp. p. 633, for example, read an awful lot into Li's enthusiasm for Lu Xun, and try to tie this to Heidegger. I believe this is over-reading. Cf. Yu Hua on Lu Xun, to whom a whole chapter is devoted in Yu's *Ten Words*. There is no older citizen of the PRC who cannot sometimes be thinking of Lu Xun.

There is no higher complement a historian can pay another person than to say that he made the past come alive, thanks to his profound interest in dynamism and vitality (both ineffably beautiful for him). I often disagreed with the specifics in Li's analyses, for example, in the generalizations that appear in his sweeping *Path of Beauty*, but on fairly nitpicking grounds. Were he alive today, I am fairly certain that Li would enjoy a book I am relishing, *The Women Are Up to Something*, on the history of Oxford philosophers before, during, and after World War II. Li was always up to something. To date, I have not yet read in Li's work an explicit exhortation to "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom," but I feel confident that this is where Li wanted all of us (with or without Chinese characteristics) to get to, and once we get there, he would press us to ask ourselves, early and often, "What Is to Be Done."

### **Conclusion**

Right now, elite intellectuals in the PRC, within and outside the party, are divided over four key issues (all unresolved since before Tiananmen):

- (1) the degree to which property should be privatized and regulated (the two being different);
- (2) the degree to which the "dictatorship" that supposedly will transition to perfect or near-perfect socialism should be led by elites claiming to represent a meritocracy; by "the people" (an amorphous term, which occasionally includes virtual illiterates); or by the CCP as "stewards" of the people's "fate";
- (3) the degree to which some form of "constitutionalism" (meaning, rule by law at a minimum, plus freedom of speech, of association, and of the press, and seldom any form of representative democracy at a maximum) should be instituted in the near future as a stabilizing mechanism;<sup>372</sup> and
- (4) whether the highest form of patriotism is exhibited by infinite "patience" with current CCP policies or by "loyal opposition" to the CCP, publicly expressed.

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<sup>372</sup> NB: nearly every group highlights the "stabilizing role" their policy proposals will have on Chinese society as a whole. Needless to say, not all these contradictory claims can be true.

Evidently, questions about tactics, theories, fallback positions, and the precise nature of actual, ever-shifting political realities bedevil conversations in China as much as they do in the United States and Europe.

There is little doubt that of the various mainstream positions on these contentious issues, Li Zehou's positions post-Tiananmen edged at points very close to those articulated by the "New Left" writers (as represented by such figures as Han Yuhai 韓毓海), since Li never abjured Marxism or quit taking it seriously. And yet other passages in Li's post-Tiananmen writing have Li sounding a great deal more like the sunny "democratic socialists" who push Kant and the neo-Kantian Rawls and invest human beings with godlike capacities.<sup>373</sup> None of this should astonish, since Li had no choice but to study Marx in his early years and, as a young academic, during his "sent down" stint in the countryside, he availed himself of the opportunity to write a major study of Kant, which study gave him some of the language he needed to articulate many of his own ideas.<sup>374</sup> Once we circumvent the labels, not so much separates the well-read Marxist from the liberal democrat, it seems, aside from the latter's insistence on the individual's sovereign legal rights *against* the state, since both agree on the basic requirements and opportunities needed to ensure human dignity for all citizens in this one world.<sup>375</sup>

Still, it's a reminder of how pervasive modern academic silos are that many China-watchers who self-identify as leftists, including the highly learned David Ownby, were not well-acquainted with Li's corpus, before Li was forced upon their attention by one event or another. Here is Ownby writing shortly after Li had died,

I was struck by the fact that certain expressions, concepts, and turns of phrase that are widely used in the Chinese intellectual world, and that had heretofore struck me as simply idiosyncratic, were in fact Li Zehou's inventions, and thus stand as monuments to the impact he has had over several generations of Chinese thinkers.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> For example, in the Li/Cauvel interview, Li calls humanity "divine."

<sup>374</sup> Mulvad 2018 outlines four positions, one of which (the "stalwart statist" from the "commanding heights") would plainly not be favored by Li Zehou, in 1989 or afterwards.

<sup>375</sup> The key disputes is about how Marxist "parties and groups claiming to speak for the proletariat" should behave in practice.

<sup>376</sup> Ownby-Interview.

Nonetheless, for nearly the whole time I've been reading Li, by fits and starts I confess, I've condescended to him for the "incoherence" of his positions, his irregular alternation between such extremist language as "self-created" and "creative" with his subtle "in-between" positions. After embarking on this more focused study trying to integrate several of Li's works, in order to bring to light more of the man, I readily admit that it is I who failed to understand. For it is abundantly clear that Li was always defying gravity by keeping a number of balls up in the air, and consistency and coherence were likely very far down on his "to-do" list.<sup>377</sup> Perhaps Li was only consistent in his insistence on the richness and diversity of the human experience; he never stopped opposing the "homogenous, monotonous, and boring."<sup>378</sup>

I have been struck by Li's remark in an interview,

There is an old Chinese saying: "There are no good people at a struggle session 批判会, and no bad people at a memorial service."<sup>379</sup>

So rather than intoning the predictable encomiums, let us honor Li's restless inventiveness by being more open to the artfulness he wielded in his more outrageous formulas, as in his exquisitely in-between positions, with due acknowledgments to Zhuangzi. Let us be neither callous critics nor simpering sycophants, the one spawning the other. Li demonstrated the sedimented layers of multiple Chinese traditions and, by implication, every other world tradition now threatened with ossification or obliteration by preening powerholders with their polished New Speak. He, like Marx, was in effect urging us to transcend our petty identity politics and self-important academic lines, these being dangerous distractions from the more pressing human tasks at hand. That there may still be time to do this, East and West, is amazing.

This conference, much delayed because of the pandemic, was originally planned when Li Zehou was alive and doubtless plotting his next moves. I have wondered whether Li's priorities would have been traveling in any specific direction, were he alive today, given the spectacular acceleration in inequality in the PRC in recent years and the degree of environmental collapse.<sup>380</sup> Li's adult life, as suggested earlier, was preoccupied, in one way or another, with two political questions: How much should the "dictatorship of the proletariat" be guided by a

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<sup>377</sup> He repeatedly said as much in his several interviews.

<sup>378</sup> Ownby-Interview.

<sup>379</sup> Ownby-Interview.

<sup>380</sup> On this, see Richard Smith, "Guanxi and the Game of Thrones: wealth, property, and insecurity in a lawless system," chap. 6, in *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse* (Pluto Press, 2020), 126-53.

small vanguard group of intellectuals, and how rapidly should democratic tools be expanded to larger groups of students, workers, and farmers? Both questions, it need hardly be said, presumed that power should not be concentrated in CCP hands to the degree that it was in 1989, let alone today.<sup>381</sup>

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to put down on paper these preliminary thoughts. As is obvious, I am not well-versed in Marx, nor in Li Zehou's entire body of work, nor do I have more than an armchair acquaintance with the events of 1989, whose shock waves continue to reverberate in East Asia and beyond, whatever the official silence in the PRC. Accordingly, I welcome comments and criticisms from those who know a great deal more, particularly as I was left with more puzzles than ever when I sat down to think and write.

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<sup>381</sup> Recall that the educational levels among factory workers and students were far closer in 1989 than today, given the vagaries of the Cultural Revolution policies on education (basic and advanced).

**Gregor PAUL:**

**Philosophy of Beauty as an Ethics of Freedom: From Kant to Li Zehou.  
Perspectives of an attractive line of thought**

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**Experience of beauty as harmonious freedom**

It seems to be a dream or an ideal of mankind: that what you like to do is just that what you ought to do, and that what you ought to do is what you like to do. This would entail that to act voluntarily is acting morally, and acting morally is acting voluntarily. It is an idea of freedom in which self-determination and moral or social demands accord with each other. As self-determination (and thus an act of positive freedom) it is a kind of self-assertion and self-realization, something enjoyable, free of oppression, fear, abasement and humiliation. One does not feel forced by moral obligations to do something one actually does not like to do. Thus, it is also an instance of negative freedom. For example, one cares for one's elder parents because one wants to care for them, and not because one feels obliged to follow a juridical law or a moral principle, perhaps even grudgingly. As an act in accord with moral and social demands, it is also socially agreeable and thus a further source of positive emotion. Such idea of freedom differs from both, willfulness which means to just follow one's inclinations and desires, perhaps even recklessly, and moral action in the Kantian sense according to which an action should be called 'moral' only then if it is exclusively determined by (respect for) the moral law ("Achtung für das moralische Gesetz"). Kant admits of course that an action motivated by individual wishes and desires could be *in accord* with moral rules. However, since he is convinced that the aesthetic and the moral are different, and that one ought to follow the moral law even if one does not like to abide by it, he insists on clear terminological distinctions.

Now, since ancient times, it has been known that individual desires often contradict moral or social requirements. As a matter of consequence, the question arose how to reconcile them with each other. In China, the *Book of Xunzi* advanced the theory that abidance by *li* 禮, i.e., beautiful and becoming socially accepted conventions, can achieve such reconciliation (Paul 1990). For instance, to bury one's parents in a beautifully ordered way, accompanied by beautiful music may prevent one from being overwhelmed by one's grief, as well as from completely neglecting

one's parents' burial. Xunzi<sup>382</sup> was aware that certain desires as e.g. sexual desire cannot be completely suppressed, while certain other emotions one actually lacks as e.g. grief about the death of one's parents ought to be brought about and displayed, and that, in both cases, *li*, because of its beautifying force, would enable a satisfying behavior, harmonizing individual inclinations with moral demands.<sup>383</sup>

In Germany, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) put forward the notion of aesthetic education. He conceived of beauty as freedom in appearance, i.e. in what one sees, and accordingly asked for behaving in a beautiful way. He also maintained that full, or perfect, humaneness requires that man, in his thinking and behavior, brings into play in a harmonious way all his faculties. In his approach, Schiller was strongly influenced by Kant's notions of a free and harmonious play of the faculties of mind (as constitutive of beauty) and beauty as a symbol of morality ("Sittlichkeit"), i.e. moral freedom. Schiller's idea of aesthetic education in turn influenced Herbert Marcuse's (1898–1979) theory of political freedom. Marcuse emphasized the importance of, and right to, positive emotion as means against what he regarded as anti-sensual

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<sup>382</sup> By using the name „Xunzi,“ I always refer to the *Book of Xunzi*.

<sup>383</sup> On pages 17–19 in his *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (2010), Li emphasizes the obligatory character of *li* as ritual rules of individual and social behavior. This differs from Xunzi's notion of *li* as beautiful and beautifying conventions, though it may do justice to earlier notions of *li*. When explicitly dealing with the *Xunzi*, Li seems to agree with my interpretation (in Paul 1990). For instance, on p. 65 Li states that Xunzi demanded “that internal desire be satisfied within the constraints of external ritual, or conversely, that external ritual be implemented through the satisfaction of internal desire.” On p. 66, Li quotes from the *Xunzi*-chapter *Li lun* that “artifice” “beautifies” “nature.” In his *The Path of Beauty* (1992: 92), he even maintains that the *Xunzi* emphasizes that art effectuates and molds [welcome] everyday emotions. That is to say that, if people lack feelings they should have, as e.g. grieving the death of one's parents, music and ceremonies can, and should bring about, such feelings, and if people are in danger to injure themselves because of their grief, music and ceremony can, and should, palliate their pain. Contrary to Li (2010: 17–19), I do not sharply distinguish between the goals and workings of *li* on the one hand and those of music on the other. In the *Xunzi*, *li* is not merely (or simply) an “external, coercive institution,” while music is an “internal[ly]” founded “guide.” Again, Li's distinction probably refers to earlier versions of *li*. In his reconstructions of the *Lunyu* and the *Xunzi* (1992: 90–94), Li points out that these earlier versions were refined by (re-)constructing and justifying them as rooted in (or based on) universal human feelings (as e.g. the parent-child-relationship) and (somewhat different from the earlier versions) requirements of social harmony (instead of mere order and peace). Admittedly, one could argue that the *Lunyu* and the *Xunzi* explicitly distinguish between *li* and music. The *Xunzi* even has separate essays on *li* (*Li lun*) and music (*Yue lun*). However, this does not change the fact that, on a general level, music is part or kind of *li*. Rituals usually comprised musical performances.

and capitalist oppression, and as an instrument to ultimately create a society whose people enjoy their lives in a harmonious way.

In short, freedom in Schiller's sense, similar to conceiving of beauty as a symbol of morality, is a kind of pleasant self-determination (autonomy) which is free of heteronomy and automatically meets social and moral requirements. The pleasure one finds in autonomy and morality is both motive (cause) and result (effect) of freedom. It is a continuous incentive for maintaining and cultivating one's freedom. In the following, I call this kind of freedom "harmonious freedom", in contrast to willfulness and moral freedom as e.g. mere subjugation under the categorical imperative.

### **The notion of harmonious freedom in Li Zehou**

Kant's notion of beauty as a symbol of morality and Schiller's notion of beauty as freedom in appearance refer to what Kant called "dependent beauty." Whereas pure beauty (in Kantian sense) is an object of uninterested pleasure, namely, not determined by anything else than the pleasure felt in contemplating the beautiful object, the pleasure in dependent beauty is not confined to mere contemplation, but also characterized by an awareness that this pleasure complies with one's moral interest (namely respect for the moral law). Also important, Kant sharply distinguishes the emotion determined by such factors as sexual attraction, prestige, possession (e.g. of an artwork), economic advantages, and power from the pleasure(s) felt in the experience of morally dependent beauty. He conceives of the former kind of emotion as pleasures connected with and manifesting "inclinations" and "leanings" ("Neigungen") that, in contrast to inter-subjective moral interest, may differ from individual to individual. As may become clear from the following, Kant's and Schiller's notion of beauty is a narrower one than the notion that Li Zehou's employs in his theory of beauty as an ethics of freedom. Because of his understanding of the sense of beauty as a function of historical development,<sup>384</sup> Li offers a

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<sup>384</sup> In his "Preface to the English Edition" of his book on Kant (2018: viii), Li emphasizes that he "begin[s] where Darwin ends." That is to say that he deals with the evolutionary developed biological species homo sapiens without, however, devoting much space to discussing man's biological evolution. Like Marx (in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*), Li in his approach sharply distinguishes between human beings and lower animals, and like Marx he bases this distinction mainly on what he regards as the most significant (qualitative) difference between man and lower animals: the difference in the kind and degree of freedom. One could perhaps rightly state that according to Li and Marx humans are no 'true' or 'real' humans if they are not free. And as I argue below, both are convinced that experience of beauty (as they understand beauty) is a necessary characteristic of human freedom.

wide range of ‘definitions’ of beauty. He even then conceives of an experience of beauty as an experience of freedom if this experience is determined by individual inclinations that do not violate moral and social norms (whereas Kant would have classified such experience as a lack of moral autonomy). In other words, Li includes in his notion of beauty what Kant, in §3 of his *Critique of Judgment*, excluded as ‘merely’ sensually “agreeable,” as for instance the “*graceful, lovely, delightful, gladdening, etc.*” (Kant 1987: 206) Thus, Li’s concept of harmonious freedom is less speculative, more ‘realistic,’ and less ‘rigorous’ than Kant’s, much in keeping with Li’s general criticism of Kant’s apriorism.<sup>385</sup>

The concept of freedom as an aesthetic and ethic notion is one of the central themes in Li Zehou’s philosophy. In what follows, I try to show that, according to Li, following perceptions of beauty in one’s thought and behavior ultimately enables one realizing harmonious freedom. Li characterizes beauty variously as grounded in “nature’s humanization” (Li 2018: 329), as “unity of truth and good manifest as free sensible form in objective nature” (Li 2018: 324, 331), as expression of “the ideal pursued in the humanization of nature” (Li 2018: 333), as “the humanization of external nature or a humanized nature,” and, most significant, as “practice of freedom” (Li and Cauvel 2006: 57), and (as Li says in several works) “a form of freedom” (*ziyou de xingshi* 自由的形式, see for instance Röscher 2018: 65, and 99), stating that “aesthetic experience or sense of beauty ... is, in essence, a pleasant sense of freedom” (Li in Li and Cauvel 2006: 93). For instance, humanization of nature by way of beautification turns eating into dining and sexual desire into love (Li 2018: 329; cf. also 2010: 41; most clearly, however, in Li and Cauvel: 2006: 90–94).<sup>386</sup> Li arrives at these characteristics by interpreting Kant and Schiller, and accepting, or implying in his characterizations their basic notions. However, in my opinion, these notions are easier to understand than Li’s characterizations. As indicated, Kant conceives of beauty as harmonization of emotions and moral obligations. He points out that perceptions of beauty consist of a harmony, and an oscillation, between concepts

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<sup>385</sup> I differ from Serenjelj’s otherwise (as I see it) adequate and instructive account of Li’s notion of (as Serenjelj calls it) “aesthetic experience as a pleasant sense of freedom” (2020: 83–84) in that I do not think that, for Li, “[all] aesthetic experience is “disinterested.” Li’s various definitions of aesthetic experience and beauty may be somewhat confusing, but either Li uses “disinterested” in quite a different way than Kant did or he contradicts himself when maintaining that aesthetic experience as a sense of freedom could be “disinterested.” Not only according to Kant’s rather specific (technical and narrow) notion of being “uninterested,” but also according to common usage of the words “to be interested,” humans are certainly interested in freedom. A “pleasant sense of freedom” (in Li’s sense) includes awareness of satisfied interests.

<sup>386</sup> Bruya 2003: 138, emphasizes this feature of Li’s characterization of beauty.

and sensual intuitions that do not lead, or enable, objective or conceptual knowledge. Kant also speaks of a free play between imagination and understanding. Schiller then introduced his notion of “play impulse,” and, as Li *approvingly quotes* (in Li and Cauvel 2006: 94), maintained that men are “really free ... only ... when [they] are playing.” Now, since according to Kant, concepts comprise both theoretical and practical notions, the latter being related to the idea of morality or moral freedom, it follows that Kant’s notion of beauty is in harmony with notions of truth and moral freedom without, however, being such notions.

Li’s repeated characterization of beauty as “unity of truth and good” could thus be misleading. It seems to contradict Li’s agreement with Kant’s notion of perception of beauty as a state and process of reflection that, a free play of the faculties of mind, is in harmony with respective knowledge *without constituting, or being, conceptual knowledge*. If “truth” is understood as (a function of) conceptual knowledge and “good” as something moral or useful, then it is difficult to see how their “unification” could constitute “beauty.” Though Li, in the given context, probably does not mean to refer to “truth” as *conceptual* truth, the meaning of the expression “unity of truth and good” does not become much clearer, if one takes into account his definitions of truth as “the law of nature” and goodness as “the fundamental character of human beings” (Li and Cauvel 2006: 63). Applying these definitions, he maintains that it is the merge of “the purposiveness of the subjective goodness and the regularity of objective truth” that constitutes beauty (*ibid.*). Perhaps “purposiveness of the subjective goodness” could be interpreted as what meets one’s individual aims and longings, and “*regularity* of objective truth” as concurrence with the *general* conditions of theoretical and practical knowledge, namely harmony between concepts and (sensual) imaginations, without constituting or being ‘fixed’ in form of conceptual knowledge. Rafal Banka (2022: 119–123), in chapters entitled “Beauty as Practice of Freedom,” and “Beauty’s Persistence through Time ...,” explains Li’s notion of “beauty as a form of freedom” by understanding the unification of truth and goodness as a kind of human practice that accords (harmonizes) with the laws of nature by man’s spontaneously realizing his individual (or subjective) intentions or goals.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> I confess that I find Li’s terminology a bit confusing. Usually, natural laws are understood as principles that simply cannot be violated. If taken in this sense, human practice *cannot but* follow natural laws. (In Li and Cauvel 2006: 57, Li defines “freedom” as a power that enables “overcoming [!] natural necessity,” something simply impossible, if taken literally.) Are the individual intentions and goals (the “purposiveness”) referred to above “good” ones, *because they are, as such*, in harmony with the ‘natural,’ or because they *lead* to harmony? Could it not be possible that one can commit a crime in accordance with natural laws, perhaps even spontaneously? Is Li

In comparison to Li's notion of "unity of truth and good," Li's characterizations of beauty as "practice of freedom" and "a form of freedom" as (experience of) free play of the faculties of mind are easier to understand. As pointed out, they are indebted to Kant's and Schiller's definitions, and they are also empirically sound. The first one looks like a rephrasing of Schiller's "beauty is freedom in appearance," invoking all of Schiller's arguments in favor of this definition.

Li Zehou rightly rejects Kant's apriorism and what he calls Kant's and Schiller's idealism (Li and Cauvel 2006: 39; Li 2018: 306, 324, 325). Instead, he argues in favor of an empirical and historical approach of a Marxist kind.<sup>388</sup> Though I do not want to quarrel about words, calling Kant and Schiller idealists is misleading. Ontological idealism means that abstract (if not even formless) ideas are the basis of everything existing. Moral idealism usually means propagating an unrealizable utopia. Neither Kant nor Schiller can be blamed of holding such positions. Schiller even explicitly emphasized that fulfilment of basic needs is a condition

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ontologizing ethics, thus committing a 'natural fallacy?' Perhaps I simply fail to adequately understand the expression "unity of truth and good."

<sup>388</sup> As indicated above, Li argues that Kant's apriorism is no basis for creating a better world. Moreover, Li rightly holds that Kant's "transcendentalism" is untenable. Li criticizes Kant mainly from materialist and historical points of view. In my opinion, one could show that Kant's transcendental deductions are logically invalid since they beg the question(s).

Li's calls his philosophy of how humans gained (and gain) the features that are necessary conditions for their abilities to arrive at intersubjective epistemological, moral, and even aesthetical, judgements a theory of sedimentation and subjectality. Roughly spoken, he holds that the history of man should be conceived of as a development that consisted of certain 'steps' ("sediments") with each step resulting in and constituting a stage of humankind that becomes the basis for developing a further stage. Thereby, each stage remains 'efficient.' (This approach reminds of the Hegelian concept of "aufgehoben.") As I should like to put it: the whole development has the character of a (possibly endless) 'piling' of layers. Of course, according to Li's approach, the development of each stage needs thousands or even hundred thousands of years. As to Li's notion of subjectality, it refers to man as a biological, material, historical, and social being (man as socially interconnected rather than isolated individual being). What is important to understand is that this subjectality results from *social* sedimentation, or, in other words, because of its being *collectively* constituted, is found (and efficient) in every human being. Except for Li's own publications, see Jana Röscher's and Rafal Banka's explanation (2020, and 2022). Banka's book led me to add this note though—regarding the aims of my article—Li's theory of sedimentation and subjectality is important only insofar as it replaces Kant's apriorism—which (to repeat) Li views as untenable. In my opinion, what is relevant remains, namely the concept (or approach) of a kind of 'transcendental epistemology' ("Transzendentalphilosophie," though, to repeat, not as apriorism). Van den Stock (2020) adequately speaks of a "historicization of the transcendental." See also Li 2018: v.

for realizing morality. Thus Li Zehou perhaps contradicts himself when he rightly maintains that instead of speaking of the “sequence—Kant—[the idealist] Hegel—Marx”, “the sequence should be: Kant—Schiller—Marx” (Li and Cauvel 2006: 39; Li 2018: 330). However, as indicated, Li is right as far as he, by using the term “idealism,” wants to refer to what he regards as *deficiencies* in Kant’s notion of a free play of the faculties of mind and Schiller’s conceptions of beauty as means of aesthetic education. He also rightly criticizes Kant’s mystical speculations about something super-natural and even divine as sources of beauty (2018: 320). Such conceptions are no bases for a theory of how to realize harmonious freedom. Kant only vaguely touched on this issue. For Kant, morality was simply more important than anything aesthetical, or, more precisely, for him moral freedom and fulfillment of moral duty was more important than harmonious freedom, though he did *not reject* harmonious freedom, as is clear from his comments on Schiller’s essay “Gracefulness and Dignity” in his “Religion in the Boundaries of mere Reason.”<sup>389</sup>

In sum, though Li is well aware that Kant and Schiller put forward a theory of a unity of moral, aesthetical, and cognitive experience, he is convinced that their theory cannot explain how to *actually realize* harmonious freedom. Since he attributes this deficiency to a lack of empiricalness, concreteness, and, so-to-say, down-to-earthness, he argues for a Marxist solution of the problem (2018: 332–335, especially p. 333). Inspired by Marx, Li sees the most important method of solution in turning estranging and boring labor that serves as a means of mere subsistence, into pleasant and pleasing creativity, i.e.—according to Li—something beautiful (2018: 332). In this way, Li’s philosophy of beauty becomes an ethics of freedom.

### **Li’s philosophy of humanization as historical development toward harmonious freedom by developing labor into work that accords with the laws of beauty**

By calling Li’s philosophy of beauty an ethics of freedom, I conceive of it, as I said in the beginning, as a philosophy that tries to solve the question of how to realize a practice in which what one likes to do is also what one ought to do, and what one ought to do is also what one likes to do. Li does not express his notion of beautiful practice as harmonious freedom in such words. In my opinion, however, his own characterization of beauty and beautiful practice imply,

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Cf.

[https://books.google.de/books?id=hDRrfrtpJv4C&lpg=PP1&dq=Religion+within+the+Boundaries+of+Mere+Reason&pg=PP1&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.de/books?id=hDRrfrtpJv4C&lpg=PP1&dq=Religion+within+the+Boundaries+of+Mere+Reason&pg=PP1&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false), pp. 48 – 49. Accessed 2020-02-29.

and even can be summed up, in such a way.<sup>390</sup> If I should be mistaken, I would argue that Li's philosophy of beauty as an ethics of freedom would need to be supplemented by the notion of harmonious freedom. But I do not think that I am wrong. Otherwise Li would have fallen back even behind the abstract notions of free play of the faculties of mind advanced by Kant and Schiller, which would be rarely compatible with his explicitly high estimation of Kant's "idea of the interplay or free play of the imagination and understanding" (Li in Li and Cauvel 2006: 174) and Schiller's notion of the "play impulse" (op. cit.: 94). Li's agreement with Kant may even go further than he himself believes. But what is at issue is of course not an adequate Kant-interpretation, but an adequate account of our experience of beauty.

As indicated, Li maintains that the experience of "beauty as a form of freedom" is a feature of the humanization of nature which, as process of civilization and refinement, amounts to a humanization of mankind (in the sense of realizing an ideal of mankind). As mentioned above, Li illustrates his notion of beautiful practice as humanization of nature by the example of turning merely satisfying one's sexual desire into courting and love (2018: 329), i.e., something what one likes and even needs to do into something a cultivated or moral person ought to do.<sup>391</sup> Following Marx in criticizing torturous and exploiting labor, he demands that labor should be turned into work acceptable and even pleasing for laborers. Taking into account Marx's respective explanations quoted and agreed with by Li—and also quoted by Bruya (2003)—this implies, first, that laborers should be able to freely choose their labor, and, second, that they

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<sup>390</sup> My interpretation can also be supported by such phrases as e.g. "unification [harmonization]... of the sensuous [emotional, pleasing and pleasant] and the rational [moral]" (Li 2010: 6); unification "of the senses and reason" [faculties of desire and morality] (2010: 10), and similar passages (2010: 34; 2018: 332–335). Also, in *Response to Sandel* (2016), Li repeatedly uses the expression "emotio-rational structure" (see for instance p. 1071) in the sense of "integration of emotion and reason," which implies a kind of holistic connection of feelings, knowledge, and moral and social consciousness.

In his history of *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (2010: 31, cf. also pp. 23, and 37), Li also maintains that even Chinese governments "perennially" [!] strived for the "unity or identity of the beautiful and the good," i.e. something both beautiful and good, apparently welcoming this pursuit. In taking over Kant's and Schiller's general notions of creation, perception, and manifestation of beauty as a free play of the faculties of mind that harmonizes emotions and moral obligations, Li (e.g. 1979) does not only simply argue for a unity of the beautiful and the good, but rather for individual harmonious freedom.

According to Li (2010: 20), "harmony is by necessity ... unification" and the resultant "unity" no identity but "mutual complementarity" "of opposing elements" and "intermingling of plural elements" and thus harmony. In other words, Li, in the quoted passages, uses the term "unification" in the sense of "harmonization."

could do this in following ideas of beauty. Li does not conceive of Marx's observation that "man produces in accordance with the laws of beauty," (cf. Li 2018: 326–335, especially p. 333; see also Li in Li and Cauvel 2006: 179) as a merely descriptive statement, but also as a norm, namely that man, as a free and autonomous individual, should be able to produce in such a way, thus avoiding estrangement. Put into a nutshell, this would indeed mean that labor should be a kind of pleasant and pleasing creativity, doing or producing something beautiful.<sup>392</sup> Li seems to believe that such goal could indeed be realized. In his view the history of man, and especially the continuous invention and use of new tools, could make possible such achievement (2018: 323–324). Of course, in such contexts "beauty" should be understood in a broad sense, including what is simply pleasant or enjoyable, i.e. sensually "agreeable" ("angenehm" as Kant put it in §3 of *Critique of Judgment*) without, however, violating social or moral norms. This applies not only to Marx's but, as indicated, also to Li's notion of beauty.

### **Human interest in beauty, and labor as a production according to laws of beauty, furthered by the development and use of tools**

If work that in a significant way involves aesthetic design counts as "labor," as e.g. architectural planning and production of beautiful cloth, embroidery, animal sculptures, and production of instruments employed in social or religious practice, then we have examples of pleasing and/or pleasant creativity for more than 40.000 years. However, there may always exist labor that

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<sup>392</sup> The German original reads "der Mensch formiert daher [!] auch nach den Gesetzen der Schönheit". (E.g., <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Marx,+Karl/%C3%96konomisch-philosophische+Manuskripte+aus+dem+Jahre+1844/%5B1.+Manuskript%5D/Die+entfremdete+Arbeit>, accessed 2020–03–06.) An English translation runs "hence [!], man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty." (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/index.htm> .)

As the context shows, this proposition is an explanation of Marx's statement that humans beings can "truly produce" only if they are "free from physical needs." Since according to Marx, "truth" in production is a necessary condition for unestranged labor, and since labor must not involve estrangement, one of its requirements is that it ought to be carried out following the laws of beauty. Or, closer to Marx's own wording, since man, other than other animals, only then truly produces if free from basic needs, and free from estrangement, man "therefore [!] also formats according to laws of beauty." This implies, if he would not format according to these laws, he would not "truly" act as a free person.

In my opinion, an adequate paraphrase of the relevant passages in Marx could be that man only then realizes himself as a human being, if man acts as a free being. Since this entails that his practice follows rules of beauty, his ways of production, and especially labor, which are the main means of self-realization as a free being, should accord with the these rules. Clearly, Li's philosophy that humanization as a realization of freedom in the form of beauty is (mainly) achieved by "the making and use of tools," is indebted to such a position.

simply cannot be beautified, or turned into a kind of aesthetic creativity. Think, for instance, of waste disposal, though one could perhaps imagine that even waste disposal could be turned into completely computerized and remotely controlled labor that, as such, enables satisfying creativity on part of those who carry it out. Li (in Li and Cauvel 2006: 179) also mentions the possibility to replace “dehumanizing labor” by using robots. Actually, development of what Nick Bostrom (<https://nickbostrom.com/>) calls “superintelligent” systems, and progress in the construction of artificial intelligence systems may open up promising (though also sometimes questionable) possibilities. They could indeed be tools in Li’s sense. However, there may be problems in enabling everybody to use technologically highly developed tools. Instead, or in addition, incentives such as high wages and public esteem of waste disposal as socially valuable work could turn it into a job people would like to do, though, because of their interest in profit (additional expenses), employers may oppose turning every kind of labor into something attractive. Also, employing more and more new tools—e.g. utilizing sophisticated technics—could lead to shortage of labor which would ultimately demand shortening labor time, again making labor more costly for employers. All this is to say that even if, *in principle*, every kind of labor could be turned into creative or at least attractive practice, certain ethical, social and political problems would remain. In other words, in spite of the force and efficiency of ideas of beauty (in a wide sense of the term), realization of harmonious freedom would have to overcome many hindrances, and this even applies to the task of making labor at least something attractive. Li seems to be aware of all such problems. Probably his insistence on Marxist solutions also results from this awareness.

If I understand Marx and Li correctly, the goal of harmonious freedom is, among others, based on three presuppositions: (i) first, that man, in a significant way, indeed wants, tries, and achieves, to act following laws of beauty, (ii) second, that this means striving for harmonious freedom, and, (iii) third, that man ultimately can (almost) completely carry through this pursuit. Of course, historically and systematically, it were above all others Kant and Schiller who paved the way for conceiving that harmonious freedom ought to be an ideal of humanity.

As to first and second points, it is bewildering that even in such ancient societies as Egypt and the (Chinese) Liangzhu jade culture, man already produced extremely beautiful objects. One wonders why people spent so much time with such production while conditions of living often were rather precarious. Of course, these were strictly stratified societies, and beautiful objects were signs of power and prestige. But was there any need to display power and prestige by beautiful symbols? Everybody could know about the power of the mighty by experiencing their

political oppression. The logical implication is that beauty was understood as a symbol of power and prestige that furthered its awareness and recognizability. The crucial point I have in mind, can be addressed by the following questions. Why did the ancient Egyptians—and many other people—attribute beauty to their revered gods? And to their evil gods and demons ugliness? Think of respective Egypt sculptures, and Akhenaton’s “Hymns to Aton.” They must indeed have regarded beauty as a symbol of goodness, as much as did the ancient Chinese in their understanding of pine trees or chrysanthemums (e.g. Li 2018: 300, 308–309, 311–312), or as most Germans do in their notion of the dove of peace. Apparently, humans have always been interested in what may be called optimizing or perfecting what they regard as valuable, thus connecting the good with the beautiful (or even truth), or the other way round, connecting the beautiful with the good. Kant and Schiller captured this universal everyday phenomenon in their philosophical notions of beauty as a symbol of morality. Note, however, that in ancient societies beauty as a sign of power and/or goodness referred to supernatural beings and mighty or otherwise privileged people only. Important in our connection, these people could already also conceive of beauty as a *symbol of (their) individual freedom*, though this may have been a kind of freedom that often amounted to willfulness.<sup>393</sup> In contrast, the ancient worlds lacked conditions that would have enabled ordinary people to conceive of beauty not only as a symbol of the good or goodness (e.g. of their gods) or (though probably rarely) of the mighty, but also of freedom. This is to say (much in keeping with Li’s “historicization of the transcendental”)<sup>394</sup> that certain political and social developments were necessary preconditions for enabling a sense of beauty that became an experience of harmonious freedom.

Differing from Li’s view who somehow distances himself from calling Paleolithic cave paintings “beautiful” (2010: 3) and who thinks “the primitive paintings of the Stone Age in Spain and France are the relics of shamanistic rituals” (Li in Li/Cauvel 2006: 177), I hold that the Paleolithic painters, in executing their drawings, were rather guided by rules of beauty than by non-aesthetical interests or demands (though Li would perhaps have argued that shamanistic dances have *also* been a kind of *aesthetic* occurrences or events). First of all, in their paintings they followed and so-to-say interpreted, structures of the cave walls, thus striving for a kind of

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<sup>393</sup> Rarely to harmonious freedom. However, the mighty could have taken into account certain social requirements when deciding to fulfill with their decisions also the interests and desires of the people close to them, as for instance family members, friends, and political advisors. In such way privileged persons could probably experience harmonious freedom.

<sup>394</sup> Cf. note 7 above.

pleasing harmony, though perhaps only unconsciously. More important, there is simply no need to believe that it were mainly non-aesthetic factors that determined the aesthetic qualities of their creations. The painters could have drawn identifiable pictures of animals which would have been sufficient for e.g. performing respective hunting rites. There is an anecdote in the *Zhuangzi* emphasizing that, in sculpturing, following the form and inherent patterns of the raw material creates beauty. The method of interpreting natural pre-formation as a means to create something beautiful has been used in different cultures for ten-thousands of years, and has been employed even in Surrealism. It is still common in e.g. Chinese and European folk arts. (cf. Paul 2022: 216–235). It is important to recognize that the category of beauty is logically independent from such categories as truth, goodness, power, or prestige, and so on, for it is this independence that gives significance to the thesis that man produces following laws of beauty.<sup>395</sup> To drastically illustrate this independence, even truth could be displeasing, and a humane man could be ugly.

As just said, Li also seems to hold that beauty originally originated in connection with, or dependence on, shamanist or religious beliefs. Again, beauty may have been used as an additional factor to enhance the value of something religious. As I argue above, this has been the case in ancient Egypt. One may also ask the general question why the aesthetical reason for creating something beautiful, namely pleasure, could not have been a sufficient one for the early production of beauty. All over Africa, 300.000 years old drilled or pierced-through shells have been found that probably served early humans as parts of pendants. I find it difficult to understand them as signs of something like a religious or shamanistic belief. Also, as became known in 2018, the Neanderthals produced cave paintings and other art objects already 60.000

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<sup>395</sup> Regarding the beauty of ancient objects of utility, Li (1992: 46) seems to be of a different opinion.

In my opinion, the distinctions between truth, goodness, and beauty, or—more generally—the cognitive, moral, and aesthetical, strongly indicate a conviction that these are logically independent values or categories. On the other hand, the equally/similarly significant attempts to somehow combine or ‘unify’ them testify to an interest to construct an optimum of what is existentially relevant for human beings. In different ways, the philosophies of Plato, Confucius, Kant, and even Marx (to mention only a few) are examples of both intentions. As to Confucius, he spoke of “the bounds of [what is morally or socially] right,” and “the desires of the heart” [something aesthetical], though “right” in “bounds of right” seems to also include a kind of “truth.” The *Lunyu* also explicitly referred to correctness in the usage of names (implying a kind of truth), humaneness (in mourning the death of one’s parents), [*ren* 仁, Yang Huo 陽貨], and pleasure (in greeting friends or enjoying poetry), though Confucius certainly advocated a behavior that, at the same time, accorded with truth and morality and was, moreover, a pleasure. As to Marx, he spoke of “true,” “unestranged,” and beautiful production, and asked for a “production according to the laws of beauty” that, *as such production*, would also be “true” and “unestranged.”

years ago. Could it not be possible that these facts attest to a human universal interest in beauty, or the pleasure caused by beauty, as such?

Thus, examples from the history of mankind abound proving that man indeed, in a significant way, and as far as political and social conditions permitted, in his practice followed rules of beauty. Regarding this point, I need not go further.<sup>396</sup> This brings me back to point three (iii), i.e., the question of progress in the beautification of labor and the realization of harmonious freedom, implicitly already also touched on. Already 5000 years ago, the production of certain tools such as bifaces developed into aesthetical creation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, industrial design is often an example of aesthetic creativity. Industrial design thus documents progress in such endeavor. Also, in highly industrialized and digitalized democracies as e.g. the Scandinavian states, there are many individuals who—of course aware of their privileges—call their labor a hobby, usually implying by this that they like, and enjoy, doing the work they are obliged to do, though this may not reflect any beautification (in a Kantian or otherwise narrow sense of the term) but what may be called (“merely”) pleasant and pleasurable work.<sup>397</sup> To confess, asked about my profession, or about what work I have to do, I often reply that I am in the privileged position of being able to just pursue a hobby, namely my philosophical interests. In medieval German, “Arbeit” (“arebeit”), “labor,” meant “hardship”. Though this is no longer the case in 21<sup>st</sup> century German, I am used to say that I am lucky not to be obliged to do any “Arbeit,” but permitted to pursue my hobbies—as I have done and keep doing, taking what I do nevertheless “seriously.”

In sum, even if, in many cases, beautification of labor and harmonious freedom cannot be realized, there are probably almost always possibilities to make labor sufficiently attractive—

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<sup>396</sup> For a more comprehensive and detailed discussion of the history and systematic significance of beauty, and especially beautiful art (with particular reference to China), see Paul 2022: 165–235.

<sup>397</sup> To explain again: According to Kant, pure beauty is an object of uninterested pleasure, whereas beauty as a symbol of morality is an object of dependent pleasure. As Li emphasizes, Kant attributed higher value to such dependent pleasure than to uninterested pleasure. Since pursuing a hobby involves interest, namely ideas of putting something into existence, and is not mere imagination or contemplation of something, a hobby could at best be realization of dependent beauty. Hobbies as e.g. playing cards, mountain climbing, or car racing that nobody is obliged to pursue, however, are simply motivated by individual inclinations, and not even examples of dependent beauty (in the Kantian sense). Even teachers who make their living by teaching, and are at the same time obliged to teach, and who like and enjoy teaching, may thereby not follow laws of beauty but simply individual inclinations. Thus, what in many cases could be achieved at best would be something pleasant and pleasurable that does not violate social and moral obligations.

to aestheticize the obligatory—so that people like to do it without acting willfully or violating social or moral norms. The Confucian ideal of “following the desires of the heart without overstepping the bounds of right,” formulated in *Analects* 2.4, and several times approvingly quoted by Li (see especially Li 2010: 48), expresses the same goal. (It provokes, however, the unwanted association that this is not so difficult when you are old, for the saying is attributed to 70-years-old Confucius.) Invention and improvement of tools as especially robots and artificial intelligence systems, a welcome job environment, including a pleasant social climate, high wages, reduction of working hours, public recognition, etc. (cf. again Li in Li/Cauvel 2006: 179) may indeed aestheticize labor so far that laborers enjoy at least a feeling of subjective freedom.

By almost limiting my discussions about Li Zehou’s ideas of realizing freedom to reflecting about his deliberations on the development and usage of ‘tools,’ I do not want to disregard the role that everyday behavior, especially the way humans communicate with each other, and aesthetic appreciation of the arts and natural beauty can, and should, play. Li leaves no doubt that he basically agrees with the *Lunyu*’s high estimation of what could be called a pleasant and pleasing (and as such ordered) way of social intercourse, as well as of the impact especially music and poetry could have in causing a subjective pleasure that harmonizes with social requirements. In other words, showing individual liking for e.g. poetry and music could be accompanied by a conscious awareness (or justified expectation) of common appreciation. An interesting question would be how labor, everyday behavior (especially social intercourse), and appreciation of literature, poetry, visual arts, and music could be integrated in a way that they mutually enforce each other in enabling feelings of freedom. The notion of “life-work-balance” indicates aspects of such goal. Also, the mentioned attempts to not only create useful but thereby also beautiful tools, points to a kind of integration.

## **Conclusion**

If my analyses and explanations are correct, then Li Zehou uses a wider notion of beauty than Kant and even Schiller did. Li’s various definitions of beauty show that his notion does not merely include pure beauty and dependent beauty as a symbol of morality but also what Kant called the “agreeable” (“das Angenehme”), i.e.—to quote again—“*what the senses like in sensation,*” namely e.g. what is “*graceful, lovely, delightful, gladdening, etc.*” However, Li argues that what he describes as experience of beauty nevertheless is, in principle, not only a pleasure reflecting individual likings, but also the fulfillment of social demands. Taken in this sense, beautification of labor means making labor so aesthetically attractive that people like

doing their work. Since they like to do it they abide by social or moral norms without feeling forced to do so but experience their labor as an act of freedom. Harmonious freedom would thus consist in what the saying attributed to Confucius describes as “following the desires of the heart without overstepping the bounds of right.” As explained above, beautification of labor, understood in Li’s sense, though in many cases difficult, is—as Li argues—at least realizable to a far degree by further development of respective “tools.” Labor that cannot be ‘beautified’ could completely be taken over by such “tools” as robots, superintelligent and artificial intelligence systems.

The persuasiveness of Li’s philosophy of beauty as an ethics of freedom results from his careful and comprehensive analyses and explanations of the history of human emotionality and rationality (including morality). Because of its empiricalness, concreteness, and—so-to-say—‘down-to-earthness,’ informed by insights provided by Marxism, and Confucianism (*Lunyu* and *Xunzi*), Li’s philosophy is more convincing and ‘realistic’ than especially Kant’s apriorism and ‘rigorism.’ Kantian influence is nevertheless significant. Like Kant, Li is convinced that there exist conditions of the possibility of intersubjective human experience (though they are historically developed), and his reconstructions of the Kantian notion of the experience of beauty as a free play of the faculties of mind and as a symbol of morality—a notion, Li greatly admires—are based on this conviction.

There remains the sobering fact that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there exist states in no condition to offer many of their people perspectives of realizing such a thing as harmonious freedom. Even worse, there are ongoing wars. Solutions of such problems must not be left to politics only. Marx was right in demanding that philosophy ought to be concerned with the issue of how to make the world a better place, and Li Zehou shares this conviction. Bruya (2003: 140) adequately calls Li’s aesthetics a political one. In this respect, Li’s philosophy is similar to Marcuse’s, though less radical. Indeed, philosophy of beauty must not remain an isolated field of lofty illusions. Thus, in spite of all the difficulties mentioned, to reflect about beautification as a possible means of freedom remains an important endeavor.

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**Karl-Heinz POHL:**

**Chinese Aesthetics and Li Zehou's Major Contributions: "The Path of Beauty" (美的历程) and "The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition" (华夏美学)**

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Li Zehou's *The Path of Beauty* (美的历程) was first published in 1981. An English translation by Gong Lizeng appeared 1988 (richly illustrated) and 1994 (with few illustrations).<sup>398</sup> The book had a tremendous impact in China, leading to an "aesthetics craze" (*meixue re* 美学热). In the following, the main characteristics of the book shall be introduced and compared with *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (华夏美学) which appeared seven years later in 1988.

In a 1983 lecture "On Some Problems of a Chinese History of Aesthetics," Li Zehou described *The Path of Beauty* as a "broad" history of aesthetics.<sup>399</sup> First, he points out some fundamental problems of a Chinese history of aesthetics: Compared to the West, aesthetics in China has no tradition of a systematic discipline. The word for "aesthetics" (literally: study of beauty – *meixue*) is a neologism that is often still misunderstood. (Li begins a recent article "What is Aesthetics" with the anecdote that, when asked the question in the title of the article, someone replied helplessly that it was probably an abbreviation for "American" [*meiguo* – literally: beautiful land] "studies" [*xuewen*]).<sup>400</sup> The category of "beauty" was not discussed by the literati and artists in traditional China. The "beautiful" had no special value in art, rather the "balanced"

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<sup>398</sup> Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty. A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, Gong Lizeng transl., Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1988; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. The references in the following are to the 1994 edition. This article is based on my introduction to the German translation of Li's *The Path of Beauty* as *Der Weg des Schönen. Wesen und Geschichte der chinesischen Kultur und Ästhetik*, Karl-Heinz Pohl and Gudrun Wacker (eds.), Freiburg: Herder, 1992, pp. 10-19 (new edition: Bochum: Europäischer Universitätsverlag, 2022, pp. 18-27).

<sup>399</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti" in: *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan*, Zhonghe 1987, p. 474. See also Heinrich Geiger, "Die Pragmatik der großen Systeme. Überlegungen zu einer eng- und einer weitgefaßten Geschichtsschreibung der chinesischen Ästhetik, ausgehend von einem Text Li Zehous," in: *Chinablätter* 18 (Nov. 91), pp. 166-77. Geiger, however, characterizes *The Path of Beauty* there as a "narrowly conceived" history of aesthetics.

<sup>400</sup> Li Zehou, "Shenma shi meixue", in: *Zou wo ziji de lu*, Taipei 1990, p. 73.

(*he*) or the "natural-spontaneous" (*ziran*).<sup>401</sup> In this respect, we find "aesthetically" relevant expressions mostly in literary or art-critical writings, which are often also characterized by an unsystematic and untheoretical character, as well as in isolated statements of philosophers related to artistic activity.

What, then, asks Li Zehou, should belong to a Chinese historiography of aesthetics? The aphorisms of Chinese thinkers of Confucian, Daoist, and other provenance that apply to music, art, or literature? Or the well-known literature and art tracts? All this undoubtedly belongs to a historiography of aesthetics, but to a "narrow" one.<sup>402</sup> Such a history, however, runs the risk of distorting or contradicting the historical development of aesthetic consciousness. Thus, for example, Confucian comments on the odes of the *Book of Songs* do not necessarily reflect the aesthetic consciousness that produced these early testimonies of Chinese literature. In contrast to such a limited view, it is necessary to include the most important works of literature and art in a "broadly" conceived history of aesthetics. Moreover, in order to document the development of Chinese aesthetic consciousness, one must also take into account other forms of artistic design, e.g., architecture, arts and crafts, and ceramics, especially from prehistoric and early historic times, as well as the social, material conditions that produced them. In this respect, the "Path of Beauty" that Li traces logically begins with the production of jewellery and the magical rituals of prehistoric people - with "totem cults from the earliest times".

In view of the inclusiveness of Li Zehou's approach, his work can also be understood as a cultural anthropology in the broadest sense, because his actual goal, as Heinrich Geiger formulates it, is "to work out the context of an organic, meaningful development process of the Chinese civilization oriented to the idea of beauty".<sup>403</sup> Although, as mentioned, the idea of the beautiful did not play a role in the traditional consideration of art and literature, Chinese intellectuals of the modern era were all influenced by Western thought – by the appreciation of the "Good, True and Beautiful", and therefore Li Zehou's pursuit of "The Path of Beauty" is no exception.

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<sup>401</sup> As to the development of aesthetics in the modern period, see my article, "Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning for Application': Li Zehou's Thought on Tradition and Modernity", in Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia (eds.), *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press, p. 57-73.

<sup>402</sup> Li Zehou began a "narrow" history in 1984 in collaboration with Liu Gangji: his multi-volume (though unfinished) *History of Chinese Aesthetics (Zhongguo meixue shi)*.

<sup>403</sup> Heinrich Geiger, *Philosophische Ästhetik im China des 20. Jahrhunderts: Ihre Stellung zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Frankfurt 1987, p. 36.

As his work can be understood as a cultural anthropology, anthropological questions dominate the beginning of the book. By understanding man primarily as a producer and his products as a reflection of his social conditions and his social consciousness, it starts from basic Marxist anthropological premises.

Hence, important for the understanding of this work are leading Marxist Ideas regarding anthropology and history. So we find repeated reference to Marx' scheme of five social stages in historical development: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, mercantilism and capitalism. There is also repeatedly mention of "class struggle" as well as Marx' concepts of "basis and superstructure". Apart from this, there are significant references to Marx' "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844", in particular to his concept of human nature – "*Humanismus der Natur*" (humanism of nature). The following quote from Marx "Manuscripts" is crucial: "Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the consistent naturalism of man and the consistent humanism of nature."<sup>404</sup>

It is interesting and significant, though, that Marx' terms "humanism of nature" and "naturalism of man" were interpreted by Li with a certain twist: "humanism of nature" is understood as "humanisation of nature" (*ziran de renhua* 自然的人化) and "naturalism of man" as "naturalisation of man" (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化).<sup>405</sup> Interestingly, the sections referring to Marx' anthropology (in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book) are deleted in the English translation ... (not so in the German translation).

While Marx still applied his terms to anthropological and sociological considerations, Li Zehou transfers the "humanization/humanism of nature" (*ziran de renhua*) into an aesthetic dimension. Regarding "Humanisation/humanism of nature", Li Zehou makes a distinction between outer or external and inner humanisation. The external one is the shaping of the objects of nature by man's labour, whereby nature becomes man's nature, and "beauty" can be realized in the external world. More important, however, is an inner "humanization of nature," which Li

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<sup>404</sup> Section: "Private Property and Communism". <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>. Marx continues: "The object of labour is therefore the objectification of the generic life of man."

<sup>405</sup> Today, the official Chinese translation of the passage is like this: 因此，社会是人同自然界的完成了的本质的统一，是自然界的真正复活，是人的实现了的自然主义和自然界的实现了的人道主义。  
<https://www.marxists.org/chinese/marx/marxist.org-chinese-marx-1844.htm>

himself considers the pivotal point of his theory of aesthetic sensibility.<sup>406</sup> Inner "humanization of nature" means humanization of man himself, his sensory perception and his feelings, through which only aesthetic feeling can be realized in the human psyche.

In the aesthetic feeling of the human being Li also distinguishes two kinds, a sensual, intuitive, disinterested kind and a rational, social-beneficial kind. In order to explain how both are interlocked with each other, i.e., "how the sensible is expressed in the sensual, the social in the individual, and the historical in the psychic,"<sup>407</sup> Li coined a word that, as the cultural debate of the 1980s in China showed, has since become widely used – that of "sedimentation" (*jidian* 积淀). What is the meaning of this metaphor borrowed from geology, which evokes processes that take place over a long period of time? Li thus attempts to grasp the emergence of aesthetic sensation and artistic form in the process of the "humanization of nature," namely how ideas and concepts – that is, the mental – are deposited in aesthetic-sensual sensations, as well as social content in individual forms. In *The Path of Beauty*, he develops this idea using the example of prehistoric and early historical art, in which he not only demonstrates the first beginnings of aesthetic consciousness and artistic creativity, but also shows how there was a development in Chinese prehistory from sketchy images of animals with still concrete content – such as figures of totems – to abstract, linear symbols on Neolithic (Yangshao) ceramics or *Taotie* bronze masks, in which original social content was deposited and dissolved. Li explains:

“What is the key to understanding the mystery of the eternal nature of art? [...] Why is it that the aesthetic value and artistic style of works of long ago still accord with the sentiments and interests of people of our time? Why do they still evoke such intimate feelings in us? Is it that the sentiments accumulated and condensed in them are related to and act upon the psychological structure of people today? Is the human psychological structure a product of the accumulation and condensation of historical experience? If so, the secret of the eternal nature of art may reside therein. Or, it may be the other way round – that is, the universal human psychology resides in and is promoted by the eternal nature of art. [...] Psychological structure is a product of the sedimentation of human history and civilization; art is the psychology that reveals the soul of the times. Maybe

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<sup>406</sup> Li Zehou, "Meigan tan" (On Aesthetic Sensation), in *Li Zehou zhexue mei-xue wenxuan*, p. 437.

<sup>407</sup> "Meigan tan", p. 439.

this can explain human nature as related to art.”<sup>408</sup>

In this respect, the beautiful is not ordinary beauty of form, but, in that meaningful social content has been sedimented in form, "significant form" (*you yiwei de xingshi* 有意味的形式), a term Li has borrowed from the writings of Clive Bell (1881-1964) and Susanne Langer (1895-1985)<sup>409</sup>:

“The social consciousness – the passions, concepts, and psychology of primitive humans – crystallized and concentrated in these pictorial symbols, invested them with a meaning and significance that was beyond pure graphic representation. Primitive humans perceived in them properties and values that transcended pure psychological responses. In other words, these natural forms were sedimented with social values and content, and man’s perceptual power and sensibility had acquired a rational quality. This unquestionably was the beginning of an aesthetic awareness and artistic creation.”<sup>410</sup>

In an even more comprehensive way, Li understands "sedimentation" as the culture-specific shaping of social and historical content, which he calls "cultural-psychic structure" (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构) – another key concept in Li's thought. This cultural-psychic structure is that which has been deposited throughout history in a culture-specific way in psychic conditions, i.e. human behaviour patterns, ways of thinking, emotional attitudes and also art.

As a structure of cultural and social sedimentations over a long period of history, it also implies the question of cultural identity. On the one hand, the formation is inherited through a process of education. Hence it is important for people of today to become conscious of the forces of history that have shaped their present. On the other hand, the formation is constantly formed anew as it is not determined by the sedimentations.

In the Chinese cultural-psychic structure Li locates – as coordinates, as it were – three basic elements to which not only general cultural phenomena but also "aesthetics" can be related: Confucianism, Zhuangzi's Daoism with its transitions into Chan (Zen) Buddhism and, as a third,

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<sup>408</sup> *The Path of Beauty*, p. 235f.

<sup>409</sup> Clive Bell, *Significant Form in Art*, 1914; Susanne Langer, 1895-1985: *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, 1953.

<sup>410</sup> *The Path of Beauty*, p. 9.

the poetry of the Elegies of Chu associated with the name Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340-278 B.C.). Confucian beauty is characterized by humanistic contents; here the Marxian thought of "humanization/humanism of nature" – in the form of humanization and harmonization of the inner nature of man – finds its most perfect Chinese expression. The beautiful in Zhuangzi, on the other hand, is the free, spontaneous, natural beautiful, which Li sees as the Chinese equivalent of the ideal of a "naturalism of man" that also appears in Marx's "Manuscripts". Finally, the beautiful in Qu Yuan is symbol of moral integrity."<sup>411</sup>

In his book, Li shows how the process of development of Chinese culture – "The Path of Beauty" – after its beginnings in prehistoric times, unfolds in constant relation to these coordinates: Apart from its humanistic contents, the ideal of an artistically balanced design, a "harmonious beauty" (*zhonghe zhi mei* 中和之美), i.e. a harmony of content (*zhi* 质) and form (*wen* 文), of reason (*li* 理) and feeling (*qing* 情), originates from Confucian thinking. The ideas of Daoism and Chan Buddhism, on the other hand, play an important role in capturing the unfathomable essence (*shen* 神) of artistic creativity, of intuition and inspiration, in images and words. Finally, with Qu Yuan begins the tradition of lyrical expression, that is, the creation and interpretation of poetry (the most important art form in Chinese cultural history) as an expression of an individual and morally cultivated personality. Within these basic directions, Li Zehou relates literature, art and philosophy to each other in many ways and shows a wealth of structural correspondences and classification possibilities: e.g. three types of Buddhist sculptures, three "worlds" of poetry and three conceptions of landscape painting, whereby the typifications correspond to each other to a certain degree.

In his lecture mentioned at the beginning, Li Zehou also points out four characteristics of Chinese aesthetics, partly formal and partly substantive, which are also reflected in *The Path of Beauty*: 1. the central importance of music, 2. the art of line, 3. the fusion of reason (*li*) and feeling (*qing*), and 4. the unity of heaven/nature and man (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一).<sup>412</sup> Music is, as it were, the art form of Confucianism. Confucius says of it that man is "perfected in music" (*cheng yu yue* 成于乐)<sup>413</sup>. The harmonizing effect of music on man and its socially unifying function – in contrast to the ordering and dividing effect of the rites, with which it is always mentioned in the same breath – is also in the foreground of the "Chapter on Music" in the *Book*

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<sup>411</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi di jige wenti", p. 492.

<sup>412</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti", p. 477-91; see also Geiger, "Die Pragmatik", p. 168-71.

<sup>413</sup> *Lunyu*, 8.8. See also: *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 49.

of *Rites (Liji)*. Its educational significance, so important for early Confucian thought, lies in its ability to temper man's primal feelings, thereby socializing him and directing his emotional world in a "reasonable" direction.<sup>414</sup> In this respect, the third characteristic is already implied in this first one: the fusion of feeling and reason, which also implies a harmonious unity of the individual and society.

The second characteristic is the "art of the line". Compared to the more sensual colour, the line possesses something spiritually abstract. It is, as it were, the visible form of music, its melodic slurs and rhythms. The "art of the line" finds its most perfect artistic realization in Chinese calligraphy – an art form that in China is ranked far higher than painting. Remarkable is again a development from sketchy, line-like illustration in the form of simple pictographic characters to spontaneous, rhythmic lines and abstract structures, in which not only the original pictorial quality, but also the feeling, thinking and power of the writer have been "sedimented", and which have thus become "significant form" in the truest sense.

Finally, the last trait, the "unity of heaven/nature and man", occupies a central position in Li's thinking: he regards it as a core idea of traditional Chinese philosophy, which is reflected in art in manifold ways. We encounter it in analogies between nature (*tian* 天 – "heaven/sky") and human virtues, as in the *Book of Changes* ("The movements of Heaven are powerful. Following its example, the superior man strengthens himself without ceasing.")<sup>415</sup> or in the talks of Confucius ("The wise man delights in the water, the kind man in the mountains.")<sup>416</sup>, but also in the demand for fusion of feeling (*qing* 情) and landscape/nature (*jing* 景) in poetry and landscape painting.

This idea of the "unity of heaven/nature and man", which can be traced in different interpretations from the *Book of Changes* to Daoist philosophy, the Han Confucianism of Dong Zhongshu, and the Neo-Confucians throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, has also given Li, albeit in a different context, a new, current significance, namely as a Chinese alternative with universal relevance to the Judeo-Christian opposition of man and nature, which has begun to show threatening consequences for the whole of humanity.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> "Guanyu Zhongguo meixueshi de jige wenti", p. 483.

<sup>415</sup> Picture-Commentary to the first Hexagram *Qian* in the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*.

<sup>416</sup> *Lunyu*, 6.21.

<sup>417</sup> Li Zehou, "Shitan Zhongguo de zhihui" (Some remarks on Chinese wisdom) in: Cao Yuetang (ed.), *Lun Zhongguo chuantong wenhua*, Peking 1988, p. 37f.

When Li Zehou, finally, offers "unity of heaven/nature and man" as a Chinese elaboration of Marx's "humanization/humanism of nature" and the "naturalization/naturalism of man", this is more than a simple correspondence, because Li starts from Marx, but he returns to traditional Chinese philosophical themes. One could speak of a dissolution of Marxian thought in Chinese structures: Marx's speculative anthropology is adapted and sinicized in a "practical-rational" way – for Li a trait of Confucian thought.

Summing up, the characteristics of *The Path of Beauty* are, first, its design as a "broad" explication of the Chinese aesthetic tradition and, second, its Marxist approach by referring to the latter's anthropology and history. Hence we find for each historical period that he discusses, first, an explication of the socio-economic situation and class affiliation of actors (the "base") before he turns to literature and art (the "superstructure"). This also accords with Li's position of "unity of objectivity and sociality" which he took in the great "Aesthetics Debate" of 1956: There arose a discussion between Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986) for whom beauty was a "synthesis of the subjective and the objective" (*zhuguan he keguan de tongyi* 主观和客观的统一) and Li Zehou whose counter argument was: "Unity of objectivity and sociality" (*keguanxing yu shehuixing xiang tongyi* 客观性与社会性相统一). With this he referred to the possibility of establishing a connection with a specific object because that object has always already been contextualized and conceptualized within a sociality of many other things and relations.<sup>418</sup>

Apart from that we also find in Li's book Marx' optimism regarding human progress, as well as Marx' critical attitude about religion, in this case toward Buddhism (chapter VI: "A miserable World" and "Illusionary Praise"). Criticism of religion may have become part of mainstream Western thought in Europe since the Enlightenment; for China, on the other hand, it could be alienating when it applies to Buddhism, which is so popular in the West and often perceived as an alternative religion. However, it is important to know that Chinese Marxists, on the one hand, are only continuing the tradition of Confucian criticism of Buddhism, while, on the other hand, the Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians (from around the 11th century), were significantly influenced by Buddhism. In this respect, Li Zehou's treatment of

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<sup>418</sup> "Lun meigan, mei he yishu" 论美感、美和艺术 (About sense of beauty, beauty, and art). *Studies of Philosophy* (*Zhexue yanjiu* 哲学研究) 1956/5. See also: Qi Zhixiang 祁志祥, 李泽厚实践美学思想及成就的系统评析 (A Systematic Review of Li Zehou's Practical Aesthetic Thought and Achievements), Shanghai Jiaotong University, 2021: <https://iah.sjtu.edu.cn/Web/Show/370>

Buddhism has also this ambivalent attitude. Worth mentioning, lastly, not as a homage to Marx but as an inheritance of thought patterns of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the way he transfers classifications of the European intellectual history to China, in this case "Romanticism" (chapters IV and X) – both to the time of the Chu and Han culture and, after a time jump of about 1,500 years, to epochs of the Dynasties Ming and Qing. This – from today's point of view uncritical – handling of Western thought patterns goes back to the time of the May 4th movement (around 1919), during which European romanticism advanced to the favourite style epoch of Chinese intellectuals.

Li Zehou published *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Huaxia meixue* 华夏美学) in 1988. An English translation by Maija Bell Samei appeared in 2010.<sup>419</sup> Li considered it to be one of his major works and more important – i.e. more philosophical – than *The Path of Beauty*. What are the major differences between the two works? *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* is also a history of Chinese aesthetics, but more in a “narrow” sense, as it traces more the philosophical tradition, based on the written documents.

He focusses on themes which are – in Li's view – constitutive for a Chinese aesthetics, such as:

- “Rites and Music” – according to Li Zehou, China is a “culture of rites and music” (*li yue zhi wenhua* 礼乐之文化);
- “Confucian Humanism” – with a focus on harmony between feeling and reason, society and individual;
- Daoist “Free and Easy Wandering” – with an emphasis on the concept of freedom;
- Qu Yuan and the *Songs of Chu* – its themes are human emotionality and mortality;
- “Metaphysics” – such as in Chan-Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism; here Su Shi comes in as a main figure in Chinese aesthetics;
- Encounter with Western thought – from Ming Dynasty thinkers such as Wang Yangming and Yuan Hongdao to the introduction of Western thought by Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei.

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<sup>419</sup> Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, transl. by Maija Bell Samei, Honolulu, U of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

The book is, most of all, orientated on Confucianism. In the preface he says: “What I mean by ‘Chinese Aesthetics’ in this volume is Confucian-based traditional Chinese aesthetics.”<sup>420</sup> However, as in *The Path of Beauty*, the basis of his approach is an “anthropological ontology”, in Li’s words: “To talk about and to seek the root of human existence.”<sup>421</sup> Hence we find also in this work reference to Marx’ “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, that is, to the already mentioned concepts of “humanism/humanization of nature” (ch. 2) as well as “naturalism/naturalization of man” (ch. 3). When Marx writes, as already quoted at the beginning in the context of *The Path of Beauty*, that “*society* is the complete unity of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the consistent naturalism of man and the consistent humanism of nature,” we see that for Li this idea corresponds to the Chinese tradition of “Unity of Heaven/Nature and Man” (*tian ren he yi*):

“The unity of heaven and humans (天人合一) [...], is a very widespread and long-lasting notion in Chinese aesthetics and artistic creation [...] From today’s perspective, however, this principle can be seen to be simply a roughhewn and roundabout expression of the ‘humanization of nature’ in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics.”<sup>422</sup>

Li Zehou considers aesthetic experiences to be the most meaningful experiences in life. In this context he elaborates on concepts of aesthetics which were introduced by Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877-1927). Wang Guowei represents the early encounter of Chinese with European ideas. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *jingjie* 境界 (“aesthetic state or consciousness”) and *yijing* 意境 (“aesthetic idea”)<sup>423</sup> to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene (*qing/yi jing ronghe* 情/意景融合). Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation; but this term soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition, using Buddhist vocabulary. The term *yijing* was first used in Yogacara Buddhism (Fawei zong / Weishi zong 法相宗 / 唯识宗) of the Tang Dynasty. The character *jing* 境 (Sanskrit: *viṣaya*), as Wing-tsit Chan explained, has the meaning: realm, conception, domain of perception;

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<sup>420</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. vii.

<sup>421</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. x and 225; Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, p. 170-171

<sup>422</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 72.

<sup>423</sup> Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei’s Jen-chien Tz’u-hua hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff, and Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, p. 409ff.

external world (the “sphere or realm in which the mind gropes for an object which is its own imagination”).<sup>424</sup> There we find the distinction between the following three realms or conceptions: *wujing* 物境 (conception of things), *qingjing* 情境 (conception of feelings) and *yijing* 意境 (conception of ideas).<sup>425</sup> Today, the Buddhist origin of these ideas is hardly subject of discussion anymore; the influence of Western thought appears to be more interesting, as in Wang Guowei’s thought the terms *yijing* (artistic conception) and *jingjie* are imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer (Kant’s “aesthetic idea”); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West.

In *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li Zehou defined Wang Guowei’s concept *jingjie* in the following way:

“The aesthetic realm is the revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene, and the objectified realm of the artistic subject – in other words, it is a manifestation of the realm of human life.”<sup>426</sup>

Hence, in their monumental (though not completed) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi* 中国美学史), Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Gangji 刘纲纪 (1933-2019) marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an “aesthetic consciousness” (*shenmei jingjie* 审美境界) was regarded as the “highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life”.<sup>427</sup>

The more philosophical bent of *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* reveals itself predominantly in its reference to Kantian thought and terminology, such as “noumenon” (*benti* 本体). It has to be added, though, that the usage of the term *benti* in Chinese does not quite correspond to the term “noumenon” in Western philosophy – neither the term *bentilun* (本体论 literally: theory of original substance) to “ontology” which is the usual translation for it. Both terms – *benti* and

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<sup>424</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1963, p. 372. The term entered the realm of poetics through Wang Changling’s 王昌龄 (Tang Dynasty): “Poetical Patterns” (*Shige* 诗格, transmitted in Japanese by the Japanese monk Kūkai 空海, 774-835: *Bunkyō hifuron* 文镜秘府论).

<sup>425</sup> Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China. Von der Tradition bis zur Moderne*, München Saur, 2007, p. 165f.

<sup>426</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xvi, p. 210.

<sup>427</sup> Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo meixueshi* (History of Chinese Aesthetics), I, Beijing: Xinhua, 1984, p. 33f.

*bentilun* – have experienced an inflationary usage in China, which cannot be said of the corresponding terms “noumenon” and “ontology” in Western writings. The reason for the popularity of these terms with modern Chinese intellectuals might be manifold. It surely is due to their uncritical adoption of, if not infatuation with Western terminology; but because of the literal meaning in Chinese, they have a more comprehensive meaning – and not such a narrow philosophical focus as the corresponding Western terms.

As to the *noumenon*, Li Zehou explains:

“The Confucian dominated Chinese tradition of philosophy, aesthetics, art, and literature, as well as ethics and government [... with Daoism and Chan-Buddhism incorporated] are all founded on a certain ‘psychologism’”. [...] “This psychologism [...] is a philosophical proposition that takes emotion as the *noumenon*. From its ethical origins to the ‘realm of life’, the entire stream of the history of Chinese thought has taken this type of sensuous psychology as the *noumenon*. The thing-in-itself is not, then, the spirit, nor is it a deity, nor morality or reason. Instead it is the psychology of human nature in which emotion and rationality are blended.”<sup>428</sup>

What, then, is the *noumenon*?

“It is ultimate reality, the origin of everything. According to the Confucian-based Chinese tradition, the *noumenon* is not nature, for a universe without humanity is meaningless. Nor is the *noumenon* a deity, for to ask humans to prostrate themselves before a god would not fit with the notions of ‘partnering in the transformation and nurturing of all things’ or ‘establishing the heart of heaven and earth’ (*Zhongyong*). It must follow, then, that the *noumenon* is humankind itself.”<sup>429</sup>

Li’s emphasis that the *noumenon* is the “psychology of human nature in which emotion and rationality are blended” reveals the way he understands his work as a contribution to an “anthropological ontology”.

Lastly, it is interesting to note some analogies between past and present, i.e. between the adaption of Buddhist thought and vocabulary particularly by the Neo-Confucians of the Song

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<sup>428</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xvii, p. 219.

<sup>429</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 223.

period, and the present transferral of Western thought and terminology. Regarding the former, Li, himself, remarked:

“In Returning to Confucianism by way of Chan-Buddhism, [the Neo-Confucians] greatly enriched their own thought by establishing this metaphysical *noumenal* realm in which aesthetics supersedes religion.”<sup>430</sup>

One is reminded here of Cai Yuanpei’s assessment of the role of aesthetic for China: As is well known, Cai regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional “spiritual” equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason he demanded for modern China “aesthetic education in the place of religion” (*yi meiyu dai zongjiao* 以美育代宗教).<sup>431</sup>

Returning to the analogy between China’s intellectuals of today and the Song Dynasty Neo-Confucians, the present day equivalent of Buddhism is Marxism. As the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming Dynasties were allured by the “Western” foreign religion, Buddhism, but returned to Confucianism, incorporating much Buddhist thought in their new interpretation of Confucianism, so Li Zehou, likewise, is greatly influenced by the new “Western” (civil)religion: the ideas of Karl Marx, but he also returned to Confucianism, incorporating much of Marxian thought into his new interpretation of the Chinese aesthetic – and ethical – tradition. Li writes: “We have to pass through Marxist thought and go beyond it,” and he sees Marxism as “a theory of the construction of material and spiritual life”<sup>432</sup>.

Hence Marxism, in a sinicised form, has entered the Chinese “cultural-psychological formation”. As the translator of Li’s *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Maija Bell Samei, writes in her introduction, the Western scientific worldview and post-Enlightenment theories like Marxism “are being ‘sedimented’ into the latest incarnation of the Chinese people’s ‘cultural-psychological formation’” – just like Buddhism before.

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<sup>430</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. xv, p. 191.

<sup>431</sup> *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 212. Liu Gangji, “Verbreitung und Einfluss der deutschen Ästhetik in China”, K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Sonderheft 10), pp. 8-13. And the famous writer of this époque, Lin Yutang 林语堂, remarked in his *My Country and my People*, that “poetry may well be called the Chinaman’s religion.”

<sup>432</sup> Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006, p. 170, cited by Maija Bell Samei in her translation of *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, p. 225. Bell Samei adds that Marxism is not seen here with its narrative of class struggle.

Seen from this perspective, Li Zehou's development regarding aesthetics corresponds to his thesis in: "Western Learning as substance, Chinese Learning for Application" (*xi ti zhong yong* 西体中用), summarized as: "One material civilization, multiple spiritual cultures."<sup>433</sup> Marxist thought refers to the universal conditions of our (common, i.e. universal) material civilization, that is, to the "outer/external humanization of nature", whereas Confucian/Daoist thought refers to the particular Chinese spiritual culture: its ethics and aesthetics – the "inner humanization of nature".

Modern Chinese aesthetics must be seen in the context of the identity crisis triggered by the break with tradition at the beginning of this century. China's self-perception since it was forced (in the late 19th century and early 20th century) by the violent actions of the colonial powers to come to terms with Western thought was that of a Chinese culture supported by aesthetics – in contrast to the European culture, which Chinese intellectuals saw as dominated by religion (Christianity). Hence, the first approaches of this discipline, which was taken over from the West, were based on the endeavour to "discover one's own buried essence" by means of beauty and art, i.e. to rediscover a cultural identity and to make it usable for gaining a new national integrity.<sup>434</sup> Aesthetics may have become a barely noticed sub-discipline of philosophy in the West, but not so in China: there it occupies an eminent position in intellectual life. If one wants to better understand modern China, it would be necessary – through a change of perspective – to take a closer look at China's self-image, which is shaped by its own cultural and aesthetic tradition.

Li Zehou's historiography of aesthetics at the end of the 1970s, which "emerged in the immediate aftermath of the equally radical rupture of the Cultural Revolution,"<sup>435</sup> as well as his second book written at the end of the 1980s, follow this new line by also viewing Chinese culture predominantly as an "aesthetic" one, namely as a "culture of rites and music" (*liyue zhi wenhua*). But there are clear differences. Now it is also important to help the tradition, which was tabooed during the Cultural Revolution, to regain its value. As the trauma of the encounter

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<sup>433</sup> Li Zehou, "Human Nature and Human Future: A Combination of Marx and Confucius", 1999, in: Karl-Heinz Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context. A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 129-144. Cf. also Fn. 4 above.

<sup>434</sup> Geiger, *Philosophische Ästhetik*, p. 19.

<sup>435</sup> By his own admission, Li completed *The Path of Beauty* in a few months in 1979, drawing on older preparatory work. Li Zehou, "Yu Taiwan xuezhe Liang Dongguang yu *Mei de licheng* de duitan lu" (Record of a Conversation on the *Path of Beauty* with the Taiwanese Scholar Liang Dongguang), in: *Zou wo ziji de lu*, p. 459.

with the West was a hundred years ago, the focus is, therefore, no longer on the sometimes cramped efforts resulting from national humiliation, such as those of the first generation of aestheticians, to point out the superiority of their own intellectual and artistic tradition. Rather, in Li Zehou's assessment of his own cultural tradition, we find a new self-understanding, or rather a new matter of course, occasionally mixed with pride and pathos. The "aesthetic fever" triggered by his works, however, shows how much he hit the nerve of the time with his histories of aesthetics in China: it was the prelude to the "cultural fever" – the hot debate about one's own tradition and identity – that characterized the second half of the 1980s in China until it was violently ended by the events of the summer of 1989. The fact that Western theoretical approaches, such as those of Marx, still serve as a starting point (perhaps only as an ideological fig leaf), but in the further course are transferred into Chinese thinking, is only a further sign of the now more unbiased attitude toward one's own tradition (and the ruling ideology) as well as for China's well-known strength, already demonstrated in the reception of Buddhism, of turning foreign thought into something unmistakably Chinese.

#### Appendix: Tables of Content

##### 1. Table of content of *The Path of Beauty* (美的历程):

###### 1. The Era of Dragons and Phoenixes 龙飞凤舞

- Totems of Remote Antiquity 远古图腾
- Primitive Songs and Dances 原始歌舞
- 'Significant Form' “有意味的形式”

###### 2. The Bronze Art 青铜饕餮

- Ferocious Beauty 狞厉的美
- The Art of Line 线的艺术
- Disintegration and Emancipation 解体与解放

###### 3. Rational Spirit of Pre-Qin 先秦理性精神

- Confucianism and Daoism: Complements and Supplements 儒道互补
- The Principles of *Fu*, *Bi* and *Xing* 赋比兴原则
- Architectural Art 建筑艺术

###### 4. Romanticism of Chu and Han 楚汉浪漫主义

- The Traditions of Qu Yuan 屈骚传统
- A Dazzling World 琳琅满目的世界
- Powerful Crudeness 气势与古拙

5.The Style of Wei and Jin 魏晋风度

- The Human Theme 人的主题
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- Ruan Ji and Tao Yuanming 阮籍与陶渊明

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- Springtime and Li Bai 青春，李白
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## **Aesthetics in modern China – Encounters with Western Thought**

In modern times, aesthetics assumed a special place in China's grappling with Western thought: First, aesthetics constituted a realm relatively free of politics. For this reason, it attracted Chinese to explore freely and without political restraint occidental thought. Second, philosophy

of art as part of aesthetics offered Chinese intellectuals the possibility of linking up with their own traditional ideas. This was important because – unlike the mainstream of Chinese traditional social and political thought, particularly Confucianism – the Chinese aesthetic tradition had not been discredited by the reception of Western ideas and the radical antitraditionalism of the May Fourth period (1917-23). Quite the contrary, when the Chinese at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to define themselves in relationship to the West, they understood their own culture as an essentially aesthetic one.

Traditional Chinese aesthetics, with its attributes of “suggestiveness” (*yan/hua wai* 言/画外), “liveliness” (*qiyun shengdong* 气韵生动), “harmony of opposing (cosmological) forces” (*yin yang* 阴阳), “cultivated clumsiness” (*zhuo* 拙) and, lastly, a “spiritual” quality of naturalness and freedom achieved by strictly training (*gongfu* 功夫) according to set rules (*fa* 法), constitutes an entirely different world of art in comparison to the Western tradition (although there are certainly overlapping elements). It is no wonder, then, that these characteristics were understood by the Chinese themselves as the most sublime features of Chinese culture. These features served, well into the modern period, as fundamental elements of a Chinese cultural identity. Hence, in their monumental (though not completed) *History of Chinese Aesthetics* (*Zhongguo meixue shi* 中国美学史), Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Liu Gangji 刘纲纪 (1933-2019) marked as the last and most important characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics the idea that an “aesthetic consciousness” (*shenmei jingjie* 审美境界) was regarded as the “highest and noblest consciousness to be attained in life”.<sup>436</sup>

Thus, the encounter with Western thought, on the one hand, brought the Chinese a wealth of fascinatingly new ideas; it allowed them, on the other, to look for familiar concepts which could be aligned with their own tradition. The president of the Peking University during the May Fourth period, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), was one of the first to formulate the idea of the mentioned cultural-aesthetic self-understanding of the Chinese. Through his studies in Germany he was familiar with occidental philosophy, particularly with Kant. He regarded Westerners to be largely shaped by religion, whereas for China he held aesthetics (a combination of ritual, art and ethics) to be the functional “spiritual” equivalent to religion in the West. For this reason he demanded for modern China “aesthetic education in the place of

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<sup>436</sup> Li Zehou and Liu Gangji, *Zhongguo meixueshi* (History of Chinese Aesthetics), I, Beijing: Xinhua, 1984, p. 33f.

religion” (*yi meiyu dai zongjiao* 以美育代宗教).<sup>437</sup> And the famous writer of this époque, Lin Yutang 林语堂, remarked in his *My Country and my People*, that “poetry may well be called the Chinaman’s religion.” As it was popular among culturally conservative intellectuals at this time<sup>438</sup> to posit a Chinese “spiritual” against a Western “materialistic” culture, the affirmation of “spiritual” aspects in Chinese aesthetics added to this understanding of Chinese culture.

Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877-1927) represents the early encounter of Chinese with European ideas. He coined basic aesthetic concepts for the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *jingjie* 境界 (“aesthetic state or consciousness”) or *yijing* 意境 (“aesthetic idea”)<sup>439</sup> to denote a perfect aesthetic fusion of artistic idea (or feeling) with a concrete scene (*qing/yi jing ronghe* 情/意景融合). Wang first used the term *jingjie* only with regards to poetry and without any theoretical explanation; but this term (as the above quote by Li Zehou and Liu Gangji illustrates) soon gained a general aesthetic meaning, signifying both an aesthetic idea as well as a most sublime state of mind. Wang Guowei derived his concepts from Chinese tradition, using Buddhist vocabulary. The term *yijing* was first used in Yogacara Buddhism (法相宗 / 唯识宗) of the Tang Dynasty. The character *jing* 境 (Sanskrit: *viṣaya*), as Wing-tsit Chan explained, has the meaning: realm, conception, domain of perception; external world (the “sphere or realm in which the mind gropes for an object which is its own imagination”). The term entered the realm of poetics through Wang Changling’s 王昌龄 (Tang Dynasty): “Poetical Patterns” (*Shige* 诗格, transmitted in Japanese by Kūkai 空海, 774-835: *Bunkyō hifuron* 文镜秘府论). There we find the distinction between the following three realms or conceptions: *wujing* 物境 (conception of things), *qingjing* 情境 (conception of feelings) and *yijing* 意境 (conception of ideas).

Today, the Buddhist origin of these ideas is hardly subject of discussion anymore, the influence of Western thought appears to be more interesting, as in Wang Guowei the terms *yijing* (artistic conception) and *jingjie* are imbued with meaning that he found in Kant and Schopenhauer

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<sup>437</sup> Liu Gangji, “Verbreitung und Einfluss der deutschen Ästhetik in China”, K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Trierer Beiträge. Aus Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Trier*, July 1996 (Sonderheft 10), pp. 8-13.

<sup>438</sup> Particularly influential was Liang Shuming and his book *Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue* (Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies), published in 1922.

<sup>439</sup> Adele Rickett, *Wang Kuo-wei’s Jen-chien T’zu-hua hua – A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, Hongkong: Hong Kong University Press, 1977, p. 23ff, and Hermann Kogelschatz, *Wang Kuo-wei und Schopenhauer: Eine philosophische Begegnung – Wandlung des Selbstverständnisses der chinesischen Literatur unter dem Einfluß der klassischen deutschen Ästhetik*, Wiesbaden: Steiner 1986, p. 245ff.

(Kant's "aesthetic idea"); hence, they represent early intercultural exchanges of thought between China and the West. Li Zehou later defined the concept *jingjie* in the following way: "The aesthetic realm is the revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene, and the objectified realm of the artistic subject – in other words, it is a manifestation of the realm of human life."<sup>440</sup>

In his article, "The Spreading and Influence of German Aesthetics in China", Liu Gangji showed that modern Chinese aesthetics was largely formed by the reception of German idealism.<sup>441</sup> The discourse of Chinese aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus, was shaped by the questions of German philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (i.e., beauty, sublime, tragedy etc.). The rather rigid reception of Marxism: reinforced this tendency. Due to many reasons (extensive periods of war, enormous problems of translation, etc.), this tradition of aesthetics – from Baumgarten and Kant to Marx – was received in China with a delay of about 100 years. European preferences triggered modern Chinese aestheticians' search for beauty in their own tradition – which appears in many ways like a voyage into the wrong direction. But (as is not unusual with such voyages), it also let them discover unknown and interesting territory and parallels between Chinese and Western aesthetics as well as a creative appropriation of Marxist aesthetics in China. As a result, and in a significant departure from their own tradition, modern Chinese aestheticians focused on categories derived from the European history such as beauty or tragedy, issues that had been completely absent in pre-modern Chinese thought on art. Hence, the encounter with Western aesthetics led Chinese scholars to unfamiliar ground, a situation that also resulted in a few creative misunderstandings of European ideas. Guided by the translation of the term aesthetics into Chinese as *meixue* 美学: the "study of beauty",<sup>442</sup> much of modern Chinese aesthetics was to become – with the literal translation of the term aesthetics into Chinese: "beautology"<sup>443</sup>.

The prominent scholars in Chinese aesthetics in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986) and Zong Baihua 宗白华 (1897-1986) both of whom had studied in Germany and were quite familiar with Western thought. The former introduced

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<sup>440</sup> *Huaxia meixue*, ch. 6.

<sup>441</sup> Liu Gangji, pp. 8-13.

<sup>442</sup> Like many terms from Western thought, aesthetics as "study of beauty" was first coined in Japan and from there introduced to China.

<sup>443</sup> Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Chinese Aesthetics and Kant", in: Mazhar Hussain and Robert Wilkinson (eds.), *The Pursuit of Comparative Aesthetics – An Interface Between the East and the West*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 127-136.

Hegel's aesthetic to China and tried to bridge Western and Chinese ideas; the latter, though a translator of Kant's Third Critique and an admirer of Goethe, was equally focused on Chinese traditional resources and developed these ideas and concepts further (i.e. the notion of *yijing* which Wang Guowei had introduced but left without any theoretical elaboration<sup>444</sup>).

Pursuing further the history of modern Chinese aesthetics, it is worth noting that, even in the ideologically rather rigid period of the 1950s (between 1956 and 1962), aesthetics was a field that allowed for a relatively free debate – within the confines of a Marxist materialist approach to aesthetics.<sup>445</sup> Apart from the concept of beauty, it was now also the Marxian idea of “practice” that was added to the discussion by Li Zehou, who was to become one of the leading scholars of aesthetics in China. Taking his ideas from Marx's “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”, practice was for Li materially productive activity, such as making and employing tools.<sup>446</sup> In the “Aesthetics Debate” of 1956, there arose a discussion between Zhu Guangqian for whom beauty was a “synthesis of the subjective and the objective” (*zhuguan he keguan de tongyi* 主观和客观的统一) and Li Zehou whose counter argument was: “Unity of objectivity and sociality” (*keguanxing yu shehuixing xiang tongyi* 客观性与社会性相统一). With this he referred to the possibility of establishing a connection with a specific object because that object has always already been contextualized and conceptualized within a sociality of many other things and relations.<sup>447</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), aesthetics ceased to exist as a topic of discussion. Nevertheless, in the year this turmoil broke out in mainland China, one of the most influential books on Chinese aesthetics was published in Taiwan by Xu Fuguan 徐复观: *The Spirit of Chinese Art*<sup>448</sup>. It discusses Chinese art and aesthetics as it had been prefigured by Cai Yuanpei

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<sup>444</sup> Liu Gangji, pp. 15-19. Representative is a collection of essays entitled *Yi jing* (Realm of Art), Peking: Peking University Press, 1987. The notion of *yijing*, (lit.: “realm [*jing*] of ideas [*yi*]”), in fact, goes further back in history than Wang Guowei (the *yi* in the title of Zong Baihua's book has a different meaning: “art”). For Chinese aesthetics of the modern period see also Zhu Liyuan and Gene Blocker (eds.): *Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics*, New York: Lang, 1995.

<sup>445</sup> Gao Jianping, “The ‘Aesthetics Craze’ in China – Its Cause and Significance”, *Dialogue and Universalism*, 3-4/1997, pp. 27-35.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>447</sup> “*Lun meigan, mei he yishu*” 论美感、美和艺术 (About sense of beauty, beauty, and art). *Studies of Philosophy* (*Zhexue yanjiu* 哲学研究) 1956/5.

<sup>448</sup> Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen*, Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1966.

and others, that is, highlighting its spiritual dimension and its connection to a Chinese cultural identity.

After the Cultural Revolution (in the 1980s), China experienced an unprecedented “aesthetics craze” mainly brought about by the writings of prominent aestheticians such as Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua and – most of all – Li Zehou. The latter was the towering figure of this period. On the one hand, he introduced new concepts such as subjectivity and practice, derived from a fusion of Kantian and Marxian ideas<sup>449</sup>, and, on the other, he offered stimulating interpretations of the Chinese artistic tradition in his widely read *The Path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng* 美的历程)<sup>450</sup> for which he had also employed ideas from Clive Bell and Susanne Langer. This craze was facilitated by the political thaw after the arrest of the “Gang of Four” in 1976: Having experienced a decade of chaos and disaster due to radical leftist politics, the Chinese Communist Party slowly departed from ideological notions such as class struggle and introduced the slogan “Practice as a sole criterion for truth” (*shishi qiu shi* 实事求是). Li Zehou’s idea of “practice” in the field of aesthetics only added to this new explorative climate. Furthermore, his coinage of other concepts, such as or “subjectality” (*zhutixing* 主体性)<sup>451</sup> or “sedimentation” (*jidian* 积淀) as a fusion of the social with the individual in a historical process, resulting in a “cultural-psychological formation” (*wen hua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构), significantly enriched the aesthetics debate of that period. These ideas led the way to a broader debate about aesthetics to include politics and culture – the “culture craze” (*wenhua re* 文化热)<sup>452</sup> of the 1990s.

Li Zehou’s *The Path of Beauty* (美的历程) was first published in 1981. An English translation by Gong Lizeng appeared 1988 (richly illustrated) and 1994 (without illustrations). The book had a tremendous impact in China, leading to an „aesthetics craze“ (*meixue re* 美学热). In the

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<sup>449</sup> Liu Gangji, pp. 19-32. Particularly influential was Li Zehou’s book on Kant: *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* (The Critique of Critical Philosophy: A Study of Kant), Peking: Renmin chubanshe, 1979. See also Jane Cauvel, “The transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou’s Aesthetic Theory”, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 150-173; Woei Lien Chong, “Combining Marx with Kant: The Philosophical Anthropology of Li Zehou”, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (April, 1999), pp. 120-149.

<sup>450</sup> See above footnote 4.

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<sup>452</sup> See Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

following, the characteristics of the book shall be introduced. In an article about questions regarding a history of aesthetics, published a few years after *The Path of Beauty*, Li Zehou made an important difference, that between a narrow and broad explication of aesthetics. A narrow history would deal only with written documents: literary or art criticism and such, whereas a broad history would address all aspects of material culture, beginning with tool making and cave drawings – such as pre-historic art. Seen from this perspective, *The Path of Beauty*, clearly, is a broad explication of Chinese aesthetics, as it deals not only with poetry, painting and calligraphy, but also with the art of cave-men, bronzes, architecture, lacquer ware, woodblock prints etc.

Important for the understanding of this work are leading Marxist Ideas regarding anthropology and history. So find repeated reference to Marx' scheme of five social stages in historical development: primitive communism, slave society, feudalism, mercantilism and capitalism. There is also repeatedly mention of Marx' term "class struggle" as well as his concepts of basis and superstructure. Apart from this, there are significant references to Marx' "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844", in particular to his concept of human nature. The following quote from Marx "Manuscripts" is crucial: "Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature – the true resurrection of nature – the consistent naturalism of man and the consistent humanism of nature."<sup>453</sup>

It is interesting and significant, though, that Marx' terms "humanism of nature" and "naturalism of man" were translated into Chinese with a certain twist: "humanism of nature" is rendered as "humanisation of nature" (*ziran de renhua* 自然的人化) and "naturalism of man" as "naturalisation of man" (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化).<sup>454</sup> Regarding the former, "Humanisation [humanism] of nature" (自然的人化), Li Zehou makes a distinction between outer and inner humanisation. The outer refers to the formation of objects (tools) through labour, whereas the inner signifies the humanisation of man's sense perceptions and feelings, viz. his aesthetic-sensual emotions. Interestingly, the sections referring to Marx' anthropology (the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book) are deleted in the English translation ... (not so in the German translation).

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<sup>453</sup> Section: "Private Property and Communism"

<sup>454</sup> This translation is understandable as the literal translation of "humanism of nature" as *ziran de renwenzhuyi* (自然的人文主义) would not make very much sense in Chinese.

Regarding aesthetics, Li's leading ideas are “sedimentation” (*jidian* 积淀), “significant form” (*you yiwei de xingshi* 有意味的形式) and “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构).

Cultural-Psychological Formation:

Can be changed: Both by positive elements of the Chinese as well as the Western tradition

A fusion of the best elements of both traditions

Possibly even a contribution to a world-civilization (human future)

Lastly: Also to be understood as human nature – as a result of a long lasting process (thousands of years) of sedimentation

Universal significance

**Dawid ROGACZ:**  
**Li Zehou: A Post-Marxist Yogācārin?**

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The concept of sedimentation (*jidian* 积淀) plays a pivotal role in the philosophy of Li Zehou. While the term *jidian* was coined by Li himself based on the metaphor of the geological settling of layers of sand and dust, its connotations cross-refer to the more or less evident theoretical inspirations of this concept. Amongst them, Li explicitly mentions the Piagetian theory of cognitive development;<sup>455</sup> there are also significant parallels between Li Zehou's notion of sedimentation and recent discoveries in evolutionary psychology and paleoarcheology.<sup>456</sup> This essay explores the alternative roots of this central category of Li's thought, namely the idea of storehouse consciousness (*ālaya vijñāna*) in Yogācāra Buddhism. Importantly, it is not claimed that Li Zehou "took it" from Yogācāra, as there are no direct traces of such borrowing,<sup>457</sup> and even if such embeddedness in the conceptual apparatus of Buddhism is true, the notion of Alaya and its transformations became largely transformed through the prism of Li's Post-Marxist understanding of human experience and history. Yet, the affinity between his theory of sedimentation, on the one hand, and some views on the transformations of the storehouse consciousness, on the other, is striking and illuminating, and given the influential position of the Yogācāra in the landscape of twentieth-century Chinese philosophy,<sup>458</sup> its actual impact cannot be ruled out without further investigation.

This is all the more surprising as Li Zehou's account of Buddhist thought is not particularly charitable. Li often treats Buddhism as an epitome of fanaticism, an apology for suffering, or a religious narcotic conducive to the maintenance of feudal society,<sup>459</sup> which is

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<sup>455</sup> Cf. Jana Rošker, "Human Memory as a Dynamic Accumulation of Experiences: Li Zehou's Concept of Sedimentation," *Ars & Humanitas* 12, no. 2 (2018), 135-137.

<sup>456</sup> Marthe Chandler, "Li Zehou, Kant, and Darwin: The Theory of Sedimentation", in: *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, ed. Roger T. Ames, Jinhua Jia, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu 2018, 279-312.

<sup>457</sup> Quite tellingly, Yogācāra is entirely omitted in Li's overview of Chinese philosophy, see *Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun*, Xinhua Shudian, Beijing 2008, 208-230.

<sup>458</sup> See John Makeham (ed.), *On Transforming Consciousness: Yogacara Thought in Modern China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

<sup>459</sup> Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, tr. Song Lizeng, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong 1994, 107-113, 126.

clearly indebted to the Marxist critique of religion. As Sandra Wawrytko points out, Li Zehou interprets Buddhism (at best) “as a catalyst for rather than a major component of Chinese philosophy,” whose main philosophical contributions are not far from the assumptions of Confucian thought.<sup>460</sup> Intrigued by this, Wawrytko traces the tacit influence of the Buddhist-Confucian compound upon Li’s aesthetics, specifically the aesthetical version of his view on the “humanization of nature.”<sup>461</sup> I would like to argue, however, that Li’s indebtedness to Buddhism may go even further and concern the very understanding of the “mechanism” of sedimentation, which bears significant similarities to the Yogācārist idea of storehouse consciousness, mostly as elaborated in *Mahāyāna Saṃgraha* and *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. And while this particular comparison might be controversial, it is noteworthy that attempts to demonstrate the complementarity of some Marxist and Buddhist categories are not new, since they date back to the writings of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) and have recently taken a deserved place in academic debates due to, i.a., Graham Priest.<sup>462</sup>

### **Coagulated seeds: Yogācāra on the generation and transformation of individual consciousness**

The concept of storehouse consciousness (*ālaya vijñāna*) has a long history that predates the emergence of the Yogācāra school.<sup>463</sup> Early Buddhist philosophy already contained an idea of the underlying latent dispositions (*anusaya*) which are psycho-ontologically instrumental in perpetuating samsaric existence. As *Samyutta Nikāya* (S II 66) reads, “If, monks, one does not intend, and one does not plan, but one still has a tendency towards (*anuseti*) something, this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness.” It is because all these tendencies give

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<sup>460</sup> Sandra A. Wawrytko, “Sedimentation in Chinese Aesthetics and Epistemology: A Buddhist Expansion of Confucian Philosophy,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40, no. 3-4 (2013), 477-479.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibidem*, 485-489.

<sup>462</sup> Graham Priest, *Capitalism – its Nature and its Replacement: Buddhist and Marxist Insights*, Routledge, New York 2021. For a synoptic view on Priest’s approach to the complementarity of Buddhism and Marxism, see Graham Priest, “Marxism and Buddhism: Not Such Strange Bedfellows,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 1 (2018), 2-13. Cf. also Karsten J. Stuhl, “Buddhism and Marxism: points of intersection,” *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 4 (2017), 103-116.

<sup>463</sup> For the classical philological and historical study of that concept, see Lambert Schmithausen, *Ālāyavijñāna. On the Origin and the Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogacara Philosophy. Part I: Text, Part II: Notes, Bibliography and Indices*, Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series IVab, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, Tokyo 1987.

rise to an unending series of conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*).<sup>464</sup> Questions about the exact mechanism of such proliferation, and regarding its “place” and ways to overcome it, led to the emergence of the concept of Alaya.

Essentially, the concept of *ālaya vijñāna* was introduced to denote both the storer of impressions (the “backup” for consciousness) and that which is stored. Since conscious life is an end product of its fluctuations, ultimately we have no (conscious) control over the transformation of the impressions of our past experiences into the objects of cognition.<sup>465</sup> According to *Mahāyāna Saṃgraha* (MSg I.3), “It is called *ālaya vijñāna* because all afflicted dharmas which have an origin dwell (*ālīyante*) in this [vijñāna] as a fruit (*phalabhāva*), and because this [vijñāna] also dwells in them as cause (*hetubhāva*).”<sup>466</sup> “Fruit” serves here as more than a metaphor, as the first [phase of] dependent arising (MSg I.26-28) refers to the emergence of the manifest forms of cognitive awareness (*pravṛtti vijñāna*) out of that which had been experienced (*aupabhogika*) in all the past existences. Alaya is, therefore, understood both in transcendental (‘the storer’) and psycho-genetic (‘the stored’) terms. On the one hand, in principle, “without that [*ālāya vijñāna*], existence (*bhāva*) conditioned by appropriation (*upādāna*) would also be impossible” (MSg I.33). Yet, on the other, from the viewpoint of the result of such conditioning, “vijñāna coagulates (*sammūrcchati*) as an embryo in the mother’s womb” (MSg I.34).<sup>467</sup> In this sense, the process of the coagulation of the seeds (*bīja*) of past actions guarantees the psycho-physical (that is, empirical) continuum of an individual.

From such a viewpoint it is clear that each individual has her or his own Alaya. However, as an ever-changing process, a simultaneously “perfumed” and “perfuming” entity, Alaya is not to be confused with the idea of permanent self, although in the opinion of Paul Williams it does “give a degree of personal identity.”<sup>468</sup> In fact, the illusion of permanent self is a product of the transformation of Alaya, resulting from the emergence of reflexive consciousness (*mānas vijñāna*). But if it is *mānas vijñāna* that creates the mental image of one’s ego and erroneously regards its cognitive processes as belonging to some self, so that the self/I is not to be found in

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<sup>464</sup> See William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist unconscious: the alaya-vijñāna in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*, Routledge, London-New York 2003, 33-37.

<sup>465</sup> Shun’ei Tagawa, *Living Yogacara: An Introduction to Consciousness-only Buddhism*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville 2009, 29-37.

<sup>466</sup> Cited from: Waldron, *The Buddhist unconscious*, 130.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibidem*, 140-141.

<sup>468</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Routledge, New York 2008, 97-99.

the Alaya itself, then why suppose that Alaya is individually differentiated? Such questions led to the interfusion of the Yogācāra school with the Tathāgatagarbha tradition, as best exemplified by *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*.

For the authors of *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, Alaya is basically and perfectly one. It is an unconditional absolute, comparable to a vast ocean unmoved by the churning of waves. For this reason, Alaya is seen as the noetic aspect of Suchness (*Tathatā*), “the conscious modality of *Tathatā* [that] grounds and animates the individual human psyche whose forms are the immanent transformations of (the Alaya) itself.”<sup>469</sup> It also means that the totality of phenomenal beings is nothing other than self-manifesting Mind. In this way, however, as Brian E. Brown points out, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* confuses ontology with epistemology, which in his eyes also jeopardizes the value of human subjectivity.<sup>470</sup> This opinion may be accurate due to the link that *Laṅkāvatāra* makes between the way-things-truly-are (Suchness) and our cognitive objects. On the other hand, such a connection is to some extent unavoidable, given that our conceptualizations are karmically determined, while these karmic seeds come from our actions, which change the world itself. *Mahāyāna Saṃgraha*, too, quite literally states that dharmas dwell in Alaya and that the causal chain of dependence arising due to their accumulation is, par excellence, real. In other words, the transformation of Alaya may be justifiably interpreted as a psycho-ontological process. As such, it bears some affinity with the way the Chinese philosopher Li Zehou understands the process of “sedimentation.”

### **Subject in the making: Li Zehou’s concept of sedimentation**

Li Zehou’s notion of sedimentation grows out of his innovative and controversial reading of Kantian philosophy, specifically from the historization of his transcendentalism. What Kant took to be a priori that is the universal and necessary structures of subjective cognition is, are in Li’s eyes, nothing but the achievements/fruits (*chengguo* 成果) of the historical, and which are therefore also the contingent experience of humanity – the experience that is carried on now and in the future generations.<sup>471</sup> Li’s provocative take on Kantianism is justified by the fact that while Kant elaborated on the transcendental character of categories, he did not explain their

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<sup>469</sup> Brian E. Brown, *The Buddha Nature. A Study of the Tathāgatagarbha and Ālayavijñāna*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi 1991, 183-184.

<sup>470</sup> Ibidem, 188, 192.

<sup>471</sup> Li Zehou, *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Sanlian Shudian, Beijing 2007, 70-72.

source.<sup>472</sup> Strictly speaking, Kant could not provide such an explanation, as the categories are transcendental in the sense that they are the condition of all possible experience, but they themselves cannot derive from any (possible) experience; otherwise they would not be *a priori*. In all fairness, Li admits that his interpretation requires a clearly non-Kantian assumption, namely that enduring forms of experience can be and are transformed into the transcendental (*jingyan bian xianyan* 经验变先验).<sup>473</sup> The exact shape of such transformation is explained by the concept of sedimentation: “In short, that which seems to be ‘transcendental’ to an individual is actually sedimentation, which has been historically acquired through the collective experience of humankind.”<sup>474</sup>

By stating that, Li fully endorses the historization of the transcendental, if not interpreting transcendentalism itself as essentially genealogical enterprise. This, however, as pointed out by Ady Van den Stock, entails precluding any bifurcation between conditioned and unconditioned, namely that which is supposedly independent of all experience.<sup>475</sup> Consequently, Li Zehou undermines another crucial distinction of modern Western philosophy, namely that between humans and nature. In Li’s own words, sedimentation refers to “the accumulations and deposits of the social, rational, and historical in the individual through the process of humanizing nature.”<sup>476</sup> The humanization of nature – a concept taken from Marxian philosophy – relates to the specifically human process of transforming both external and inner nature. While the humanization of external nature results in the creation of material civilization, and thus technical-social structures (*gongyi shehui jiegou* 工艺社会结构), the transformation of inner human nature(s) generates cultural-psychic formations (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构).<sup>477</sup> As Sylvia Chan points out, the latter “refers to the mental powers individuals have: cognition,

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<sup>472</sup> Cf. passages A 95-6 of Kant’s *Critique*.

<sup>473</sup> See Jana Rošker, *Following His Own Path. Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, New York 2019, 28.

<sup>474</sup> Li Zehou, *A New Approach to Kant. A Confucian-Marxist’s Viewpoint*, tr. J.H. Allen, Springer, Singapore 2008, viii.

<sup>475</sup> Ady Van den Stock, “Imprints of the Thing in Itself: Li Zehou’s Critique of Critical Philosophy and the Historicization of the Transcendental,” *Asian Studies* 24 (7), no. 1 (2020), 17.

<sup>476</sup> Li Zehou, *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View*, tr. J. Cauvel, Lexington Books, Lanham 2006, 94.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.

emotion, and volition.”<sup>478</sup> In this way, the collective ‘subjectality’ (*zhutixing* 主體性) shapes individual subjectivity (*zhuguanxing* 主觀性). On the other hand, since sedimentation “stores human experiences and shapes collective memory,”<sup>479</sup> human subjectivities are being molded from practical transformations of the objective world, which leads to the complementary process of the “naturalization of humans” (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化) and enables Li Zehou to engage in a dialogue with evolutionary psychology.

Importantly, the concept of the naturalization of humans does not involve just any experiences, but one particular experience that according to Li genuinely shapes our cognitive faculties: the manufacturing and use of tools (*shiyong-zhizao gongju* 使用—制造工具). For this reason, Li Zehou eagerly puts forward a number of concrete hypotheses regarding the origin of language or motor thinking.<sup>480</sup> This aspect of his theory of sedimentation, however, is not evolutionistic (Darwinian), but essentially Lamarckian. The accumulation of experiences, or rather features acquired during the practical taming of reality and under the influence of current needs, is gradually ‘transcendentalized,’ thus extending human cognitive abilities. It is not merely about a “the survival of the fittest,” when it comes to those preestablished and arbitrarily found faculties that happen to adapt to reality in the way that makes their survival possible. No matter how these faculties are shaped, at a certain stage of technological development, the production and use of tools actively and continuously transforms and expands them, and there seems to be no room for pure contingency in this process. On the other hand, Jane Clauvel argues that there are two more meanings of sedimentation present in Li Zehou’s theory: cultural, referring to the accumulation of the customs of thinking and feeling, and individual, pertaining to the accretion of personal experiences during one’s own life.<sup>481</sup> The latter two are clearly ‘Lamarckian’ in the sense discussed above, which means that even if Li’s transformativist approach to human subjectivity remains controversial from the scientific viewpoint, it is definitely consistent with the actual development of human culture and the way we live our own lives.

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<sup>478</sup> Sylvia Chan, “Li Zehou and New Confucianism,” in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. J. Makeham, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2003, 109.

<sup>479</sup> Rošker, “Human Memory as a Dynamic Accumulation...,” 135.

<sup>480</sup> See Li Zehou, “An Outline of the Origin of Humankind,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 31, no. 2 (1999), 20-25.

<sup>481</sup> Jane Cauvel, “The Transformative Power of Art: Li Zehou’s Aesthetic Theory,” *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 2 (1999), 158.

At the end of the day, however, Li Zehou's concept of sedimentation should not be read as a scientific hypothesis, but as a philosophical theory of human subjectivity and culture that quite effectively interprets it in the *longue-durée* scale. In his interpretation of the course of Chinese culture, which given its universal claims can possibly be related to other cultures as well, Li Zehou argues that the humanization of inner nature took place due to shamanistic activities, so that "all kinds of uniquely human psychological functions, like imagination, cognition, comprehension, and other intellectual activities, sprouted and developed while preserving their connection to elementary animalistic mental functions."<sup>482</sup> These activities themselves are described by Li as "based upon a unity of body and mind and by no means separated soul and flesh. They attached importance to the very process of activity and not to its objects."<sup>483</sup> This means that human subjectivity has been historically shaped through the collective practice of shamanistic transformation, or using Li Zehou's terminology, that individual "small self" (*xiaowo* 小我) has been created, or sedimented, out of the collective "greater self" (*dawo* 大我) – a communal form of consciousness. The collective consciousness is logically and historically prior to the individual self.<sup>484</sup> For this reason, Li Zehou understands this process in transcendental terms: "just as in the case of material production, I insist that without the activities of the collective social consciousness, i.e. without primitive shamanist ritual activities and without linguistic and symbolic activities, the formation of a human psyche that is different from that of the animals would not have been possible."<sup>485</sup> At the stage of this initial and elementary sedimentation, as Marthe Chandler reminds us, humans had much less sense of themselves as individuals than in the modern era; losing themselves in these collective activities, they "were in a sense 'one being' with one set of intentions, desires, and goals."<sup>486</sup> Treating shamanistic activities on a par with material technological practice may be surprising, but, as a matter of fact, magic and rituals were the first efforts to tame and manipulate nature, even phenomena seemingly beyond human control.

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<sup>482</sup> Jana Rošker, "Li Zehou's ethics and the importance of Confucian kinship relations: the power of shamanistic rituality and the consolidation of relationalism (關係主義)," *Asian Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (2020), 232.

<sup>483</sup> Li Zehou, *You wu dao li, shi li gui ren* 由巫到禮,釋禮歸仁, Sanlian shudian, Taipei 2015, 13.

<sup>484</sup> Cf. Rošker, "Human Memory as a Dynamic Accumulation..." 143.

<sup>485</sup> Li Zehou, *Meixue yu weilai meixue* 美学和未来美学, Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, Beijing 1990, 191-192

<sup>486</sup> Chandler, "Li Zehou, Kant, and Darwin," 300.

It has to be observed, however, that Li's focus on the long-range sedimentation of external nature and collective inner nature (and generally his almost post-structuralist understanding of subjectivity) could raise some questions about the extent to which the processes in question may be described as autonomous and free. Li Zehou himself was well-aware of this theoretical problem and addressed it mostly in his *Historical Ontology* (*Lishi bentilun* 历史本体论). First of all, the manufacturing and use of tools is a variant form of the process of measuring (*du* 度), which is practiced everyday by all human beings in all spheres of their *Lebenswelt*; in this sense, the substance (*wuti* 物体) of history is tantamount to social life.<sup>487</sup> All such acts are free within the limits of the current level of technological and economic development. They are necessary only in the long scale and post factum: it is from the viewpoint of time that we see that some things could not have happened otherwise, but it is impossible to predict in advance which single practice should necessarily lead to what sort of structures. All these stipulations notwithstanding, Li argues, the necessity arising from long-term practices of manipulating and transforming nature, resulting in sedimented psychic formations (*xinli xingshi* 心里形式), is no less fundamental than economic relations, although its pivotal role was long omitted by Marxist philosophers.<sup>488</sup> People are both the products and creators of history. And since "people actively create their own history, they take moral responsibility for their choices."<sup>489</sup> Sedimentation does not overrule this responsibility, but in fact it strengthens it, showing that the results of human practices are, in the strict sense, historical, and that what emerges from this process is ultimately nothing but the human subject itself.

### **Li's concept of sedimentation: Yogācāra turned on its head?**

This often neglected ethical dimension of sedimentation provides further opportunities for an effective comparison between the Yogācāra concept of the subject (specifically the version from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*) and Li Zehou's approach to subjectivity. In terms of the theoretical structure of these two conceptions, there are some intriguing and deep similarities and differences that need to be pointed out.

First, similarly to the transformation of storehouse consciousness, sedimentation can be described as a process, to use Rošker's formulation once again, that "stores human experiences

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<sup>487</sup> Li Zehou, *Lishi bentilun* 历史本体论, Sanlian Shudian, Beijing 2008, 18-22.

<sup>488</sup> Li Zehou, *Lishi bentilun*, 39, 42-43.

<sup>489</sup> Li Zehou, *Pipan zhexue de pipan*, 380-381.

and shapes collective memory.” Second, all these experiences come from free actions or practices, for which their agents bear moral responsibility. On top of that, both systems use similar imagery: whereas for Yogācāra this process is portrayed as a coagulation of the seeds of actions, Li Zehou depicts it as a sedimentation of the fruits (*chengguo*) of practices. Fourth, the result of this process – the “coagulated seeds” or “sedimented achievements” – are nothing but the manifest forms of cognitive awareness or consciousness in the language of Yogācāra, or psychic or cultural-psychic formations/structures (or simply categories of cognition) in the vocabulary of Li Zehou. Five, both approaches go further and state that what is transformed or sedimented is actually the individual subject itself (the individual self). For this reason, they introduce a communal form of consciousness – Alaya or *dawo*, which as an entity that logically precedes the creation of strictly cognitive faculties is also described in a more ontological way: as noetic Suchness or subjectivity (*zhutixing*, lit. “body-nature of the subject”). This is connected with the sixth affinity between these two conceptions. Both Li Zehou and the Yogācārins understand the generation of subject(-ivity) in both transcendental and psycho-ontological manners: it is, on the one hand, something without which individual consciousness would not be possible; on the other hand, the sedimentation or transformation of Alaya both refer to the actual, ‘psycho-genetic’ process that is extended throughout the generations. From a bird’s eye view, Li’s struggles to present Kantian categories as the ‘sediments’ of the practice of manufacturing and using tools are akin to Vasubandhu’s efforts to root reason qua reflexive consciousness (*mānas vijñāna*), understanding/apperception qua mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*), and six sensory consciousnesses, into a deeper repository of the results of human actions. Finally, both Li Zehou and the Yogācārins operate with a *longue-durée* scale and do not assume that every individual and every generation writes history anew: just as the way one’s world is seen in the current life is a result of the actions from all previous lives, so contemporary subjectivity should be seen as an effect of the long-term transformations of subjectivity starting, at the very latest, from the shamanistic humanization of nature.

Despite all these resemblances, none were spotted by either Li Zehou or the scholars of his thought. Of course, in order to make such a comparison feasible we need to make an assumption enabling us to read Yogācāra (also) as a philosophy of history. Such a reading, however, was not alien to modern Chinese philosophers due to the contribution of Zhang Taiyan (also known as Zhang Binglin, 1869-1936). As Viren Murthy observes, “Zhang explains the objectivity of history and time using the concepts of Yogācāra Buddhism” based on the idea

that “karmic seeds produce phenomena and are stored in ālaya consciousness.”<sup>490</sup> As Murthy continues, in Zhang’s view the collective karma stored in Alaya drives history and is responsible for the biological evolution of species from “the earliest amoeba” up to the emergence of human beings out of the realm of animals.<sup>491</sup> These ideas could certainly be viewed as an attempt to modernize Yogācāra in dialogue with both Hegelianism and evolutionism, and eventually even as the missing link between classical Yogācāra and Li’s Post-Marxist concept of sedimentation. This is not, however, the way Li Zehou interpreted Zhang Taiyan. In his eyes, the evolution Zhang Taiyan speaks about is a spiritual rather than a biological process. As such, it is a mere “reactionary speculation” that mirrors the capitalist mode of production that Zhang (allegedly) stood behind. And as if this typically Marxist criticism was not enough, Zhang’s philosophy is also described as “relativist,” “cabalistic,” and “nihilist,” falling back from transcendentalism to the “subjective idealism” of Buddhist epistemology which does not go beyond the phenomena of sensual experience.<sup>492</sup>

However, as uncharitable as such a reading may be, it certainly follows crucial discrepancies between the Yogācārist and Li’s Post-Marxist approaches to subjectivity. First of all, Yogācāra Buddhism is still a form of idealist philosophy, be it subjective or even transcendental. The quoted sutras clearly state that the perceived and cognized reality is the manifestation of reflexive consciousness and Alaya, and not vice versa. That the ‘material’ for these manifestations may come from external stimuli (a view held explicitly by e.g. Xuanzang) does not change the fact that it is consciousness(-es) that determines how these entities are synthesized into meaningful phenomena. Li Zehou, on the other hand, openly advocates the dependence of the cultural and psychic ‘superstructure’ upon the economic and technological base, although he insists that Marxism has to be purged of all elements that do not belong to the core of historical materialism (*weiwu shiguan de hexin* 唯物史观的核心), namely the idea of the constitutive role of the manufacturing and use of tools.<sup>493</sup> Consequently, the practice Li Zehou has in mind refers mostly to the use of tools, and generally – to all forms of manipulative and harmonizing measuring (*du*). In Yogācāra the seeds are brought about by all kinds of acts, and those of non-instrumental nature are probably even more saturated with karmic significance.

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<sup>490</sup> Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan*, Brill, Leiden 2011, 151, 156.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibidem*, 157-158.

<sup>492</sup> Li Zehou, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* 中国近代思想史论, Sanlian Shudian, Beijing 2008, 411-427.

<sup>493</sup> See Li Zehou, *Makesizhuyi zai Zhongguo* 马克思主义在中国, Minbao Chubanshe, Hongkong 2006, 141-148.

Third, Yogācāra does presuppose the existence of two or – counting the world of dreams – three realms of being (*trisvabhāva*). Specifically, the unconditioned, non-dual and perfect reality: Suchness or Alaya, is distinct from, if not opposed to, impermanent and imperfect phenomena. Such dualism is openly rejected by Li Zehou, and his “one-world view” is strengthened by a radical endorsement of historicism. The fourth significant difference regards the mechanism of subject-making in both approaches. In Yogācāra Alaya stores the seeds from a person’s own actions and transmits them to the next lives of that individual: the subject, its consciousness – and the world of experience such consciousness presents, is the result of her or his own actions ‘saved’ within Alaya. For Li Zehou, in turn, modern subjectivity, and therefore the cognitive faculties of contemporary human subjects, result from the collective long-term practice of all humanity. This entails another difference between the two views. Although the Yogācārist account clearly guarantees the continuity and accumulation of the fruits of one’s deeds, it does not necessarily imply any progression or improvement in this process. Due to the transmission of bad karma, things can actually go from bad to worse. Li Zehou believes, on the other hand, that since the manufacturing and use of tools serves as an instrument in adapting to external reality, with proper effort sedimentation and the accompanying “peaceful evolution” (*heping jinhua* 和平進化) shall lead to the increasing amelioration (*gailiang* 改良) of social life.<sup>494</sup> Needless to say, Li Zehou lacks the soteriological perspective of Yogācāra Buddhism. But even assuming that the notion of revolution constitutes, to some extent, the Marxist counterpart of the idea of liberation (salvation), then the views of the Yogācārins and Li Zehou could not be less different. While for the former the only way of liberation lies in the disruption of the stream of karmic seeds, Li Zehou condemns revolutions and all other disruptive forms of social liberation as utopian, counter-effective and simply dangerous.<sup>495</sup>

All these differences, however, do not overrule the affinities in their understandings of the genesis of the subject: for both Yogācārins and Li Zehou, individual subjectivity and its cognitive faculties is a long-term result of the sedimentation/coagulation of the results of human action (practice), which are collectively stored and transmitted through generations. The view of Li Zehou may be interpreted as a materialist, historicist, collectivist and antiutopian twist to Buddhist ideas, similar to the way in which Marx stood Hegel on his head.

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<sup>494</sup> Li Zehou, Liu Zaifu, *Gaobie geming: huiwang ershishiji Zhongguo* 告別革命: 回望二十世紀中國, Tiandi Tushu, Hongkong 2004, 302-304.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibidem*, 65.

**Jana S. ROŠKER:**

**A Post-Marxian Dialogue on the Subject-Object Relation: Li Zehou and Adorno on the Dialectics of Aesthetic Subjectivity**

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**Prologue: The Marxist Framework**

In pre-modern and modern Western epistemology and aesthetics, the subject-object dichotomy was mainly understood, following the Cartesian tradition, as meaning that the cognitive subject (the knower) is a thinking being that is not extended, and the object is an extended thing that does not think. This view or characterization of the concept of the cognitive subject has also prevailed in discussions of the nature of the Self, both in continental and analytic philosophy. Kant and the German idealists aimed to explain the human subject as something constituted in the process of perception and cognition, as the result of streams of sensory impressions.<sup>496</sup> This basic position was not changed by the fact that objects in this process had to adapt to the perceiving and cognizing subject. In such theories of knowledge there is an indissoluble difference between the object of knowledge and the knower. This is also true when the subject reflects on itself, i.e. when it is a matter of objective self-awareness.

A basic characteristic of the Marxist approach to the analysis of cognition, then, can be found in a new approach to the exploration of cognitive activities: here, the cognition, i.e. the grasping of knowledge about the object by the subject is in the context of the practical transformation of natural and social reality. In such a framework, subjects are conditioned by their practice, by their activity in the function of social human beings. Thus, Marxism views the foundation of people's relationship with external reality in their practice, that is, in their acting upon it. These activities enable human beings to perceive the world, but at the same time, in the process of perception, they necessarily change both reality and themselves. In this view, such reflective practice constitutes humans as beings qualitatively different from other animals, because in

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<sup>496</sup> Even though the active subject has been highly valued for their autonomy and independent decisions guided by free will since Kant established the basic Enlightenment values, these decisions and the subsequent actions take place on the foundation of the subject already laid in the process of perceiving and grasping external reality. In this sense, Kant's epistemology presupposes his practical philosophy, and we must distinguish between epistemology and ethics in the context of pre-modern and modern European philosophy.

confronting the outside world they are not passive receivers, but rather deal with the objects of cognition as something “that should be changed in accordance with some aim of their own” (Lektorskiy 2022: 2). Hence, in such an “actual practice” the perception of the object as it is, and the subject’s intentions of the goal of changing the object, are directly united.<sup>497</sup>

From a Marxist perspective, then, practice is that which actually unites the subject and object of perception and comprehension. In such an understanding, grasping reality was intrinsically connected with changing reality.<sup>498</sup> However, in this context we must also be aware of the fact that in Marxist theory, the relationship between subject and object cannot be equated with the relationship between consciousness and being – it is not a relation between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. The former is not confined to the limits of consciousness, for it is a real and acting person, while the latter is not merely part of the “objective reality”, but “that part of it which has become the target of the practical or cognitive activity of the subject” (ibid: 3). It is also important to understand that in this view the subject is not merely a physical and bodily individual, separated from his or her material and social environment. A human being can become a subject only under the condition of his or her mastery of the modes of existence and practices developed by society. Human language, the laws and categories of logic, the methodological systems of science and other forms of complex cognition can only evolve on

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<sup>497</sup> The destruction of this “natural” unity of subject and object lies at the core of Marx’s notion of alienation, in which the worker (the subject of production) is (violently and system-immanently) separated from the products of his or her labour (Marx 1972: 546).

<sup>498</sup> Similar views can be found in late medieval Chinese philosophy and are especially visible in Wang Fuzhi’s 王夫之 (1619 - 1692) philosophy. On the one hand, he acknowledged Wang Yangming’s 王阳明 (1472- 1529) hypothesis of the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一): “Knowledge and action complete each other; only together can they be efficient” (Wang 1974, IV: 383). But in contrast to Wang Yangming, Wang Fuzhi’s epistemology highlights that the relation between them is strictly hierarchical, for knowledge can only be gained through action: “If we wish to acquire reliable (substantiated, reasonable) knowledge, we must deal with concrete reality, which means that we have to act “. (ibid III: 316) For example, we are able to recognize the taste of food and drink only if we actually, i.e. actively, taste it: “First we have to eat or drink it, and then we can know its taste”. (Wang 1933, Vol. 32, II: 8b) This premise was also used by Mao Zedong 毛澤東, who took it one step further in his epistemology of revolution with his famous maxim that we must change reality in order to recognize it. Using the example of a pear that had to be eaten in order to know what it tasted like, he noted that in the very act of eating it, we have already changed it. (Mao Zedong 1966: 264)

such a onto-epistemological basis. This practice is a material practice, it pertains to the material world, it changes this world and elaborates upon it.<sup>499</sup>

### The “Practical Philosophy of Subjectality” and the underlying theory of perception

Li Zehou, who followed Marxist (especially the early Marxist) theory, labelled his philosophical system “anthropo-historical ontology”<sup>500</sup> (or in abbreviated form, “historical ontology”<sup>501</sup>), although he emphasizes that this new way of thinking is essentially a “practical philosophy of *subjectality*”.<sup>502</sup> *Subjectality* is his own neologism denoting the practical and active aspects of the human subject, expressed in Chinese by the term *zhutixing* 主体性<sup>503</sup>. Although he agreed that the latter term might better capture the meaning of his philosophy, he felt that the name philosophy of *zhutixing* (or subjectality) would be more difficult for Western readers to understand. In Chinese, there are two different terms that refer to the nature of the human subject. In contrast to *zhuguanxing* 主观性, which belongs to epistemology and refers to the properties of the cognitive subject, *zhutixing* means the acting person in practice who has the property of objectivity.<sup>504</sup> Traditionally, however, both terms have been translated into English with a single word, subjectivity. In order to maintain this important distinction between the epistemological and ontological aspects of the human subject, Li coined the term

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<sup>499</sup> In this aspect of Marxist epistemology, however, we encounter a problem that is not very visible but has important implications for the general questions that are in the centre of the present paper. As Klaus Gössler reveals (214: 771), there is probably no major account of Marxist epistemology in which essential methods of materialist dialectics are not described. In general, its basic principles are conscientiously recapitulated in all their essential premises and working steps, and often meticulously explained with examples (mostly from the economic writings of the classics), but unfortunately without being applied to Marxist epistemology itself.

<sup>500</sup> *Renleixue lishi bentilun* 人类学历史本体论

<sup>501</sup> *Lishi bentilun* 历史本体论

<sup>502</sup> *Zhutixingde shijian zhexue* 主体性的实践哲学

<sup>503</sup> Actually, the term *zhutixing* could be translated into English with a word that already exists, namely subjectness, which refers to the quality of being a subject. However, in a personal conversation in which I suggested to Professor Li that the term “subjectality” could be changed to “subjectness” (because this would be easier for Western readers to understand), he claimed that the term referred only to the individual, which I believe is not necessarily true. However, at the time of this discussion the concept of subjectality was already an integral part of his philosophy, so it would be too complicated to change it anyway.

<sup>504</sup> As we shall see below, Li viewed the concept of objectivity not only as something that stands in opposition to subjectivity, but also as that which is common to both humanity and its sociality.

subjectality. In his view, however, the concept of subjectality was difficult to grasp for Western philosophers, who usually automatically assume an ontology based on the static notion of being. Li therefore feared that such a deep-seated, fixed view of the problem of existence would make it too difficult to understand his specific, dynamically changing concept of the human subject, which (along with their entire psychology) is a product of socio-historical development. For this reason, he preferred to call his “practical philosophy of subjectality” by the term “anthropo-historical ontology” (Li and Cauvel 2006: 171). But the idea of subjectality was doubtless in the centre of this theoretical system, and it represented a synthesis of a Kantian autonomous subject, and the Marxist notion of practice as a vital element of human existence. While Li agrees with Marx’s emphasis on the primary importance of objective conditions, productive forces, and the material base, he diverges from orthodox Marxism in his conviction that the objective content of human practice cannot be separated from all those factors that are constitutive of autonomy in human life, especially in their creativity, innovativeness, and the willingness to act. Li Zehou tried to fix this inconsistency with the help of Kantian philosophy, in order to provide a link between Marx’s idea of a “humanized nature” on the one hand and Kant’s understanding of the subject on the other. As he explained:

The work that I now needed to do was to provide a link between Marx’s idea of a ‘humanized nature’ and the philosophy of Kant. That is the reason I associated ‘subjectality’ with subjectivity, giving ‘*a priori*’ subjectivity a materialistic ‘subjectality’ foundation. (Li 1999: 179)

In Li Zehou’s philosophical system, the concept of subjectality had several different layers, and Li distinguishes between two different kinds of subjectality: the first refers to the personal identity of an individual, and the second to communities and to humanity as a whole:

The so-called ‘subjectality’ has precisely this meaning. The subject of humanity appears through the social realization of material reality, (based upon material production). This is the objective level of subjectality. This level is elementary and manifests itself in the structural connection between technology and society, as well as in social existence. Simultaneously, it also embraces the subjective level of social consciousness, which manifests itself in culturally conditioned mental structures. Therefore, the mental structure of subjectality is not primarily the subjective awareness of an individual in the sense of his or her sensations, desires etc. This notion refers primarily to the results of

human history that manifest themselves in structures of spiritual and intellectual culture, as well as in structures of ethical and aesthetic consciousness.<sup>505</sup> (Li Zehou 2001: 43)

But the question of the subject and its connection to the concept of subjectivity is not the only problem that needs to be clarified when speaking about Li Zehou's view of the subject-object relation, because in Chinese the semantic connotations of this relation do not entirely overlap with the English (or Western) ones.

As we have seen, there are different expressions for the Western concepts of subjectivity (e.g., *zhutixing* 主体性 vs *zhuguanxing* 主观性). However, the semantic scope of the field involving Chinese notions of object or objectivity is also different from the Western one, though not in the same way. In the epistemological sense, that is, in the function of individual perception expressed in English by the word objective or objectivity, the Chinese use the term *keguan* 客观 or *keguanxing* 客观性, in contrast to the term *zhuguan* 主观 or *zhuguanxing* 主观性, which means subjective or subjectivity. However, when expressing the general idea of an object as opposed to a subject (*zhuti* 主体), the Chinese language uses two different terms, *keti* 客体 or *duixiang* 对象<sup>506</sup>:

In the Chinese context, strictly speaking, the object (in the sense of *keti*) belongs to the category of epistemology, while the scope of the object (in the sense of *duixiang*) is much broader. ... The aesthetic object (*shenmei keti*<sup>507</sup>) mainly belongs to the category of epistemological philosophy, and together with aesthetic subject, it forms an epistemological model in the field of aesthetics.<sup>508</sup> (Zhang 2002: 1)

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<sup>505</sup>所谓'主体性'也是这个意思. 人类主体即展现为物质现实的社会实现活动(物质生产活动是核心), 这是主体性的客观方面即工艺- 社会结构亦即社会存在方面, 基础的方面. 同时主体性也包括社会意识亦即文化心理结构的主观方面. 从而这里讲的主体性心理结构也主要不是个主体观的意识, 情感, 欲望, 等等. 而恰恰首先是指作为人类历史成果的精神文化, 智力结构, 理论意识, 审美享受.

<sup>506</sup> A similar differentiation can be found in German, which distinguishes between *Objekt* und *Gegenstand*. While the former relates to the Chinese *keti*, the latter is a rather literally translation of *duixiang*. Both nouns, derived from the two core notions, i.e. *Gegenständlichkeit* as well as *duixiangxing*, refer to the external phenomena.

<sup>507</sup> 审美客体

<sup>508</sup> 在汉语语境中, 严格讲, 客体属于认识论范畴, 对象的使用范围则要广泛得多... 审美客体主要属于认识论哲学范畴, 它与审美主体一道构成美学领域中的认识论模式.

Since, at the level of terminology, these two different connotations of the object in the sense of *keti* and *duixiang* are expressed in English by a single term, we must be careful to maintain the distinction made by Li (and in Chinese in general) between the object in the sense of a thing existing in the external world, which is in general opposition to human beings, and the object in the sense of the epistemological opposition to the cognitive subject.

The object (in the sense of *keti*) is relative to the subject and refers to the object (in the sense of *duixiang*) of the subject's understanding or practice, which can be either material or mental. But the correspondence of object (as *duixiang*) and subject refers to the material or mental phenomenon that is determined as the purpose of understanding and practice. Whether a particular thing or thought can become the object (as *keti*) of cognition and practice depends on the subject. In the context of cognition, object (as *duixiang*) and object (as *keti*) are synonyms. But the two are also different. In the strict sense, object (as *keti*) belongs to the field of epistemology, while the meaning of object (as *duixiang*) is different because of the different scope of application. For example, it is consistent that the object (in the sense of *keti*) is that which is in corresponding opposition to the subject. But the object (in the sense of *duixiang*) that stands in corresponding opposition to consciousness is matter, which is not limited to the category of cognition, and here the object (in the sense of *duixiang*) is not an object (in the sense of *keti*) but matter. Similarly, the object (*duixiang*) corresponding to social consciousness is social existence, not the object (in the sense of *keti*). The extension of the object (as *duixiang*) is larger. As mentioned above, it can refer to both the material and the mental, which means that it can refer to both the object and the subject. The objective (*keguan*<sup>509</sup>) refers only to material objects. Its extension is therefore narrower. The object (as *keti*) is more limited to the part of the material or spiritual world that pertains to knowledge and practice, therefore its extension is even narrower.<sup>510</sup> (Ibid: 2-3)

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<sup>509</sup> The word *keguan* derives from *keti*

<sup>510</sup> 客体是相对于主体而言的，指的是主体认识或实践的对象，这种对象既可以是物质的，也可以是精神的。对象与主体相对应，指的是被确定为认识和实践活动目的的物质现象或精神现象。某种事物或某一思想，能否成为认识和实践的对象，依赖于主体而定。在对象与客体的关系上，在认识范围内，对象与客体是同义词。但二者也有不同。客体是严格意义上的认识论范围，而对象则因使用范围不同其含义也各有不同。比如，与主体相对应的是客体，这是一致的，而与意识相对应的对象则是物质，这就不限于

Thus, the two terms commonly translated as object, i.e., *duixiang* and the *keti*, both refer to entities that are opposite to the subject. In other words, they are both what the subject is directly confronted with. However, while *duixiang* includes all objects of the external world, *keti* refers only to the phenomena that are to be grasped (or understood) by the cognitive subject. This difference also has certain implications for understanding the idea of objectivity.

While *duixiangxing* 对象性 refers to objective reality in its entirety (including the subjects and objects of cognition), the counterpart to the subject (*keti*), which refers to objectivity, is only *keguanxing* 客观性 and not *ketixing* 客体性. Here it is important to see the difference between the characters *guan* 观 and *ti* 体. While the former expresses a particular point of view (thus, in the compound *keguan*, this is an objective, i.e., external, point of view), the latter implies the connotation of incorporation and thus, the compound *keti* can only be used in reference to discrete objects as such and not to the perception or understanding of those objects.

Li already defined this view of objectivity (in the former, epistemological sense) in his first important essay, titled *Lun meigan, mei he yishu* 论美感, 美和艺术 (On aesthetic feeling, beauty and art). In this work, which was published in 1956, Li raised his famed idea of the “synthesis of objectivity and sociality” (客观性与社会性相统一), arguing that we could establish a seemingly intuitive and direct connection with a specific object not because an unmediated relation exists between the subject and the object, but because that object has always already been contextualized and conceptualized within a sociality of many other things and relations (Li 1956: 55).

In this early work, one can already sense the importance of subjectivity, for he argued – in accordance with Marx’s early work *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* – that for us, there is no inert nature as such, but only the nature that is transformed by humans (Pang 2022: 9). In this regard, Li upgraded and expanded the Marxist concept of the “humanization of nature” (*zirande renhua* 自然的人化). Indeed, in his early work Li often

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认识范畴了，而且对象就不是客体而是物质了。与社会意识相对应的对象，指的又是社会存在，而不是客体了。对象外延更大，如前所述，既可指物质，也可指精神，既可指客体，也可指主体。而客观则只指物质对象。所以外延小。客体则更是限于认识和实践的那一部分物质世界或精神世界，外延更小。

referred to this process as the “socialization of nature” (*zirande shehuihua* 自然的社会化) precisely because he wanted to emphasize its social and collective component. In such a view, perception is our activity of constituting humanized objects. Therefore, the object of perception should not be treated “as if in a ‘disconnected’ cognitive situation of the subject and object. It is constituted in the interaction between them” (Banka 2022: 30).

But the young Li Zehou also believes that these basic or essential characteristics of humanity, including their relations as subjects to the objects of their practice, have been seriously alienated in class society. Such estrangement is a state in which human beings are related to the *products of their labour* as to alien objects. Here, Li’s theory was in complete accordance with early Marx, according to whom the estrangement of the workers from their products means not only that their labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside them, independently, as something alien to them, and that it becomes a power that confronts them on its own. It means that the life that they have conferred upon the object confronts them as something hostile and alien. The workers put their lives into the object and, consequently, their life no longer belongs to them but to the object (Marx 2007: 29). In this context, Li emphasizes that it is exactly this estrangement that tends to make humanness (or human nature) appear similar to animal nature (Li 1994: 320). Hence, for Li Zehou, the essence of “being human” lies precisely in the free activity of production – especially in the production of art. In this process humans become capable of achieving the free unification of their cognitive powers, as described by Kant, and find their way to the unity with the objects of their nature-humanizing practice. The highest stage of subjectivity is therefore to be found in the realm of aesthetics, which can, however, not be reduced to the spiritual sphere. Instead, Li Zehou considers aesthetics to be the ultimate fruit of human subjects, and the most striking and prominent manifestation of humanity (Gu, Xin 1996: 216). In this sense, beauty, as an aesthetic category, obtains an ontological dimension (Lin, Min 1992: 990). It is necessarily objective because it neither depends on individual consciousness nor is rooted in a metaphysical, supernatural order. But beauty is not objective because it would be an intrinsic property of the observed objects. Rather, it is a quality of humankind:

Nature as such is certainly not beautiful. Beautiful nature is a result of socialization; it is a result of the objectification (or alienation) of the essence of the human being. The sociality of nature is the origin of beauty.<sup>511</sup> (Ibid.: 57)<sup>512</sup>

Therefore, Li believes that beauty can only emerge through the interdependence of the subjective practice and objective reality (Banka 2022: 362). Li Zehou's concept of subjectality was thus firmly rooted in his aesthetic theory, which was based on a critique or expansion of Kant's theory of perception. In this context, the vital and inseparable connection between subject and object is constituted by the fact that human essence, i.e. our subjectality, can be identified with the objectivity of our social nature. The aesthetic experience which stems from such a perception theory is necessarily different from that of the Western mainstream, which presupposes a simple dichotomy between subject and object (Man 2015: 2).

This elimination of a fixed borderline between the subject and the object of comprehension and practice was thoroughly maintained in Li's later writings on the theory of perception and its intrinsic axiological value which manifests in the aesthetics feeling:

A human being, then, is no longer a subject facing the objective world (cognition) and interacting with it (actions), but an aesthetic noumenon that has abolished the distinction between subject and object or the "realm of Heaven and Earth"<sup>513</sup>. (Li 1994: 24)

With regard to the subject-object relationship and the issue of their dialectical interaction, Li also emphasizes the instrumental role of the principle of "seizing the proper measure" (*du* 度) because it triggers both the separation and the union of the two antipodes that constitute this

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<sup>511</sup>自然本身并不是美，美的自然是社会化的结果，也就是人的本质的对象化（异化）的结果。自然地社会性是美的根源。

<sup>512</sup> The somehow strange claim that beauty was the product of the alienation of human essence is probably a mistake; what Li really meant in this context, was probably externalization (*waihua* 外化). This confusion was a result of the fact that Marx frequently uses two similar German terms, "Entäußerung" and "Entfremdung", to express the notion of alienation or estrangement. In Chinese translations of the Manuscripts, the term "Entäußerung" (i.e. externalization) is usually translated with the term *waihua* 外化 and "Entfremdung" with the term *yihua* 异化.

<sup>513</sup> 人从而不再是与客观世界相对峙（认识）相作用（行动）的主体，而是泯灭了主客体之分的审美本体，或“天地境界”。

relationship. For Li Zehou, the original distinction between subject and object appears in this dynamic method, which humans need to deal productively with objects and process them in a way that is appropriate to the internal order of those objects and at the same time consistent with their own intentions. Since *du* is always relative and relational, there is, of course, no fixed, pre-existent, or *a priori du* that could be grasped and imposed on objects in this process. Rather, as Wu Xiaoming explains in another chapter of this volume, different kinds of *du* represent different ways of being “just right” in the ever-changing activities of matching the *du* of the object.

The “*du*” not only enables the establishment of the cognitive forms of the subject. The distinction between subject and object itself can also be realized only on the ontological basis of “*du*”. On this existential basis of “*du*”, they were originally merged together, but in the consciousness of subjectivity, the need for a distinction between them gradually arose.<sup>514</sup> (Ibid: 64)

In this view, the separation between subject and object is not something of ontological primacy, but rather a product of human cognition and practice.

It can be seen that the dichotomy of subject and object is secondary and second-order. It has its origin in human practice and was established by the grasping of the right and proper measure that can be of use to human beings.<sup>515</sup> (Ibid: 65)

This separation of subject and object is something that distinguishes humans from other animals that do not differentiate between them (Li 2006: 15). But, on the other hand, practice also “refers to the activities of the subject to purposefully and consciously transform the objective material world. It is the unity of subject and object”<sup>516</sup> (Ma 1991: 51). In the natural, i.e., non-alienated process of productive practice, such a union of opposites is a result of the internalization of the intrinsic structures of the objects worked on and thus of their “humanization”.

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<sup>514</sup> “度”不仅使主体认识形式得以建立,而且主客体之分也是在“度”的本体性基础之上才能实现的。主客体在“度”的本体中本来混而不分,但在主观性的意识中,却逐渐需要区别。

<sup>515</sup> 可见,主客体的二分是第二位的、次要的,它来源于人在实践活动中恰到好处的“度”的建立。

<sup>516</sup> 实践是指主体有目的、有意识地改造客观物质世界的活动,是主体与客体的统一。

Practice, then, is a trigger for both the separation and the unification of subject and object. It constitutes humanness (*ren xing* 人性) and subjectivity. In such a view, subject and object interact with each other in a mutually complementary and interdependent way. It is a dialectics guided by the laws of *du*, which always tends toward equilibrium and is the first epistemological category. It is precisely this category that establishes the separation and unity of cognition in the dialectical process of human practical activities (Li 1994: 181).

According to Li's understanding, human knowledge is thus able to grasp the internal structure of natural objects. In this way, the human understanding of the nature of things on the one hand, and the things in their objective states on the other, can be brought together (Man 2015: 24). In Li Zehou's system, it is tools that enable people to transform their social and natural worlds, which in turn shape them (Cauvel 1999: 156). Thus, this process is a dialectical and reciprocal one.

### **Negative dialectics and the critique of identitarian philosophy**

Having already presented Li Zehou's understanding of the subject-object relationship and their mutually complementary interaction in the previous section, let us now take a brief look at Adorno's conception of the dialectics of the relationship between subject and object.

Adorno describes his understanding of knowledge about social reality as negative dialectics in the book of the same name. For him, a method based on the concept of dialectics is the prerequisite for a theory that remains open to what has not yet been conceptualized by the cognitive subjects. He points out, on the other hand, that thought itself is something that leads us to the identification of our subjective conceptualizations and observed objects. However, we rarely think about the fact that this identity is an illusion. Traditional Western dialectics is based upon this illusion, which leads to the problem that whenever we are confronted with other concepts (i.e. different understanding) of the same reality, we inevitably see them as contradicting our original conception. Adorno formulates this problem in the following way:

Yet the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify. Conceptual order is content to screen what thinking seeks to comprehend. The semblance and the truth of thought entwine. The semblance cannot be decreed away, as by avowal of a being-in-itself outside the totality of cogitative definitions. It is a thesis

secretly implied by Kant – and mobilized against him by Hegel – that the transconceptual “in itself” is void, being wholly indefinite. Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity. Since that totality is structured to accord with logic, however, whose core is the principle of the excluded middle, whatever will not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction. Contradiction is non-identity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself. (Adorno 2004: 5)

In Adorno’s view, Hegel’s dialectic, based on such a problematic relationship between subjective concepts and external objects, can hardly lead to new insights. The shift in thinking proposed by Adorno, based on a critique of such forms of cognition, is of utmost importance not only for contemporary Western philosophy, but also for global philosophy, especially if we compare it to other theories developed in other cultures. In this sense, a contrastive analysis of Li and Adorno could prove itself to be quite fruitful. (Or not – let’s see.)

Adorno is a mischievous child of the European Enlightenment. He recognizes the importance of its values, but on the other hand is very critical regarding the inner structure of its basic epistemology. Already Plato insisted on a fundamental separation of soul and body, and centuries later the Platonic separation of body and soul found its final manifestation in the Cartesian split between subject and object. But it is only after Kant that the subject of cognition no longer remains a passive moment in the process of perception, dependent only on the objects. Rather, the objects now proceed from the cognitive structure of the subject. Thought is thus conceived here as in itself concrete and self-determining. Adorno admires Kant’s emphasis on the acting subject, but at the same time criticizes this epistemological model because it inevitably leads to an aporia. Here, the human being no longer has the possibility to conceive of herself as a sensuous subject, she can no longer define herself as a physical, material being in a material world. The Kantian conception is also not able to determine how problems in thinking can arise and (even less) how they can be solved. The objectivity which is attained in the process of cognition can therefore only be understood as constituted by the subject, and thus knowledge means nothing more than the subjectively produced objectivity of the world appearing to us. That which is perceived and objectified by the categories of the understanding is considered reality, but at the same time, it remains imprisoned within the limits of human

reason. Since thought is a closed domain, cognition becomes tautology, since thinking and what is to be thought apparently lie in the same instance. But actually the act of cognition should refer to something that is outside the mind. Despite these problems, the Kantian “revolution of thought” was of enormous importance for the progress of European philosophy and culture, since it meant a shift from theological to human creation.

Adorno’s critique, which is based upon his concept of the “priority of the object”, aims at overcoming such an aporetic ontological dualism of subject and object without falling behind Kant’s progress in recapitulating human freedom. With his critique of Kant, Adorno’s tries to escape the aporia in which thought can only refer to itself, and to point out a possibility according to which subject and object are not only definable as opposites but also as a reciprocal relationship (N.N. 2010: 4). To this end, he opposes the strict separation between the empirical and the transcendental subject as carried out by Kant. According to Adorno, the concept of the subject refers not only to a general definition, to “consciousness in general”, but always also to a single individual as well.

The element of individual humanity is indispensable in any concept of the subject; without any memory of it, the subject would lose all meaning. Conversely, the single human individual is already universalized as soon as it is reflected on in a general conceptual form as the individual, not only as some particular person. (Adorno 2003: 741)

By defining the subject not only as something general, but also as something particular and empirically concrete, Adorno highlights the importance of the experience and practice upon which the individual subject relies in acquiring knowledge (N.N. 2010: 4). As he emphasizes: “The key position of the subject in knowledge is experience, not form” (Adorno 2003: 752).

Adorno here defines a “faculty of sensuousness” (N.N. 2010: 5), characterized by the fact that the subject is always in a sensuous relation to the object. In this way, Adorno abolishes the dichotomous separation of subject and object and the supremacy of the Kantian subject, but without revoking Kant’s central insight that the givenness of the objects to which a subject refers cannot be uncritically presupposed. With Kant, Adorno emphasizes the view that the subject has of the world, but unlike Kant, he emphasizes the independence of the object of cognition from the subject of cognition (Adorno 1966: 70). For it is precisely the absence of

this independence that makes cognition a tautology or pure identity. On the other hand, he emphasizes the non-identical, i.e., that part of the object that is included in the cognizing subject, because it is precisely this part that triggers thought by making it go beyond itself. Adorno's "priority of the object", then, by no means implies a return to a naïve rationalism. Instead, he establishes a different subject perspective, and one that seeks to reclaim the position of the object in the process of cognition in order to achieve a dialectical mediation between them.

The "priority of the object" implies that, in contrast to Kant's epistemology, the process of perception and understanding is not directed asymmetrically from the side of the cognitive subject to the side of the object of understanding, but from the centre equally in both directions, namely to the subject and the object (N.N. 2010: 5). This also means that everything that is perceived is filtered through subjectivity and everything that exists is inconceivable without human practice.

The role of the object in the cognitive process must not be neglected. According to this view, the cognitive process consists of a coexistence of sensory and conceptual faculties. Thus, the origin of thinking and sensory abilities comes from the same source. The sensory experiences that give rise to sensory cognitions and the judgments that are sensory cognitions are thus to be understood as actualizations of one and the same faculty.

The concept and the conceived, the judgment and its sensuous basis, whose logical unity was still disputed according to Kant, can now be brought together by the idea of a sensuous faculty of understanding. Perception is here the basis of all cognition, which, however, does not only extend to conceptual rationality, but also includes feelings. This synthesis, however, is already present in the process of perception and is not first made possible by a transcendental consciousness. Things, then, can be known as they have been constructed through the concepts. However, this is not to be understood as absolute: Here it applies that a subject with conceptual faculties must also have a critical relationship to them and reflect on them. For like any ability, a sensory-cognitive ability is fundamentally fallible (Adorno 1996: 229). And therefore it is important to question the process of perception again and again and not to accept it as given and infallible (ibid: 148).

Adorno defines the subject-object relation as a relationship in which the two antipodes influence each other. But by no means does he want to level the dichotomy completely. Rather, he is

concerned with presenting the two categories as interpenetrated by mediation. For the deformed perspective that Adorno sees in rational subject-centredness does not stem from a general separation of subject and object, of mind and nature, of reason and sensuality, but from the lack of reflexive mediation that can only be achieved through a “mindfulness of nature in the subject” (N.N. 2010: 6).

Objectivity, according to Adorno, is solidified social practice expressed in terms of material and immaterial production as well as social structure and spheres of life. In this respect, the subject-object dichotomy is on the one hand pure thought abstraction and on the other hand social reality at the same time (ibid: 7). The separation of subject and object is thus reality and illusion at the same time:

True, because in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development. False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant. (Adorno 1978; 498-9)

Adorno sees in this dichotomy a contradiction, which is conveyed into epistemology. On the other hand, however, this contradiction has a pseudo-character, for while they can only be thought of separately, this separation is manifested in their being mutually mediated.

### **Let's imagine a dialogue**

Since we want to establish a theoretical relationship between the works of these two scholars, it would be good to start with their opinions of each other. However, this will only be a one-sided introduction since, as mentioned earlier, Adorno did not even know of Li Zehou's existence, let alone his work. But before we compare their epistemologies and turn to their respective conceptions of the subject and object of understanding, let us therefore at least briefly present Li Zehou's critique of the Frankfurt School and negative dialectics.

Li Zehou was not very fond of the European post-Marxist streams of thought. In his view, Marx (especially the early Marx) was still interested in sociality, whereas the post-Marxist theories – including the critical theory of the Frankfurt school – focused more and more on the individually conditioned type of subjectivity. In fact, in his eyes this was the main common

flaw of most “fashionable” contemporary streams of thought emerging in the West region throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Analytical philosophy, structuralism, and many other streams of the contemporary capitalist world (like for instance philosophical methodology or epistemology) are cold philosophies, which overlook the substance of subjectality. In addition, Sartre’s existentialism, the philosophies of the Frankfurt School and other fashionable currents (like for instance the philosophy of rebellion or the philosophy of emotion) on the other hand, are blindly propagating the individual subjectality. They have nothing to do with the practical philosophy of subjectality.<sup>517</sup> (Li 1985: 21)

To the best of my knowledge, Li never explicitly mentioned Adorno, although he was very critical of the idea and implications of negative dialectics, which is one of the most important concepts of Adorno’s theory:

In my view, this “negative dialectics” is an antidote or a decoration of contemporary capitalism. Capitalist society has locked them up within the academic walls where they can deal with the angry voices of the public, freedom and democracy without seriously affecting or having any real impact on the economic foundation of capitalism. And they have not even seriously studied that foundation.<sup>518</sup> (Li 1994, 74)

Li thus accuses critical theory of a privileged distance or separation from the facts and practical realities of the real world. According to him, the theory production of the members of the Frankfurt School originated in an academic ivory tower of “splendid isolation”.

This criticism is probably somewhat exaggerated. Although Li Zehou himself had a truly remarkable influence on Chinese youth in the 1980s, several members of the Frankfurt School,

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<sup>517</sup>分析哲学、结构主义等等,可说是无视主体性本体的冷哲学(方法哲学、知性哲学),而沙特的存在主义,法兰克福学派等,则可说是盲目夸张个体主体性的热哲学(造反哲学、情绪哲学),它们都应为主体性实践哲学所扬弃掉。

<sup>518</sup>这种“否定辩证论”,我曾称之为今日资本主义的解毒剂和装饰 d 品。资本主义把它放在学院院墙之内,以示众声喧哗、自由民主,而并不严重影响或真正触动资本主义的经济基础。它们也没有认真去研究这个基础。

notably Herbert Marcuse and Adorno himself, were similarly influential and the intellectual idols of critical leftist students and their movements in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. As for Li's accusation regarding the lack of knowledge of the "economic foundations of capitalism" allegedly visible in Adorno's theories, it is only fair to add that we cannot find any profound development or elaboration of Marxist economic theory in Li's own philosophy, either.

Li also criticized members of the Frankfurt School (including Adorno) for focusing on the individual and neglecting the importance of the social, collective nature of being human. Such criticism is relatively weak if we consider the neo-Marxist theoretical framework of the Frankfurt School. As we have seen, for example, in Adorno the concept of individual humanity was not introduced as a negation of the indisputable importance of the universal and collective character of humanity, but as a necessary complement to arrive at a comprehensive conceptualization of the human subject. This complementary aspect was crucial for Adorno's emphasis on the importance of experience and practice, a view that is basically very much in line with Li Zehou's theory of subjectivity, which, as we have seen, has several levels.

Be that as it may, it is worth comparing the works of Adorno and Li Zehou in some important respects. On a general level, the two theorists resemble each other in their shared concern to establish a productive connection among aesthetics, epistemology, and sociology. In the comparative reflections that follow, I will focus on one particular aspect of their philosophical interests that constitutes the central problem of this essay, namely their respective conceptions of the subject-object relationship. I believe that a contrastive analysis of their individual views of this relation may suggest some alternative ways of resolving the problems inherent in the prevailing Western model of dialectical thought.

Although they shared two decades of their adult lives, Li and Adorno did not know much, if anything, about each other's work. As we have seen above, Li Zehou's critique of the Frankfurt School and its critical theory (including his critique of the concept of "negative dialectics") was very general and vague, and Li never made any specific references to Adorno's theories. Therefore, it is probably safe to say that he never really engaged with his work. And Adorno, in turn, had no opportunity to read Li Zehou, since the first translation of his work into Western languages was published long after the German's death.

It is all the more surprising, then, that for all the differences in the theoretical structures of Li Zehou and Adorno that are apparent at first glance, a closer look reveals a remarkable number of similarities. And not all of these similarities can simply be attributed to the same zeitgeist and largely the same discursive foundation. What is certainly more interesting in this context are the differences that arise from this common ground. Since most of these differences can be traced to the different cultural and socio-political backgrounds on which the theories of these two great scholars were developed, they could be related to different paradigms of their respective traditions. Thus, a contrastive analysis of these differences might shed light on some aspects of the relationship between Chinese and European intellectual traditions. Through the lens of their particular views on the subject-object relationship, we will therefore start from their commonalities in order to place their differences in a framework that will allow us to construct a fruitful dialogue between the two philosophers.

Li and Adorno were both active in the field of modern philosophy, they were both supporters of Marxist (especially early Marxist) thought, and both were interested in aesthetics, especially in its social and political functions. Besides, the general epistemological basis of their respective theoretical models is a thoroughgoing questioning of the ontological dualism that both scholars also regard as the foundation of modern Western thought. They both see this dualism as the result of the hypostatization of rationality that emerged from the European Enlightenment and became a supposition with increasingly visible shortcomings.<sup>519</sup>

Both scholars assume a social nature or basis of human perception and understanding. In their view, objectivity is a social category, a coalesced social practice which manifests itself in the material and cultural production of human beings. Knowledge is therefore always socially constructed and cannot be simply and directly drawn from the external world. For both, then, there is no possibility of pure *a priori* knowledge. Any insight into reality is socially mediated, even if this mediation seems to be more directly conveyed in Adorno and transmitted via evolution in Li Zehou. Notwithstanding this difference (which manifests itself on the quantitative rather than the qualitative level), both Adorno and Li can be considered

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<sup>519</sup> In his earliest aesthetic work, e.g. in his aforementioned first academic paper “On Aesthetic Feeling, Beauty, and Art”, Li still followed the dualistic dialectical principles of Marxist historical materialism, which was based upon Hegel’s model, but transferred from the idealistic to a materialistic foundation via Feuerbach. Less than a decade later, however, he began to question the dualistic nature of such a dialectical approach, and to criticize the underlying “two-worlds-view”.

constructivists. However, both see social reality not as something constituted by purely discursive elements, but rather as something resulting from the mutual interaction between the social and the material. Since they consequently reject both natural and social determinism, their approach could be called “realist constructivism”.

As we have seen, both assume – in a very general sense of the underlying ontology - a materialist worldview, even if Adorno’s “primacy of the object” seems to offer a more complex and sophisticated problematization of the concepts of matter and form. The idea of human practice as an indispensable element not only for grasping the objects of the external world, but also for being (and becoming) human is shared by both philosophers. With regard to epistemology, both aim at developing a dialectical relation between the subject and object of perception and knowledge. In this context, however, I think Li Zehou can offer an alternative solution to the problem highlighted by Adorno, namely the problem of the impasse inherent in the dialectical scheme of identitarian thought.

### **The dialectics of subject and object**

As for the subject and object of cognition, both Li and Adorno are primarily interested in the nature of their mutual relationship. In his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno warned that

it is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy. (Adorno 2004: 181)

Li Zehou followed a similar view of a non-hierarchical relation between the subject and the object of comprehension. Even though he was always a zealous advocate of objectivity, he did not see it in an essentialist way, as most of his contemporaries did. Since for him objectivity was a manifestation of the objective nature of social existence, he was able to include the notion of subjectivity into this framework as an “indispensable social agency” (Liu 2000: 134). Like Gramsci, who argued that objectivity always means “humanly objective”, or “universally subjective”, Li’s change in positions on subjectivity is grounded in historical considerations (ibid). In this regard, the concept of practice was of utmost importance. Similar to most

followers of early Marxism, Li Zehou considered practice a key link that mediated the subject and object.<sup>520</sup>

For Adorno, the reconciliation of subject and object was also of utmost importance. In spite of his persistent rejection of formulating a visionary alternative to the problems of society, he offered his readers a glance of something similar in his “moment of peace”, which was necessarily defined by an egalitarian and mutually complementary relation between subject and object:

In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in the realization of peace among men as well as between men and their Other. Peace is the state of distinctness without domination with the distinct participating in each other. (Adorno 1978: 499-500)

Such an idea of “peace” or reconciliation, however, was by no means feasible in the traditional dualistic model of dialectical opposites. Adorno therefore strongly criticizes the Hegelian schema, which strives for the identity of subjects and objects in a framework in which the antagonistic dichotomy of being and conceptuality is always reconciled in the identity of thought and reality. For Adorno, such an “identitarian philosophy” leaves no room for new insights, nor for a critique of reality. The impasse arises from Hegel’s adherence to the theoretical framework determined by the elementary laws of formal logic, namely the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, and the law of the excluded middle (Adorno 2004: 142). Such a dialectics strives for the identity (and thus unity) of contradictions, a unity that is seen as the only way to know reality. These laws are products of a static framework of unchanging meanings that provides an instrumental basis for their validity. With his negative dialectics, in which identity does not disappear but is qualitatively transformed, Adorno aims to overcome this model. In this new framework, the affinity of the object to the subject (or to the thought of the object) is reborn through mediation in a new identity.

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<sup>520</sup> According to Liu Kang (2000: 134), this notion helped him to shift from his earlier insistence on objectivity to his later passionate plea for a construction of aesthetic subjectivity. This shift, however, was not really an abrupt break with Li’s earlier stance. The foundational position of practice featured prominently in his work from the beginning.

In this way, Adorno attempts to overcome the static foundations of identitarian ontology with a dialectic that “turns against itself” (ibid.: 406) because it simultaneously implies the impression and critique of the illusory universal realm of being. The ultimate goal of the negative dialectic, however, is not to escape the identitarian context of delusion. On the contrary, it aims to break out of this context from within (ibid.). It is a dialectics that negates thought by thinking. This negation is precisely the ultimate realm (and starting point) that enables freedom of human thought. Because his “priority of the object” denies the constitutive role of the epistemic subject, it surpasses traditional methods of achieving identity and unity for thought, since it allows for the diversity of objects and does not impose on them the forms of the cognitive subject. But in the end, Adorno’s critique still proceeds from the same scheme of identifying thought because it is still embedded in a static view of reality. His negation of identity merely offers us a turn to a new concept, that of non-identity (ibid.: 12). More importantly for him, however, non-identity, as the central concept of negative dialectics, offers the possibility of “reflection on its own meaning”, which for Adorno is “the way out of the concept’s seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning” (ibid).

Since such reflection is a continuous process, it is quite capable of eliminating the illusion of a constitutive subjectivity and can be extended to objects belonging to the non-conceptual realm that can only be expressed in art. Hence, it enables aesthetic subjects to experience a unity of sensation and thought. Ultimately, however, Adorno’s thesis still works with notions of identity and non-identity as separate and fixed stages. Although for him, “reflection on its own meaning is the way out of the concept’s seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning” (ibid: 12), such a reflection is still insufficient, because the problem of identitarian thinking cannot be solved on the basis of the negation of identity, for a non-identity between identity and non-identity is ultimately still a conceptualization of a certain mode of objectivity.

Here, it seems that Li Zehou’s aesthetics and epistemology can offer a better alternative to achieve a genuine mediation between the subject and object of understanding, which is not based on identity but on correlative complementarity. As mentioned earlier, his early aesthetic works were nevertheless still based on dualisms of Marxist materialist dialectics, which proceeded from a negation of the thesis to the negation of negation, a synthesis, which is the ultimate phase of a certain dialectical stage and simultaneously, the basis of the following one. In Li’s early aesthetic thought, this highest realm of negating the negation was art: “Beauty is

the negation of the aesthetic feeling, and art is the negation of negation” (ibid.: 62)<sup>521</sup>. Approximately at the same time, the much older Adorno criticized such naïve positivisms that could be found in modern Western art in the following way:

What is qualitatively new in recent art may be that in an allergic reaction it wants to eliminate harmonizations even in their negated form, truly the negation of negation with its own fatality: the self-satisfied transition to a new positivity, to the absence of tension in so many paintings and compositions of the postwar decades. (Adorno 1997: 159)

In this context, Adorno highlights (2004: 158) that the nonidentical is not to be obtained directly, as something positive on its part, nor is it obtainable by a negation of the negative. In his view, the claim of identity is a “magic circle that stamps critique with the appearance of absolute knowledge. It is up to the self-reflection of critique to extinguish that claim, to extinguish it in the very negation of negation that will not become a positing” (ibid: 406). In this view, the negation of negation produces new negations, without reference to “that traditional logic which, more *arithmetico*, takes minus times minus for a plus” (ibid: 158). Negation thus becomes the continuous non-identity, and the only reason for its failure to accomplish a genuine breakthrough out from the confines of the identitarian thinking is the fact that even the non-identity is a concept that refers to an object, and thus it is still identitarian in itself.

Later on Li Zehou abandoned Western-style dialectics, along with all its negations and negations of negations. For the mature Li, not only the human conception of reality, but even the emergence and constitution of beauty itself, is closely related to this principle of complementarity<sup>522</sup> (Li 1980: 27), which has its origin in the oldest Confucian classics, the *Book of Changes*. In a sense, the epistemology of this traditional cosmological scheme can be compared to the dialectical model that prevailed in Western philosophy, for both systems represent a particular mode of interaction between two mutually opposing ideas. Due to its embeddedness into the framework of formal logic, however, the latter can only function as a system in which every pair of oppositions is a contradiction, because in the identitarian schema different ideas are necessarily mutually exclusive. In contrast to such structures, in the traditional Chinese correlative model based on the principle of complementarity, pairs of

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<sup>521</sup>美是美感的否定，艺术是否定之否定。

<sup>522</sup>儒家...以自然的阴阳五行来说明自然美的产生。

opposites are not mutually exclusive and are often referred to as binary categories (*duili fanchou* 对立范畴). Quite the contrary, in fact, since the system is based on processual paradigms, these categories complement each other. They are interactive and interdependent.

In such a view, there can be no subject without an object, and vice versa. Therefore, neither can assume a purely constitutive role. Li Zehou considers this model of correlative complementarity as a basic framework in which human subjectivity can actively seize the tool of dynamic proper measure *du* to act, adapt to, and make reality “just right”. This model is clearly different from Adorno’s idea, with which he wanted to replace the traditional model of contradictions and identities triggered by the constitutive role of the subject with a linear scheme in which “they constitute one another as much as – by virtue of such constitution – they depart from each other” (ibid: 174).

In this dynamic scheme, *du* generates the ceaseless movement in which the subject and object of understanding are repeatedly separated and united, in a continuous and uninterrupted process of interdependent interaction. In this respect, the difference between Adorno and Li is that the latter was equipped with different methodological paradigms than the former, and thus for Li it was clear that subject and object cannot interact directly and quasi-automatically. The dialectical synthesis eliminated from Adorno’s negative dialectics is also absent from the traditional Chinese principle of complementarity that guides the “Chinese type” of dialectical interactions. But in this complementary dialectics, synthesis is not a separate, isolated, and qualitatively new stage of dialectical development, but arises (and is hidden) in the very process of interaction between pairs of opposites. Indeed, in this model subject and object (or any other binary category) are not linearly juxtaposed and cannot enter into a direct and immediate or proximate relationship with each other. The system of correlative dialectics of complementarity is guided by the dynamic grasp of the proper measure, that is, by the principles of *du*, which mediate the relation between the subject’s Self and the object’s Otherness.

As we have seen, *du* is a kind of experience-based reasonableness, which is not determined by *a priori* reason. It is a dynamic criterion, which seeks to achieve the “middle way” in the mastering of every situation requiring choices or decisions. Li describes *du* as a dynamic structure of proportions, as something that changes according to the discrete conditions of a certain time and space. He highlights that it is by no means an eternal mediator and it does not always remain neutral. From an overall perspective, *du* can sometimes be extreme.

Therefore, *du* cannot be understood as a simple and stagnant mathematical middle between two different possibilities, but rather a vibrant situational principle (Li Zehou 2012: 2). It must be found and appropriately applied because in Li's view concrete problems require concrete analyses. The inner logic of *du* is operational rather than transcendental. Hence, it is not identical to any form of dialectical logic, which is based upon oppositions, but can rather be expressed by the form  $A \neq A_{\pm}$ , which is different from  $A = A$ , but also from  $A \neq \bar{A}$  (ibid.). This means that it is based upon and functions in accordance with the premise that A is not identical to any form of A, which refers to a kind of general contingency.

### **Epilogue: the discreet charm of the unthinkable**

In Chinese tradition, *du* is closely associated with the concepts of harmony and the middle way or the way of equilibrium (*Zhong yong* 中庸). In the West, such terms are usually seen as expressing an extremely conservative attitude based on conflict avoidance and obedient conformity. For reasons of space, I cannot elaborate on the misrepresentation inherent in such prejudices and can only emphasize that, with regard to the concept of harmony, we must distinguish between the official ideologies of the contemporary Chinese state, on the one hand, and the classical philosophical, especially Confucian, understanding of the concept, on the other. While the former is based on the decree of unification, the latter is rooted in diversity. The way of equilibrium is also often misunderstood. *Zhong yong* is often translated in Western languages as the “doctrine of the mean” which can be seen as an almost reactionary, and surely completely uncreative method of always choosing the middle way in order to reach a static compromise between two opposing alternatives. In reality, however, it does not refer to a formal, statically unchanging “middle”, but to a state of equilibrium that changes from moment to moment.

Notwithstanding such misconceptions, the dynamic concepts of harmony and equilibrium to which *du* is always oriented are possibly comparable to Adorno's concept of peace, which he seeks “in an unpeaceful whole” (2004: 153), knowing well that “all images of reconciliation, peace, and tranquillity resemble the image of death ... as long as the world ‘is as it is’” (ibid). The world is still “as it is”, and it may even evolve to the point where we find it much worse. But much like the idea of perpetual peace, the two great scholars I have tried to bring into conversation in this essay will always remain alive through their work and their ideas. For them there is no death. In their aesthetic writings, both find their final refuge in art, which, in the face

of our last breath, represents a completion of artistic subjectivity (Li Zehou 2010: 159) and a semblance of what lies beyond the reach of death (Adorno 1997: 27). For Adorno (2004: 110), this is the realm of non-conceptual void, which is the direct expression of the inexpressible and for Li Zehou (1985a: 298), it is the possibility of exploring the unlimited space within the limited time of our existence. And if one day we can reconcile all these different yet similar ideas, we can still hope to find a way out of the suffocating totality of identitarian thought and establish a real dialogue between this text and its readers, between me and you, between the subject and the object of what is inexpressible and hence, unthinkable. Only in this way can thought be truly resolved through thinking.

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**WANG Keping:**  
**A New Alternative to the How-to-Live Concern**

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As noted in the three decades of his time, from 1990s to his departure in 2021, Li Zehou claims repeatedly on many occasions that the key telos of philosophy lies in the consideration of human destiny *per se*. Such destiny is assumed to take on its foundation stone from human capacity coupled mainly with human living and human becoming altogether. Accordingly, he devotes continuing efforts to explicate his anthropo-historical ontology as one of the fundamental theories in his thought. On this account, he is preoccupied with the how-to-live issue, and proposes a full-fledged development of human capacity as an alternative to address it. Such development is a process of human becoming, during which human capacity is escalated to its full extent in light of human subjectivity<sup>523</sup> as the ultimate outcome of human fulfillment. This discussion commences with ontological reflections on the how-to-live concern with reference to Confucian, Kantian and Marxist philosophy. Then, it proceeds to examine the structure of human capacity in terms of the cognitive, moral and aesthetic dimensions. Along this line of thought, it moves on to look at a fourfold aesthetic engagement in the dynamic interaction between the four acts interrelated. All this is pointed to the heaven-earth realm of human living that is metaphysicized in Li's conception of aesthetics as the first philosophy.

**The how-to-live concern**

The how-to-live concern is a pivotal one in Li Zehou's practical philosophy of subjectivity that is also termed as historical ontology of anthropology. This concern can be specified as "how the human being is to live." It is in fact a transfiguration of the Kantian question about "what is the human being?" or "what the human being can make of himself?" Simply put, it is a question about the possibility of human becoming *per se*. It is indirectly approached in the Three Critiques, and directly approached in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. As Kant himself could not expound it any further because of his departure, Li Zehou resumes the incomplete task and explores it from a practical instead of transcendental standpoint. Actually, Li deviates from Kant at this point by giving up the concept of universal necessity *a priori*, and goes ahead to ally with Marx by accepting the idea of social

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<sup>523</sup> This special concept in Chinese is *zhu ti xing* (主体性), coined by Li Zehou, and distinguished from subjectivity as *zhu guan xing* (主观性) in certain cases as exposed through his philosophical discourse.

objectivity stemmed from human practice or making-using tools in labor. Moreover, he returns to classical Confucianism and rediscovers relevant sources so as to develop his ontological method of human becoming and human living alike.

As noted in Li's exploration, what is prior to the how-to-live concern is the why-to-live question. The question is brought forth against the *status quo* of the human condition shrouded in a blanket of diversified strictures, including such social and psychological ills as injustice, inequality, poverty, deprivation, frustration, depression, madness, loneliness, nothingness, care, worry, anxiety and so forth, not to speak of such destructive threats as civilizational clashes, international conflicts, regional wars, and terrorist attacks, among many others. Worse still, the biggest of all challenges comes from the hard fact that life is short in a stream of time, and death befalls all men alike at any moment. In extreme cases, some may realize that they have never lived at the critical moment of death, because their life has been concealed in a so-called life against free will and natural rights. All this seems to revive the hidden echo of the old *skepsis* about "to be or not to be" in Hamlet's self-questioned murmurings. Nevertheless, an optimistic outlook arises out of a ray of hope to make human living worthwhile by virtue of pragmatic wisdom principally in aesthetic and ethical domains.

In this aspect, a renowned stance advocated by Martin Heidegger is none other than facing death in order to live. It touches upon a negative overtone of modern existentialism. Reversely, Confucius advocates a more positive attitude, advising people to live without bothering about death, because "unknown yet is life, much less is death" (Confucius, 1995, 11:12). This attitude implies three things at least: (1) The first priority is given to life instead of death, according to the logical inferring that if life is not understood yet, how death can be understood. (2) Life is related to the human world and the living reality while death related to the underworld and odd fantasies of spirits, ghosts and deities. Confucius focuses on the former but ignores the latter. (3) Life is this-worldly by nature whereas death is afterlife in eschatology. What is to be cherished is the true value of life, and what is to be suspended is the natural term of death. For in Chinese convention, the span of life is often likened to the cycle of grass,<sup>524</sup> and the arrival of death befalls all things alike. Both of them are so natural and certain. But how to live a life, especially a worthwhile one, is open to many choices and possibilities.

In order to strengthen the argument given above, Confucius offers a number of relevant alternatives. One of them announces, "Having heard the Dao in the morning, one may die

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<sup>524</sup> The old saying in Chinese is *ren sheng yi shi, cao mu yi qiu* (人生一世，草木一秋).

content in the evening” (Confucius, 4:8). By this announcement is meant the demand for making the greatest efforts possible to attain a real knowledge of the Dao in lifetime. Conceived as the paramount principle of reciprocal humaneness and universal love, the Dao purports to build up a moral character of a superior person, and to facilitate a humane governance for the common good. This being the case, one may be feeling so gratified even with a happy death after having attained the Dao itself. Confucius expects human individuals to make the most of life for the discovery of the Dao, because it embodies the greatest worth of living and the truest virtue of humaneness. In addition, Confucius claims that “A man with lofty ideals and humane virtue never gives up the virtue of humaneness to save his life, but sacrifices his own life to accomplish the virtue of humaneness” (Confucius, 15:6). As the statement denotes, a person of this type demonstrates a fine personality and noble spirit, morally obliged to tread upon the sure path of humaneness as the highest principle similar to the categorical imperative in Kant’s ethics or theoethics alike. In order to retain one’s moral character and fulfill one’s social commitment, the person in the Confucian expectation is ready to put aside personal interest and sacrifice personal life for the common good according to the required obligations of virtuous humaneness *par excellence*. Take Yan Hui, a disciple of Confucius, for example. As alleged to draw bitter joy from his persistent exercise of reciprocal humaneness, he did not retreat a single inch within three months when living a hard life with meager daily provisions. He was highly praised by his master because they both shared the same values and ideals (Confucius, 6:11). All this leads to “the exemplary paradigm of Confucius-Yan’s joy”<sup>525</sup> that has been promoted by Neo-Confucianism ever since the Song Dynasty (970-1279).

As observed from the foregoing exposition, the positive attitude toward life upheld among Confucians is coupled with moral obligation, social commitment, heroic spirit, altruist orientation and so on. It can be traced back to the rites-music heritage. As read in the *Discourse on Music* (Xunzi, 2016, 648-9), for instance, the conception of *yue* as music indicates a historical duration from antiquity. It is hereby identified with *le* as joy.<sup>526</sup> Such identification not merely reveals a defining property of music itself, but also procures a strong impact upon the Chinese mentality. Say, it enhances the musical sensibility in an aesthetic sense, remolds the joy-conscious character in an anthropological sense, and consolidates the optimistic spirit

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<sup>525</sup> It is expressed in Chinese as *Kong Yan le chu* (孔颜乐处), which is recommended as a life style according to the classical Confucian ideal.

<sup>526</sup> The Chinese notion of *yue* as music and that of *le* as joy are distinct in pronunciation but share the same Chinese character (樂/乐).

in an ontological sense. These three aspects are interwoven in the deep structure of Chinese cultural psychology and life philosophy at large.

In practice, the musical sensibility helps heighten the aesthetic awareness of the artistic, moral and social functions of music; the joy-conscious character declines no bitter joy and seeks delight from varied experiences including miserable encounters; and more significantly, the optimistic spirit enables people to become what they are, never losing a ray of hope at confrontation with the gravest crises and hardships. Thus they are prone to perceive the interaction between the negative and positive sides of all matters, and prepare for the fishy interplay between fortune and misfortune in changing and even delicate situations. This being true, they tend to be on guard against potential dangers, and live in high consciousness of crisis emergencies, from which they draw pragmatic wisdom, care-ridden pleasure, and useful strategies to tackle any unexpected challenges or catastrophes. Knowing well the uncertainty of human existence sandwiched between heaven and earth, they have no other choice but resort to self-reliance under all circumstances. In Li's elucidation, Chinese culture is one of optimism by nature, running parallel to the joy-conscious character and aesthetic sensibility. It is directed to a positive stance to human living, and an active motivation of human becoming. All this is found relevant and helpful to sort out the why-to-live question and the how-to-live concern.

### **The structure of human capacity**

Li revisits classical Confucianism with particular reference to the Kantian moral anthropology and the Marxian practical philosophy. In order to address the how-to-live concern, he proposes an anthropo-ontological approach, which is both material and formal in kind. It is material because of its instrumental function, and formal because of its conceptual guidance. It is so recommended as to meet the two determinants of human nature: the satisfaction of sensory needs, and the fulfillment of conceptual demands. Judging from the anthropo-ontological standpoint, human nature is the outcome of human culture, a complicated and interwoven synthesis of two leading aspects: animality and sociality. One is originated from sensory needs to preserve physical existence and species reproduction; the other is derived from human socialization and cultural education, hence rejecting brutal carnalism and beastlike behavior (Li, 2010, 4). These two aspects are historically cultivated and sedimented into human capacity, the process of which is proclaimed to range from Marx's techno-social structure (the material dimension) to Kant's cultural-psychological formation (the mental dimension). It follows that human capacity as such underlies human nature, gratify human needs, and secure human

existence. Along this line of thought, its full-fledged development is schemed as a working alternative to handle the how-to-live concern.

Being the most important component of human nature, human capacity arises out of the cultural-psychological formation comprising at least three dimensions known as the cognitive, aesthetic and moral, which in sequence involve the faculty of correct understanding, the action upon moral laws, and the power of judgment according to Kant (Kant, 2006, 90-3). Conspicuously, Li Zehou branches off to his historical ontology, and conceives of the human being as the historical being by nature. He thus proceeds to reflect on the constitution of human capacity in view of Marx's approach to techno-social substance, Kant's articulation of human mentality, and the Confucian notion of emotional substance. However, he strives to go beyond their respective limits, and opens up a new window on the development of human capacity. As he argues,

*Historical ontology comes from Marx, Kant and Chinese tradition, but deviates from them to quite some extent. More specifically, it differs from Marx who merely heeds the social aspect of homo sapiens but ignores the psychical dimension of the individual. It differs from Kant who ascribes the psychological form to the super-human reason but neglects its origin of historical living in actuality. It differs from Chinese tradition that lays an excessive stress on usefulness but makes light of the vital importance of abstract speculation. However, historical ontology as such absorbs and integrates them all. It generally brings forth its key arguments via the concepts of pragmatic reason and joy-conscious culture, and intends to deal with the issues of psychological constitution concerning an all-round realization of personal potentials in modern life (Li, 2005, 108).*

What does he do then in accord with this argument? He moves on to bestow the structure of human capacity with such three elements as “free intuition, free will and free enjoyment”.<sup>527</sup> In his explication, “free intuition” is in contrast to “original intuition”. It is surely human intuition as is derived from the power of imagination and the cognition of experience in Kant. It is hereby distinct in terminology, but identical to rational intuition as a cognitive faculty for logic, mathematics, and dialectic concepts. It is represented in the mode of “rational internalization”, and traced back to human practice by using, making, innovating and adjusting tools for diversified labor in a long process. During this process, a variety of lawful models and forms

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<sup>527</sup> These three concepts are termed in Chinese as *zi you zhi guan* (自由直观), *zi you yi zhi* (自由意志) and *zi you xiang shou* (自由享受).

are preserved and accumulated in practical activities of humankind, which are then transformed into an informational system of languages, symbols, and cultures, and finally internalized, condensed and sedimented into human psychological formation. All this builds up the human capacity of appreciating and understanding the world at large. The capacity is cultural in essence. It contains an intellectual structure acquired through learning from infancy. As regards the ability of rational intuition, it is the same with the ability of free creation according to Albert Einstein. It is hereby labeled as free intuition by Li himself (Li, 1984, 425-6). Rationality is the use of reason. Human rationality is a formal constitution internalized through the application of reason to both materially practical and symbolically rational activities. Such activities are associated not only with the development of intellectual faculty for scientific knowledge, but also with the nourishment of creative mentality for aesthetic sensibility, among others.

Then, “free will” is pointed to ethics and the reality of human existence. It brings out the scope of human subjectivity that overrides utilitarian superficiality. In Kant, a will bears the capacity to act according to the principles as moral laws that are produced by practical reason. Such reason assumes freedom and action in order to let them function appropriately and effectively. Since Kant regards moral laws as categorical imperatives that command unconditionally everyone to comply by in the same way given, the only way to act freely in the full sense of exercising moral autonomy is to act upon categorical imperatives above all. In this case, a will to act freely and universally means a will to act morally and autonomously according to categorical imperatives, which in turn gives rise to the free will and make the agent become immediately conscious of moral laws. Hence in Kant’s definition, if the determining ground of a will is none other than the universal lawgiving form of categorical imperatives, a will of this kind must be thought of as independent of the natural law of causality. Such independence suggests freedom in the strictest or transcendental sense. Therefore, a will for which the mere lawgiving form aforementioned can alone serve as a law is a free will (Kant, 2015, 26).

Undoubtedly, categorical imperatives are unconditional and universal requirements. They prescribe moral dignity, represent moral autonomy, and encompass unmatched force as well. They well disclose the ethos of Kant’s moral sense that is noble and idealistic for certain. As discerned in his historical ontology of anthropology, Li asserts that individual practice is required to set up the structure of the subjective will, and human individuals are expected to shoulder the obligation for the existence and development of humankind. Such moral sense and action make up the psychological mode of human subject, and go beyond the specific interests of any era, society and group. Naturally, they are conducive to the formation of will power and

moral psychology as a result of “rational coacervation.”<sup>528</sup> Such coacervation comes out of human practice, action, emotion, wish and other sensibilities, just like “rational internalization” that occurs in cognitive activities through sensory intuition. Then it ends up in the true form of a free will in ethics, corresponding to free intuition in epistemology and so forth. Moreover, its moral worth coordinates the unity of humankind as a whole while upsetting the causal law and utilitarian effect. Bearing the features of the sublime, it arouses such moral feelings as “admiration and reverence.”<sup>529</sup> These feelings are self-conscious and rational, characteristic of human beings alone.

As to “free enjoyment”, it purports to enjoy the perception and experience of pleasure that effects in the beautiful through sensory intuition and aesthetic judgment. It is free by nature, because the beautiful as free form is not merely the union of lawfulness and purposefulness, but the product of humanized nature (the world). Corresponding to this free form is the aesthetic state of mind as a synthesis of sensation and rationality in one sense, and as an outcome of humanized internal nature (the humankind) in the other.

More specifically, the aesthetic state of mind can be seen as the final attainment of human subjectivity, and the most explicit manifestation of human capacity as well. At this point, what is of humankind in its historical entirety is sedimented into what is of a human individual; what is rational is sedimented into what is sensible; and what is social is sedimented into what is natural. As a consequence, the nature of animal-like senses is humanized, and so is the nature of animal-like psychology. For example, *eros* becomes love; natural kinships become human relationships; natural senses become aesthetic faculties; and instinctive lust becomes aesthetic feeling. All this entails the true mode of free enjoyment and the ultimate aspect of human subjectivity through historico-cultural sedimentation (Li, 1984, 434-5). In other words, all this implies aesthetic capacity characterized by “rational melting” in accord with “aesthetic sedimentation” (Li, 2010, 5).

All in all, “free intuition” is coupled with “rational internalization”, and “free will” with “rational coacervation”. Both of them grow out of sensation in which rationality is either

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<sup>528</sup> This term in Chinese is *li xing ning ju* (理性凝聚).

<sup>529</sup> According to Kant, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.” Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 129.

internalized or coacervated. As to “free enjoyment”, it is aligned with “rational melting”, for it arises out of rationality sedimented in sensation. “Free intuition” and “free will” are expressed in the ability, action and volition of rationality, whereas “free enjoyment” expressed in the desire, feeling and expectation of sensation. It is through the service of “free enjoyment” that human convergence with nature is rendered attainable. This convergence connotes the oneness between heaven and human. In Chinese tradition, it stands for both the aesthetic realm of human life and the ontological realm of super-moral being, thus facilitating the possibility of superseding the religious by the aesthetic. For the essence of beauty is, according to Li, the embodiment of human fulfillment. The philosophy of beauty is the summit of all humanities. Hereby what is probed relates to the possibility of human subjectivity, and what is exposed relates to the formation of cultural psychology (Li, 1984, 436).

### **Beyond aesthetic engagement**

According to a recent investigation, the notion of human subjectivity is taken as a “new conception of human self” (Rošker, 2018, 1). Because of its objective existential features, human subjectivity is not constrained to the level of each human subject alone. It assumingly includes the ability to establish interactive relationships with others in the living environment that involves a variety of human community such as society, nation, class, and organization. Hence Li Zehou intends to advocate two kinds of human subjectivity: One is directed to each individual’s identity, and the other directed to the human race as a whole. Both of them help humanity create a structure of human subjectivity, a structure that is super-biological and deeply-rooted in a universal necessity. As a rule, the objective dimension of human subjectivity can be found in the social realization of material reality through the process of production. It demonstrates itself not merely in the structural connection between technology and society, but also in the linkage between social existence and practice. Meanwhile, human subjectivity accentuates the subjective level of social consciousness, which reveals itself in culturally conditioned mentalities or psychological formations. Following this paradigm, the constitutions of human subjectivity are basically differing from the subjective awareness of human individuals. Rather, they are related to the products of human history that manifest themselves not only in the formations of spiritual and intellectual culture, but also in the structures of ethical and aesthetic consciousness (Rošker, 2018, 3-4; Li, 1986, 136; Li, 2001, 43).

As read in what Li himself observes:

*Analytical philosophy, structuralism, and many other streams of the contemporary capitalist world (like for instance philosophical methodology or epistemology) are cold philosophies, which overlook the substance of subjectivity. In addition, Sartre's existentialism, the philosophies of the Frankfurt School, and other fashionable currents (like for instance the philosophy of rebellion or the philosophy of emotion) on the other hand, are blindly propagating the individual subjectivity. They have nothing to do with the practical philosophy of subjectivity. (Li, 1985, 21)*

To my understanding, “cold philosophies” are presumed to be the philosophies that not merely “overlook the substance of subjectivity”, but also neglect the emotional substance as the fundamental root of human becoming. They are most likely left under the overarching impact of conceptual abstraction or instrumental rationality. As regards the particular case of human individuals, when the development of human capacity is up to a full-fledged degree, it leads to the highest degree of human individuality, freedom, autonomy and independence, in a word, the highest achievement of which human as human is capable. It is at this stage that the wholeness of human becoming is enhanced in light of human subjectivity *per se*.

Historically speaking, Li's notion of human subjectivity was initially employed to highlight the rise of enlightenment in early 1980s soon after the disastrous period of the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China. It was pronounced deliberately to fill up the ideological vacuum, and to spur a self-conscious pursuit of value selection and political freedom for self-development. Intellectually speaking, it was designed to alter the old-fashioned guardianship discourse in order to meet the growing political needs of the great majority, and the necessary theoretical needs of the merging reform in its initial exploration. At that time, the curtain of ideological manipulation was somewhat swayed and lifted up because of its self-defeating effect in one sense, and the crying demand for a new space of thinking in the other. It was then replaced by a humanistic rediscovery of Marxism with reference to the Western heritage of humanism. Guardianship discourse was so dominant for a decade or so during the harsh time of the Cultural Revolution, and then reduced to a considerable alternation when the Open-Door policy was introduced to accelerate the China Reform. All this entailed a period of New Enlightenment in China throughout 1980s. Hence the promotion of human subjectivity can be seen as one of the hammers utilized to break the ice of theoretical and ideological rigidity.

As to the key characteristics of human subjectivity, they tend to cover individual uniqueness, practical sociality, historical sedimentation, cognitive initiative, moral autonomy, creative ability, aesthetic transcendence and the like. Comparatively speaking, Li himself

distinguishes his concept of subjectality from the Kantian notion of subjectivity, and formulates it in terms of anthro-historical ontology as well as practical philosophy. He further develops it together with human capacity, but proposes it as the acme of human capacity and the ultimate outcome of human fulfillment. He attributes it to the possibility of aesthetic transcendence in association with disinterested satisfaction, purposefulness without a purpose, detachment from the immediate reality and so forth. For this reason, Li tapers much more stress on the aesthetic dimension of human capacity in general, and of human subjectality in particular.

He tries to do so for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the real meaning of human living is essentially aesthetic, for a relevant contemplation enables the human being to find out the way of living well in an artistic, purposeful and disinterested manner in spite of the socio-psychical ills aforementioned. Such manner applies not only to a moral will, but also to a world outlook. According to Li's articulation of aesthetics as the first philosophy, it elicits the human being to choose a worldview through creative imagination based on sensible preferences. As an aesthetic choice, such worldview embodies a world picture of beautiful order. Even though the picture cannot be sorted out as true or false, the worldview that is aesthetically imagined provides much food for thought. In this respect, the real theme of aesthetics is about the entire world and human life of sensibility instead of art alone. Human life is to be eventually realized through the joy or pleasure experienced in landscapes underlying the heaven-human convergence. Hence the "grand aesthetics" of Chinese type is considered to be the truest when compared with its counterpart in other cultures. Such aesthetics is treated as the first philosophy, because it implies an intuitive assumption of the world (the cosmos) that exists in a mysterious mode and lies beyond the limit of human knowledge. Accordingly, the human worldview itself contains a mixture of "rational mystery" and "sensible mystery", which is inclined to provoke a profound feeling of admiration and a mystical experience of faith. (Liu, 2009, 218-9)

Secondly, aesthetic experience is both sensuous and spiritual in effect. It is conducive to the growth of aesthetic sensibility that is both the bud and fruit of human capacity. It is more significant in that it entails spiritual sublimation in a range of "aesthetic transcendence".<sup>530</sup> At this point, it straddles two interrelated states: the initial state of human becoming, and the supreme state of human fulfillment. According to Li,

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<sup>530</sup> Li uses the term as *shen mei chao yue* (审美超越) because he rejects the term of inward transcendence (*nei zai chao yue* 内在超越).

*Aesthetic experience is related to sensuous and animal-like desires. For this reason, pleasures drawn from music and sexuality have become prevailing in pop culture today. However, aesthetic experience attempts to go beyond such desires, and strives for “transcendence” in a pure spiritual scope. It is therefore differentiated from mere entertainment and decoration, and intended to pursue a super-biological state and living realm. (Li, 2010, 8)*

Yet, the “transcendence” mentioned above is not “pure” at all, for the human being can only hanker after it within the physical body from which the mind cannot be separated. It is therefore called “aesthetic transcendence” that relies on not merely the interaction between the mind and the body, but also the interconnection between the objective and subjective time. Herein by the objective time is meant to live in the stream of time with spatial occupation, which features the numbers of date, month and year due to social objectivity. It is accounted for by human birth, mortality, and body that take up the organic space. By the subjective time is meant temporality without spatial occupation, which is symbolized by immortality or eternity in respect to the spiritual home of historical being and the infinite state of creative mind in particular. Provided that, only the experience of the reality that all is nothing (no meaning, no causality, no utility) but still stays alive appears to be a mastery of temporality. As detected in Chinese tradition, such transcendence is usually obtained from the mystical experience of “heaven-human oneness,” and drawn from the concordance between the human cultivation and the cosmic rhythm hidden in both humanized nature and naturalized humanity. All this is linked with the “emotional substance” as the fundamental root of human becoming.<sup>531</sup> In order to facilitate the extension of subjective time, for example, it is of theoretical importance to bring “aesthetic transcendence” into the focus of human thinking, because it entails aesthetic self-consciousness and spiritual sublimation. As we humans cannot perceive any real thing except under the conditions of space and time, both the objective and subjective time cannot grow out of space in a narrow sense. However, if a distinction between them is to be made, the objective time is thought of related to the space and time of sense experience in general, whereas the subjective time thought of related to the space and time of psychical experience at large. A typical example is the conception of “the wind and moon turning out in a day” (momentary existence) as “the broad sky being of ten thousand years” (eternal existence). The former scene implies the space and time of sense experience on a specific occasion, and the latter scene implies the space and time of psychical experience merging into long history. The conception as such is achieved

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<sup>531</sup> Li Zehou, “Human Nature and Aesthetic Metaphysics”, p. 8.

through sudden enlightenment and self-liberation as a consequence of human enculturation and cultivation, pertaining to transcend sense experience and secure spiritual freedom, which enables humans to shift from the finite sphere into the infinite one as is embodied in the boundless communion with the heaven-human convergence as well as the range from the remote past to the current present and even the forward-looking future. This is fundamentally a different type of spatial and temporal experience on the part of human beings who are higher organisms with rational faculty and cultural mechanism. A reference to Cassirer and Bruno would shed light on this point.<sup>532</sup>

Thirdly, aesthetic education is recommended to substitute religion, not only because the former does not oppose the search for “perfect” experience of religious spirit, but also because human existence connects the physical body with the unconscious cosmic rhythm, which gives rise to the heaven-human convergence in association with “aesthetic transcendence”. By virtue of fostering a fine taste, aesthetic education helps human individuals to overcome the tragic sense of nothingness and hardship of human existence. As acknowledged in Chinese tradition, this tragic sense is twofold at least, say, “void and non-void” in the meantime. It is void in terms of nothingness, and non-void in terms of immediate reality, both of which implicate the dual properties of the phenomenal world and the human condition. Under such circumstances, human individuals are encouraged to face the hard fact without any expectation of divine protection or redemption, and to approach an aesthetic realm of this-worldly living in pursuit of aesthetic rather than inward transcendence. Such realm of living is sustained by “emotional substance” with a tendency to cherish life in the stream of time and make it worthwhile by all means. As a necessary and sufficient condition, the way of cherishing life awakens human individuals to the extent that they will be ready to drop off all the illusions, and to tackle all

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<sup>532</sup> According to Cassirer, “we must analyze the forms of human culture in order to discover the true character of space and time in our human world... There are fundamentally different types of spatial and temporal experience. Not all the forms of this experience are on the same level. There are lower and higher strata arranged in a certain order.” (Ernest Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1944, rep. 1975, p.42). According to Bruno, man’s self-liberation leads to what follows. That is, “Man no longer lives in the world as a prisoner enclosed within the narrow walls of a finite physical universe. He can traverse the air and break through all the imaginary boundaries of the celestial spheres which have been erected by a false metaphysics and cosmology. The infinite universe sets no limits to human reason; on the contrary, it is the great incentive of human reason. The human intellect becomes aware of its own infinity through measuring its power by the infinite universe.” (*Ibid.* p. 15).

changes, events, occasions and contingencies encountered during the span of life (Li, 2010, 10-11; Liu, 2009, 230).

Last but not the least, the aesthetic realm of this-worldly living in spiritual freedom is metaphysical and ontological in kind, for it is directed to the full-fledged development of human capacity, the self-realization of human subjectivity, and the whole becoming of human as human. In this scope, aesthetics is taken as the first philosophy due to its embodiment of the beautiful order and the mystical vision of the cosmos in its entirety. Accordingly, the way of cherishing life becomes a true aesthetic experience of an ontological kind, even though it is akin to contemplating a sunset over the hills or scrutinizing a poem on the landscapes. All this supposedly comes out of the following fact:

*Man is self-awakening in his own way. He accepts his accidental and limited existence, and struggles to survive without blaming God or others. He tries to learn from the bottom and then moves up to the above, which means metaphorically to approach spiritual freedom through personal cultivation...Therefore, the ideal of human becoming as the final end of nature will be realized ...in the pursuit of aesthetic metaphysics through emotional substance (Li, 2010, 13; Liu, 2009, 218, 228-9).*

Ostensibly, “the ideal of human becoming as the final end of nature” is none other than the full-fledged development of human capacity in light of human subjectivity. Li thereby champions an aesthetic approach that means more than it seems. It is designed to cover three interrelated acts of illuminating the true, furnishing the good, and making life worthwhile through the beautiful. (Li, 2010, 7) It occurs to me as though it entails a trifold aesthetic engagement. I personally find it plausible to extend it into a fourfold engagement by taking into account the act of creating the beautiful according to the proper measure.

### **The first act**

To begin with, the act of “illuminating the true through the beautiful” (*yi mei qi zhen* 以美启真) is to make the most of aesthetic feeling and free imagination. It is underlined by the “aesthetic double helix” that may also lead to new findings in science and technology (Li, 2010, 7). Herein the notion of “double helix” is borrowed from the discovery of the DNA molecular composition that encodes the information for making proteins. It is used hypothetically with an aesthetic tag to suggest that the secret of aesthetic feeling and judgment be decoded in the future development of brain and genic sciences.

Discernably, both aesthetic feeling and free imagination are so stressed due to their functions not simply in aesthetic experience and artistic creation, but also in scientific discovery and technological invention. The beautiful is at this point related to what is called the “thing in itself” (*Ding an sich*) in the Kantian catchphrase. What can be known are the sensory objects that are conjectured as mere appearances stemmed from the “thing in itself”. What is unknown is the “thing in itself” that affects human senses and faculties when it comes to think over this *noumenon* given. The cosmos as a whole does exist according to its natural lawfulness, but remains largely unknown to human beings. Such lawfulness is “created” by exercising “the proper measure”(du 度). As a rule, it engages not only logical and dialectical discursion, but also human emotion and imagination. It hereby signifies a key to “transcendental imagination” and the core of “illuminating the true through the beautiful.”

Moreover, the act as such is also intended to inspire the cognitive power and gain real knowledge of a new type of “thing in itself”, a type that is tallied with the “synergistic coexistence of humanity with the cosmos.”<sup>533</sup> This is a metaphysical assumption without which aesthetic experience would have no origin, and sense of form would find nowhere. The cosmos presents the object *a priori* whereas the cognitive power of man-made symbolic system resembles the subject *a priori*. Both of them are unified through human praxis from the perspective of historical ontology. With the help of “illuminating the true through the beautiful”, the human being manages to peep into the mysteries of the cosmos, and to secure a position for humankind therein. It is via such an active life that the communion between humanity and the cosmos is made possible. It is therefore a must to have a metaphysical hypothesis of such a “thing in itself” in order to secure the synergistic concordance and coexistence of humanity with the cosmos (nature), because it will generate an indispensable premise, enabling humans to bring forth an order to the cosmos or the world in which they reside.

On this occasion, humans are apt to give a beautiful order to the cosmos or the world. The beautiful order is essentially cosmic and worldly, sensible and divine. It is by no means a byproduct of pure subjective willfulness or wishful thinking. Instead, it is a manifestation of the crucial relationship between the beautiful and the true on one hand, and between human emotion and rational truth on the other. Furthermore, it is concerning not only the theory of knowledge, scientific discovery and technological invention, but also the deep meaning and significance of anthropo-historical ontology. For example, Sir Michael F. Atiyah affirms that

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<sup>533</sup> It is termed in Chinese as *ren yu yu zhou gong zai* (人与宇宙同在).

mathematics arises out of “invention” instead of “discovery”. In this field, humans are characteristically to make choices out of thousands of possibilities according to the law of beauty. The insight is corresponding to Li’s affirmation: the development of mathematics is originated from the abstraction of sensible operations, which exemplifies a special case of “illuminating the true through the beautiful” (Liu, 2009, 222). That is to say, the abstract and the sensible are interactive as much as the true and the beautiful. In all these cases, the law of beauty counts much more than expected.

### The second act

The act of “furnishing the good through the beautiful” (*yi mei chu shan* 以美储善) is to draw aesthetic feeling from an underlying faith in emotional substance, and to find inspiration for a sound human interaction with the cosmos (Li, 2010, 7). Such faith and inspiration help the human being to take up an affective view of the cosmos. This view in turn fosters a quasi-religious feeling for the cosmos, and facilitates an aesthetic awareness of the concordance between humanity and the cosmos, which will be conducive to establish the heaven-earth realm of human living (*tian di jing jie* 天地境界).<sup>534</sup>

In principle, the heaven-earth realm is both moral and aesthetic in kind. It calls for emotional and faith-based support, thus resorting to the inner historicity of the human being, and cherishing the natural span of life within this world. Say, it is so worldly that it never bothers about how to pray God for a prerogative admission into the so-called paradise. As a life style, the realm is recommended as a Chinese way of dwelling poetically on the earth. It may be perceived as a fantasy *a priori* from a quasi-religious or religious standpoint. However, it is pragmatically positive because it encourages the human being to exist in this world despite all the difficulties and hardships. It is schemed to work with an affective view of the cosmos,

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<sup>534</sup> This notion can be traced back to *Xin yuan ren* [The New Original Men] by Fung Yu-lan (Feng Youlan 1895-1990) in 1947. It is mainly concerned with the approach to freedom, moral transcendence, and self-awakening possibility. As regards moral transcendence, Fung examines into four realms of human achievement as follows: the natural realm that is characterized with simplicity based on naturalness, the utilitarian realm that is characterized with self-interestedness based on sociality, the moral realm that is characterized with righteousness guided by moral substance, and the heaven-earth realm that is characterized with serving heaven-earth in pursuit of moral transcendence. Cf. Fung Yu-lan (Feng Youlan) 冯友兰, *Ji gao ming er dao zhong yong* 极高明而道中庸 [Reach the greatest height and brilliancy and follows the path of the mean] (Beijing: China Guanbo Dianshi Press, 1995), p. 367-434.

carrying out a kind of self-conscious affinity for the synergistic concordance between humanity and the cosmos (Liu, 2009, 228-30).

The cosmos is structurally tripartite, including heaven, earth and humankind at large. As to the heaven-earth realm, it is twofold in essence, signifying a way of human living between heaven and earth in one sense, and a tri-unison of heaven, earth and humankind in the other. It usually features inseparableness and harmoniousness among the three parties involved. According to Zhuangzi, a human individual at this stage could go so far as to claim that “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me” (Zhuangzi, 2013, 71). As heaven and earth are symbolic of the cosmos in Chinese mentality, the heaven-earth realm can be also recognized as the cosmic realm, in which human beings have reached moral transcendence and become cosmic beings. They are then prone to embrace the cosmos (nature) as their spiritual home, and to shoulder a sense of mission to take care of it. They will commit themselves to eco-environmental protection, rethink their self-development in light of the cosmic harmony, and hanker after their convergence with heaven, earth, and the myriad things.

The cosmic harmony comes by and large from the synergistic concordance and co-existence between humanity and nature. It mainly depends upon two most crucial modes of social practice and human enculturation: “humanized nature” and “naturalized humanity.” Judging from their developmental sequence and interactive connection, humanized nature contributes a precondition to naturalized humanity, and naturalized humanity in turn serves as a complementary counterpart to humanized nature. In brief, “naturalized humanity” involves four primary activities at least. The first is to perceive nature as a shelter and facilitate a harmonious relationship; the second is to return to nature for aesthetic contemplation of its beautiful landscapes; the third is to help the myriad things in nature grow properly through appropriate protection; and the fourth is to learn how to breathe naturally (e.g., through appropriate practice of *qigong* as breathing exercise somewhat similar to *yoga*) in order to conciliate the rhythm of human body and heart with that of nature, which is most likely to entail heaven-human oneness. All this is associated with a kind of aesthetic feeling or state of mind, in which the rational is fused with the emotional, the subject identified with the object, the social consciousness accompanied with the individual freedom, and the sense of the finite coupled with the sense of the infinite. In a word, by virtue of “naturalized humanity”, human individuals will return to nature for dwelling poetically so long as they are capable of freeing themselves from the control by instrumental rationality, from the alienation by material

fetishism, and from the enslavement by the system of power, knowledge and language, among others.

As one of the activities mentioned above is aligned with aesthetic contemplation and appreciation, it accordingly operates through free enjoyment as part of human cultural-psychological formation. Compared with the service of the humanized faculties and emotions, the “naturalized humanity” exposes humans to free enjoyment in an aesthetic and spiritual sense. For this reason, Li asserts the superiority of the aesthetic dimension to the cognitive and ethical dimensions. The aesthetic dimension is neither the internalization of reason (the cognitive) nor the condensation of reason (the ethical), but the sedimentation of both reason and sense. It helps rectify “the seven human emotions including joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate and desire”<sup>535</sup> and procure “the delight in heaven-human oneness”.<sup>536</sup>

Interestingly, the idea of “furnishing the good through the beautiful” results from transformational creation. It purports to synthesize implicitly the Marxist conception of applying the law of beauty to human practice, the Kantian assumption of beauty as the symbol of morality, and the Confucian preoccupation with moral nourishment via emotional substance. The beautiful can be divided into two primary kinds known as the pure and the dependent whereas the good into the unconditional (absolute) and the conditional (utilitarian). Teleologically, these two categories are interwoven with each other despite the tendency that one is used as the means while the other taken as the end. Functionally, they are all underpinned by the pragmatic worth of aesthetic metaphysics in terms of the cultural-psychological formation through social practice and spiritual praxis, among others.

### **The third act**

What follows hitherto is the third act of “making life worthwhile through the beautiful” (*yi mei li ming* 以美立命). It is aimed at emancipating human individuals from all cares and worries concerning life and death, enabling them to live at ease and without fear. (Li, 2010, 7) It is common knowledge that humans are mortals, and they live to die for certain. Facing their natural term each, they live on resolutely disregarding the limited span of time. Intellectually and emotionally, they learn from the past experiences in order to find a way out, endeavor to have a better understanding of human existence under varied circumstances, and manage to

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<sup>535</sup> It is termed as *qi qing zheng* (七情正) in Chinese.

<sup>536</sup> It is termed as *tian ren le* (天人乐) in Chinese.

appreciate the infinite and mysterious cosmos. Sentimentally if not sorrowfully, they retain their attachment to life and cherish it even though they are highly aware of the destined death. Still, they are prepared to confront whatever happens to them. They know the fact that they are bound to vanish eventually into the stream of time. Yet, they are mostly determined to uphold their will to live, and ready to die for such a reason: it is better to cherish life, and have no panic for death; it is sheer folly to be haunted with life-and-death anxiety. Having reached this level of self-consciousness, they come closer to the heaven-earth realm of human living, and tend to have aesthetic feelings mixed up with admiration and reverence.

Noticeably, human life is preset in a natural term, and human living is a dynamic process. Both of them are subjected to the hierarchy of human needs. When the basic needs (physical and material) are gratified, the higher needs (social, aesthetic and spiritual) come along. Judging from an aesthetic point of view, the sense of beauty occupies an important ranking. As noted in this aspect, there arises a free play of such faculties as human perception, intuition, imagination, judgment and understanding. They all work interactively, and assist people to sublimate their aesthetic sensibility, taste and wisdom, which in turn leads them to contemplate and appreciate the beautiful. What is beautiful in nature and art is ubiquitous in varied forms, genres, styles, structures and symbols. It waits for a mind's eye or a musical ear to find it out. In general, it can be divided into three broad types, encompassing what "pleases the ear and the eye", what "delights the mind and the wish", and what "inspires the will and the spirit".<sup>537</sup>

Briefly, the first type particularly appeals to the senses of hearing and sight of the viewer. It involves beautiful forms, images, appearances, shapes, colors, sounds and rhythms, among others. These elements can be widely perceived and enjoyed due to their visual features, inviting attractions, sensuous pleasures and so forth. It is available in natural scenes, landscape paintings, pop songs, folk dances, country music and so forth.

The second type largely delights the mental state and the intentional wish of the contemplator. It comprises more significant forms, meaningful contents, grotesque images, magnificent proportions, sophisticated *métier* and artistic *tour de force*. These components can be apprehended and appreciated through an integrated working of such faculties as aesthetic sensibility, understanding, imagination, association, judgment, feeling and so on. They are usually applied to works of art and landscapes blended with culturescapes in unique settings.

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<sup>537</sup> This mode of division is proposed by Li Zehou. The three types of the beautiful are respectively termed in Chinese as *yue er yue mu* (悦耳悦目), *yue xin yue yi* (悦心悦意), and *yue zhi yue shen* (悦志悦神).

The aesthetic experience at this stage is facilitated by means of deep apperception and percipience, thus touching the mental state, affecting the intentional wish, and above all, provoking more reflections and ponderings.

The third type inspires the will and the spirit, conducive to evoke a kind of cosmic spirit and mysterious feeling. It covers something great, sublime, symbolic and even divine. It can be effectively perceived by means of serene contemplation and sudden enlightenment. It is therefore quasi-religious in that it spurs peak experience, transcending all kinds of sensuous pleasures and psychological delights. Such experience conforms with both the heaven-human oneness and the cosmic realm of human living. On this account, what is void is also non-void for individuals of high aesthetic sensibility and wisdom, because they live poetically in freedom from cares, fears, worries and other tangible entanglements. Such a way of life is contemplative, detached, disinterested, and harmonious and peaceful. It appears as if it were this-worldly and other-worldly at the same time. It is expounded and metaphorically expressed in many classical Chinese poems and literary essays.

#### **The fourth act**

We have so far formulated the three acts relating to the trifold aesthetic engagement. What strikes me as necessary is the additional act of “creating the beautiful according to the proper measure” (*yi du chuang mei* 以度创美). For it serves to enrich the aesthetic dimension of human capacity in light of human subjectivity.

To Li’s mind, “the proper measure” relies upon technico-social substratum, and bears a root-like character. It is therefore perceived as “the first category of historical ontology” (Li, 2005, 108; 2002, 10). Active in the praxis of human production, it functions as a fundamental basis of man-made (subjective) invention and natural (objective) discovery (Li, 2002, 13). In actual operation, it is none other than a good command of the most appropriate technique or craft employed to handle all matters and tasks encountered. It therefore entails technical correctness, suitability, and effectiveness. It seems approximate to what ancient Greeks thought of as *pan metron ariston* (the best measure for all). As objectified in what ancient Chinese conceived as the golden mean or perfect equilibrium, it is practically applied to many areas such as the art of music, art of war, art of politics and so forth. It can be therefore equalized with the principle of ultimate appropriateness and best proportion in both qualitative and quantitative considerations against the background of ever-changing situations (Wang, 2019, 195-6).

As to the subtlety of applying the proper measure to practice, it can be illustrated by the cook allegory in the Zhuangzi. As noted in the description (Zhuangzi, 2013, 82-84), the cook himself demonstrates his masterful skill through a process of cutting up an ox. What he is doing is depicted to keep up with the rhythm of the dance and music popular and graceful in antiquity. It seems as though he is performing a kind of action art to his heart's content. Sure enough, all this exhibits his perfect repertoire owing to a good command of the proper measure. He is claimed to know the complex structure of the ox inside out. Seeing it as a whole with his mind instead of his eyes, he is capable of figuring out all the trivial openings between the muscles and the crevices in the joints where he operates his knife so freely and accurately. Hereby the openings and crevices count a great deal because they attest his practical technique and provide him with a seemingly invisible but mentally perceptual space, a space that allows accurate, effective and free use of the knife itself. He naturally follows the openings while dismembering the ox without any obstacles caused by the complex and delicate joints, which enables him to retain the blade of his knife as sharp as it is freshly honed even after having used it for 19 years so far. In my observation, Zhuangzi attempts to make a special case of the excellent skill of moving the knife freely between the tiny crevices in the joints. The skill is delicately practical and spiritual altogether. The crevices hereby provide the minutest space of inmost freedom to be enjoyed through the performing artistry given. Such freedom is advocated in light of the Dao as is verified by the cook's affirmation of his skill approximate to the Dao itself.

Noticeably, the cook analogy shows how the great skill counts in this particular case, and justifies how it is associated with the Dao itself. It is therefore approached and appreciated in terms of the mastery of the proper measure as such. If human individuals have achieved a good command of the proper measure, they are well in a position to develop a solid technique. They can apply it to creating the beautiful in art besides many other things. As practice makes perfect, its application will be handy and smooth in accord with what is expected and wished, thus eliciting creative freedom, aesthetic freedom and spiritual freedom. At this stage, it guides the practitioner to upgrade one's repertoire and approach the unlimited over the limited in one's profession. Herein the unlimited is created out of the limited as a matter of fact. For instance, the piano keyboard has a limited number of 88 keys in all by standard. Yet, an outstanding pianist can play it well for an unlimited number of music pieces. It is also the case with the flute and many other musical instruments. Evidently, the beautiful in art is man-made, but diversified in style. It becomes so because of aesthetic, cultural, philosophical, socio-individual, technical and other reasons. However, all these reasons are aligned one way or another with the proper

measure beneath which lie purposefulness without a purpose and lawfulness without a law. On this account, it can be claimed that a real mastery of the proper measure will expose the creator of the beautiful to free imagination, free creation, free spirituality and free enjoyment as well.

### Summary

As depicted in the foregoing discussion, the how-to-live concern is linked with the human condition today. Li Zehou proposes a full-fledged development of human capacity as an alternative to address this concern. When human capacity reaches its greatest height, it gives rise to the accomplishment of human subjectivity. Both of them are intimately interrelated because they share the similar determinants given. The ideal state of human subjectivity is treated as the acme of human capacity and the ultimate outcome of human fulfillment, standing for the highest achievement of which human as human is capable.

In order to obtain the final objective, much emphasis is placed on the aesthetic dimension of human capacity and subjectivity alike. For this dimension is both a budding stage of human development and the final end of human fulfillment. Characteristically and teleologically distinguished from its Western counterpart, Chinese aesthetics is deployed as a foundation stone of Li's historical ontology, practical philosophy, and aesthetic metaphysics altogether. It is closely leagued with such notions of emotional substance, proper measure, emotio-rational structure and pragmatic reason.<sup>538</sup> It is expected not only to enhance the development of human capacity, but also to address the how-to-live concern with aesthetic sensibility and wisdom. Say, it is intended to lead human individuals to approach the ideal of human subjectivity as a new conception of human self, emancipate them from socio-psychical entanglements for the sake of spiritual freedom, and eventually enable them to live a worthwhile life in this world rather than the underworld.

Incidentally, when applied to creating the beautiful, the proper measure helps human individuals develop skill into art, transform creative freedom into spiritual freedom, and sublimate artistic appreciation up to aesthetic transcendence. Moreover, its application is coupled with "illuminating the true through the beautiful," because they both are directed to the special role of practical aesthetics. Similarly, the conception of emotional substance as a fundamental root of human psychology is connected with the act of "furnishing the good

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<sup>538</sup> Wang Keping, "Li Zehou's View of Pragmatic reason", in Roger Ames and Jia Jinhua (ed.s), *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2018), pp. 240-7.

through the beautiful”, because they both are pointed to promoting the internal value of aesthetic metaphysics. All this is due to the conviction that the beautiful illuminate the true and symbolize the good. Accordingly, the aesthetic sensibility of the beautiful serves as an enlightening energy that inspires the contemplator to gain insights into the epistemological worth of the true, and to cultivate the moral consciousness of the good.

Regarding the fourfold engagement in the interactive acts stated above, it makes the most of the aesthetic dimension that straddles a number of provinces including the true, the good, the beautiful and human living. It is aimed at the attainment of aesthetic transcendence mainly grounded on two paramount orientations: the heaven-human oneness and the culture of optimism. They both represent the primary ethos of Chinese culture at large. Respectively speaking, the oneness of this kind is often treated as the supreme aesthetic realm tallied with heaven-earth realm of human living. The optimism as such is originated from the Chinese music-rites heritage that features joy-consciousness and aesthetic stance towards everyday life. Historically and practically, it procures a strong impact upon Chinese cultural tradition and national mentality altogether. Naturally and effectively, it evokes aesthetic sensibility in a metaphysical sense, remolds joy-conscious temperament in an anthropological sense, and consolidates the optimistic spirit in an ontological sense. These three traits are interwoven in the deep structure of cultural psychology and life philosophy in China. Empirically and actually, the aesthetic sensibility pertains to the aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful in art and nature, the joy-conscious temperament makes the national mentality accustomed to granting bitter joy or drawing delight from sufferings and miseries, and the optimistic spirit, all the more instructive and significant, enables Chinese people to become what they are, never losing a ray of hope at confrontation with the gravest crises and hardships. Thus they are ready to acknowledge the interaction between the negative and positive sides of all matters, and prepare for the possible interplay between fortune and misfortune in varied situations.

This being true, they tend to prepare for the worst, and hope be for the best. They usually get accustomed to crisis-conscious thinking, and keep alert against potential dangers even in peacetime. Meanwhile, they manage to appreciate bitter joy while searching for possible alternatives to cope with unexpected problems and challenges. Knowing well the difficult condition of human existence as is sandwiched between heaven and earth, they have no other choice but persevere in self-reliance under all circumstances. To the extent of their self-consciousness of human living as such, they are distinct from the Christians who are fortunately exposed to divine grace and redemption. Thus in many cases, the Chinese majority are liable to

suffer more, and paradoxically, enjoy more, because of their enculturated sense of bitter joy either in difficult situations or under harsh conditions. They are fond of human living with an optimistic spirit and matter-of-fact attitude. They tend to celebrate a joy-conscious and morality-based life in this world. In general, their way of life is like a boat against the current. It beats on, so persistently, no matter what difficulties it confronts with. This is repeatedly verified through the ups and downs in the long course of Chinese history.

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**WU Xiaoming:**

**The *Du* Beyond the Limits of *Du* and Finding the *Du* in the *Du* without Limits - Discussing Li Zehou's "Primary Category of Anthropological Ontology"**

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Confucius had gone along until he was fifty-one and had still not heard the Way (*dao*). Finally he went south to Pei and called on Lao Dan. "Ah, you have come," said Lao Dan. "I've heard that you are a worthy man of the northern region. Have you found the Way (*dao*)?" "Not yet," said Confucius. "Where did you look for it?" asked Lao Dan. "I looked for it in rules and regulations (*du-shu*), but five years went by and I hadn't found it."<sup>539</sup>

—— "The Turning of Heaven", *Zhuangzi*

This story in *Zhuangzi*, in which Confucius interrogates Laozi on *dao*, is probably fictional, although it will not be the focus of this paper.<sup>540</sup> I chose to begin the paper with this epigraph simply to draw attention to the term "*du*". Nevertheless, Confucius' concern for "*du*" as rules and regulations (*du-shu*) in this fictional story distantly and reciprocally echoes Li Zehou's real concern for *du* as a philosophical concept. This echo may not be purely coincidental, whereby the historical resonates with the contemporary, and the traditional resonates with the innovative. Although these distant echoes may not have been recognized in the thought of our times, nor were they anticipated by the traditional narrative and hence at most remain as disguised potentialities and possibilities. Despite this, unravelling these potential dialogues in the history of ideas and rousing their potential meaning, thus shedding new light on these ideas, or at least creating new space for the generation of new ideas, is precisely the purpose of studying such ideas. Although this paper will primarily discuss Li Zehou's philosophy, the two-thousand-year-old fictional tale of the conversation on the pursuit of *dao* between Confucius and Laozi could be an imagined background or the potential horizon of our discussion.

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<sup>539</sup> *Zhuangzi*, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 113. Bracketed term *du-shu* will be an important terminology in this article. Watson chose to translate it as rules and regulations but another way to understand these characters is *du* – measures and *shu* – numbers.

<sup>540</sup> This paper was originally written in Chinese. The draft translation was done with the help of Huang Yijia, to whom I owe my thanks. The present text is a new version with my own further revisions.

### **An ‘Ontology’ reluctantly retained**

Li Zehou states in “An Explanation of the Summary Chart on Ethics”: “I hope in the coming decades and years, the Chinese terms ‘*qing*’ and ‘*du*’, which are central to my philosophy, could become like the commonly used terms ‘*dao*’ and ‘*ying-yang*’ that are phonetically translated in Western languages, as none have the appropriately corresponding translations in Western languages.”<sup>541</sup> Whether it is possible to find the appropriately translated terms for Li Zehou’s *qing* and *du* in other languages<sup>542</sup> will not be discussed here. However, Li Zehou’s wish, in and of itself, and his desire to preserve *qing* and *du* as unadulterated concepts (by replacing translation with phonetic transcription), wishing to continue their philosophical life in other languages, has given away two important pieces of information: the first is that Li Zehou affirms and shows confidence in the centrality of *qing* and *du* in his philosophy; the second is that these two concepts, which are granted a central position by Li Zehou in his philosophy, if not entirely untranslatable, are considered hard to be accurately and completely expressed in other languages in a manner that captures their uniqueness. Language is indeed more than a direct and transparent medium for the expression of ideas. Linguistic expressions and philosophical thinking are intimately tied. The legitimacy (if this was even a question of “legitimacy”) of terms such as “German Philosophy”, “French Philosophy”, or “Chinese Philosophy” is attained through the idea that the terms cannot be separated from the specific language it is articulated in. Therefore, what Li Zehou desires to convey through the Chinese terms “*qing*” and “*du*” may indicate the uniqueness and originality of this Chinese language philosopher’s thought. Accordingly, for readers of philosophy (even more so for readers of Chinese language philosophy), a careful reading and understanding of these two important concepts is a task that should not be neglected. New philosophical ideas, or creativity in philosophy, only occur in the direct and indirect dialogue with the philosophy written in the past. For a philosopher like Li Zehou, who had once set a trend for an entire generation but for many years had always regretted that his ideas were neglected, especially by younger thinkers, starting or maintaining such continued dialogue is particularly important.<sup>543</sup> That is because our thinking on historical

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<sup>541</sup> Li Zehou, “An Explanation of the Summary Chart on Ethics”, *Chinese Culture*, 2018 (47): 1.

<sup>542</sup> Li Zehou says specifically “Western languages”, while in this article the writer consciously uses “other languages” as a neutral term.

<sup>543</sup> Whenever he had a chance, Li Zehou will bring up the ridicule and neglect that he considered his ideas had suffered over the years: “At my current age of dying, I might still have the responsibility to not avoid those scorns and repeats of me ‘being self-duplicating’.” (Li Zehou, “An Explanation of the Summary Chart on Ethics”) By doing so, he gives a simple and common explanation of his basic thoughts on ethics. Li Zehou mentions that the

and contemporary philosophy, and the possible creativeness of our own thought, should not be swayed by shallow trends, despite trend-following being difficult to avoid outright. To that end, as we pay attention to philosophical creativeness, maintaining a focus on the neglected works of contemporary Chinese language thinkers could indicate that one is not swayed by trends.

I had written about topics regarding *qing* in the Chinese language in my other research.<sup>544</sup> Although that paper does not directly address Li Zehou's *qing*, it analyses the specific meaning of *qing* within the context of the history of the Chinese language and the Chinese philosophical tradition and hence forms some sort of indirect dialogue with Li Zehou's argumentation. Therefore, the discussion of this paper will only focus on the concept of *du* as found in Li Zehou's *Historical Ontology*. The form of this paper is a type of careful close reading of the text. As it is often said, the devil is in the details, and this will be the mindset going into the study of this philosophical work.

Within *Historical Ontology*, Li Zehou's first focus is to explicate the ontological nature that *du* possesses. However, Li Zehou uses the term 'ontology' ambiguously. He admits that: "Indeed, borrowing the term 'ontology' (*benti-lun* 本体论) and using it in the Chinese context may not be appropriate. This is reflected in its different translations, such as 'theory of existence' (*cunzai-lun*) and 'theory of to-be/being' (*shi-lun*).'" (p.13) Li Zehou thinks that ontology in Western Philosophy is an investigation concerning "the ultimate nature, character, or 'the final reality' (the Being of beings [English in the original]) of all things."<sup>545</sup> Whereas "in the Chinese

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three-line teaching he regards as the general outline of his anthropological-historical ontology "experience (a posteriori) transforms to a priori; history establishes rationality; psychology becomes ontology" were teased, he, therefore, needs to give further clarification. Nevertheless, afraid of being ridiculed again, he defends himself in advance with the following words: "I thought 'historical ontology' is initially an ordinary and simple theory and is not profound at all. I thus express it straightforwardly; it is unnecessary to be devious, mysterious, and difficult. This might be teased again for being 'outdated' and 'old-fashioned'. Unfortunately, I always ignore these comments and I plan to ask my friend to engrave a signet for me with the words 'a Chinese person from last century' on it... to verify my identity. To show that it is certainly the work of an outdated person from an uncultured country and that it is definitely not some profound and mysterious work by a cross-century heroic writer who is 'connected to the international world'. As seen in Li Zehou, the preface of *Historical Ontology* (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2002), 2. In the following paragraph, the writer will directly mark out the page number when quoting this book.

<sup>544</sup> Wu Xiaoming, *Qing and the Goodness of Human Nature*. Wu Xiaoming, *In-Between Text: From Confucius to Lu Xun* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2012), 178-221.

<sup>545</sup> Li Zehou intentionally notes in the brackets that the term "the final reality" (*zuizhong shizai*) means "the Being of beings". While this might make readers relate it to Heidegger, who is frequently mentioned in *Historical*

tradition of ‘separation without separating, connection without connecting’, which means the phenomenon and the noumenon are neither equated nor are separated,” we “fundamentally find it difficult to propose an ‘ontological question concerning ‘the final reality.’” (p.13) Given so, why does Li Zehou carry over the term “ontology”, using it as the title of the book, instead of first investigating the inappropriateness of the term in its application to the discussion of Chinese philosophy? Such an investigation may be fundamentally important for Li’s philosophical concern with the question of the ontological. Why not just create an alternate philosophical path that may be more fitting for Chinese language thinking? Perhaps, in fact, Li Zehou’s concept of *du* already subtly contains some sort of alternate path, or even some sort of breakthrough, although only unconsciously, and this is the basic reason why my paper focuses on Li Zehou’s concept of *du*. However, Li Zehou not only makes no attempt to follow the contemporary Western philosophy’s problem of “ontology”, re-examining the term which has become a vocabulary used in Chinese philosophy, but he is also reluctant to give up in his argumentation the notion of “the ontological” which has been receiving various critiques and doubts from the different fields in philosophy. However, his so-called “ontology” (*ben-ti* 本体<sup>546</sup>) only seemingly means a kind of ambiguous “final reality”, which in the final analysis is none other than the daily lives of people: “What I call ‘ontology’ is to put emphasis on the regarding of the total historical procession of humanity and nature (external nature and internal nature) as ‘the final reality’ of all phenomena, including the phenomenon of ‘I am alive’. It definitely does not imply a departure from each and every instance of ‘I am alive’. If we were to depart from each and every instance of ‘I am alive’, then how could we speak of any sort of anthropological-historical ‘ontology’ (*benti*). Therefore, the so-called ‘historical ontology’ (*benti*) or ‘anthropological-historical ontology’ (*benti*) is not some sort of abstract object, nor an intellectual pattern or an idea. It is not the absolute spirit or an ideology and so forth; it is just the daily life itself of each living person (individual).”<sup>547</sup> (p.13)

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*Ontology*, Heidegger may not acknowledge “the final reality” as a proper translation for the Sein or Being as he has intended it. The Being of beings is not “the final reality”.

<sup>546</sup> When Li Zehou says “*benti*”, which actually refers to the onto- of ontology, I will still resort to the word “ontology” as its translation but insert “*benti*” in brackets to distinguish it from his “*benti-lun*” or ontology. I do not think that here “substance” is a suitable translation for what Li Zehou calls “*benti*”, as some researchers seem to think.

<sup>547</sup> Translator’s note: the writer of this paper had originally pointed out that there is some difficulty in translating “历史本体” and “人类学历史本体”, to simply mean historical ontology. The trouble seems to be that Li Zehou’s usage of “本体” could be directly extracted from the term “本体论”, which points to a direct relationship between

If “historical ontology” (*benti*) or “anthropological-historical ontology” (*benti*) are designated as “the daily life itself of each living person”, then we need to first raise a question: what is the relationship between each person, as an ontological being (*benti*), with other people? After all, individuals do not live or exist alone. The above passage does not clarify how each living person’s daily life connects together with other people’s daily life to form what Li Zehou calls the “total historical procession”. As such, we do not know how individuals connect with one another within the totality of history. Is it that each person is an irreducible ontological being (*benti*), and the so-called historical ontology (*benti*) or anthropological-historical ontology (*benti*) is just a superposition of such beings? Or is it that each person is ultimately fused into a single historical ontology (*benti*) or anthropological-historical ontology (*benti*)? We also do not know whether this totality of history may have an “outside” (Hegelian totality does not have an outside or an externality, while Levinas strives to find the “outside” or the externality of such totality), or whether this historical process has a purpose or final destination (the existence of purpose or final destination is implied by the very question of the process). Hence, we could only currently accept this ambiguous assertion: as that which cannot be further reduced, as “the final reality”, “the daily life itself of each living person” is the “ontology” (*benti*) in specifically Li Zehou’s historical ontology or anthropological-historical ontology.

However, even if we provisionally accept Li Zehou’s ontological theory, concerning “the daily life itself of each living person” as individuals, it should be immediately noted that ontological categories, even the primary category, are not the ontology (*benti*) in and of itself that an ontological theory concerns itself with. Categories are only different ways for the final reality to be what it is or to be itself, they only express the “how and what” of the “ontology” (*benti*). If the ontology (*benti*) in Li Zehou’s historical ontology or anthropological-historical ontology is “the daily life itself of each living person (individual)”, then “*du*”, classified as the primary category of this ontological theory, only concerns the “how and what” of such “ontology” (*benti*), instead of being the “ontology” (*benti*) in and of itself. But in his own account of the term, he often uses expressions such as “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” (or “the

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being and ontology that allows for the connection between historical ontology “历史本体论” and a “historical being” “历史本体”. Whereas the connection in Chinese is clear, the corresponding translated term ‘historical being’ does not seem to work for English. One solution is to note that Li Zehou’s idea of *ben-ti* 本体 is an independent and distinct idea from ‘the ontological’. Rather, it is an ontology in that it interrogates the final reality of existence. This is why the translation I provided here retains the meaning of *ben-ti* “本体” as just ‘ontology’.

ontological nature of ‘*du*’).<sup>548</sup> This is puzzling. What does it mean by saying “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’”? How should “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” be translated? Because in this form of articulation, “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” could mean *du* as the ontology (*benti*), it could also mean the ontology (*ben-ti*) that supports *du*, or the ontology (*benti*) that *du* depends on. If according to Li Zehou’s following account of “*du*”: “the human subjectivity that has *du* as its ontology (*benti*)” (p.5),<sup>549</sup> then we should understand “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” as “*du* as the ontology (*benti*)” but not “the ontology (*benti*) that *du* depends on”. Meanwhile, the expression “the ontology of ‘*du*’” should correspondingly be written as “*du*, the ontology (*benti*)” to avoid confusion. However, if within Li Zehou’s anthropological-historical ontology, *du* was indeed the ontology (*benti*), then this ontological theory would have two ontologies (*benti*): *du* and “the daily life itself of each living person (individual)”. If that were really the case, then we would not be able to know how the two ontologies (*benti*) relate to each other. Are they each’s ontology (*benti*), or the one depends on the other? This kind of ambiguity causes conceptual obfuscation and difficulty in understanding. Within Li Zehou’s framework of argumentation, according to his internal logic, we could follow his argument of *du* as the “primary category” in his ontological theory and make further logical analysis, because the category in ontological theory is not the ontology (*benti*) in and of itself. But once we run into the expression of “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’”, our reading becomes obstructed. If Li Zehou’s “ontology” (*ben-ti*) were to mean “the final reality” or “the ultimate foundation”, then we can see in the following that Li Zehou’s account of *du* seemingly does not always point to such reality or foundation.<sup>550</sup> One only needs to strip the aura of “ontology” (*benti*) from Li Zehou’s “*du*”, then his account of “*du*” as the primary category of his ontological theory becomes logical and systematic, at least internally within its framework of discourse. Therefore, the work of this paper will be limited to an analysis of the questions contained in the assertion that *du* is the primary category of historical ontology and the different ways of thinking that could possibly be opened by these questions. Given what had been argued, we have, without consent, separated “*du*” from the ontology (*benti*). We recommend that readers of this paper read the various instances of “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” as simply “*du*”<sup>551</sup>. We may finally see the reason why that, even within

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<sup>548</sup> Translator’s note: Again, the ‘ontology’ used here means Li Zehou’s usages of the term as the ‘final reality’.

<sup>549</sup> Translator’s note: by saying the human subjectivity has *du* as its ontology, Li Zehou means that *du* acts as the ‘final reality’ which supports human subjectivity.

<sup>550</sup> Li Zehou, “An Explanation of the Summary Chart on Ethics”.

<sup>551</sup> According to the writer, the following expression of “the ontology of ‘*du*’” can simply be read as “*du*”: “The subject and object in the ontology of ‘*du*’ is initially mixed without distinction.” (p.5) “Within the ontology of ‘*du*’,

Li Zehou's framework, the expression of "the ontology (*benti*) of 'du'" still will not be able to possess any true meaning.

### Survival Teleology Put to Doubt

Now let us attempt to understand concretely the important position of *du* in Li Zehou's "Anthropological-Historical Ontology". His basic propositions concerning *du* are as follows:

1. *Du* concerns the ontological nature of human existence. It is the "primary category of anthropological-historical ontology". (p.3)
2. *Du* is "taking the right measures, doing things just right". (p.1)
3. *Du* is technique or art.<sup>552</sup>
4. *Du* does not exist within objects, but appears in the process of human production and living activities. *Du* is a human creation. (p.2)
5. Humanity relies on mastering *du* in the artistry in production<sup>553</sup> to survive and thrive. *Du* constantly adjusts, changes, expands, and corrects itself according to the needs of humanity's survival and existence. (p.3)
6. "*Du* as the concretization of material practice (operational activities and others) represents itself in the establishment of various structures and forms" (p.4): throughout material practice and productive activities, humans "discover" the mutual adaption between operation, tools (means) and the object. The specific formalization of any specific mutual adaptation is embodied as the *du* that could guide some specific practical activity.<sup>554</sup> (p.4-

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subject and object completely merge into one." (p.6) "the measurements, stipulations, consolidations, and declarations on the ontology of 'du' of the human subjectivity". (p.6) "The ontology of 'du'..... is greater than human rationality, precisely because it possesses some sort of irregularity and unpredictability." "The ontology of 'du' renovates itself day by day, day after day, pushing humanity's survival, continuation, and development." (p.7-8)

<sup>552</sup> The following proposition five is saying "humanity relies on mastering the *du* in the artistry of production" is able to prove that *du* cannot be equated to technique or artistry. *Du* is always the *du* within the technique, skills and artistry.

<sup>553</sup> The underlining emphasis is added by the writer.

<sup>554</sup> This is a recapitulation by the writer. The original text is: "The subject and object in the ontology of 'du' is initially mixed without distinction, but in subjective consciousness, the distinction gradually becomes necessary. It is because, 'du' is originally generated according to various concrete conditions, including favourable timing, geographic advantages, and the harmony of people (group collaboration). Thereby, the handling of performance, scenarios, and conditions of various kinds of things, including favourable timing, geographic advantages, and the

- 5) “All the rational forms, outcomes, and achievements (knowledge and science) in later generations are simply the measurements, stipulations, consolidations, and declarations on the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’ of the human subjectivity.”<sup>555</sup> (p.4)
7. The ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’ is greater than human rationality because it possesses some sort of irregularity and unpredictability. (p.7)
8. Historical ontology (*benti*) is established on the realization of *du*, which is a dynamic and never-ceasing forward progression. (p.7)
9. In *Zhouyi (Yi-Jing)*, the centre curve that divides the *yin-yang* pictogram is the pictorial representation of *du*. (p.8)

We will track the particular arguments in the text to commence our analysis of these propositions. The author takes the age-old question in philosophy: “What is .....?” to begin his argumentation of *du*. As such, “what is *du*” becomes the first question that the author needs to answer. “What is ‘*du*’? ‘*Du*’ is ‘taking the right measures, doing things just right’.” This answer is an abstract and formal determination of the meaning of *du*. Having made his first and foremost definition clear, the author then asks: “Why?” This abrupt “why” could be asking “why is *du* ‘taking the right measures, doing things just right’”? It could also be questioning: “Why ‘*du*’? Why should ‘*du*’ be a concern? Why does ‘*du*’ take the forefront in the elaboration of historical ontology? Or rather, why do we grant *du* this privileged ontological position in the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Historical Ontology*?” Concerning this “why” question, the author gives a simple and straightforward answer: “Because this is the way to achieve the goal.” But then we might again ask: to achieve what goal? To achieve the goal for humanity and individuals to survive: “Humanity (and individuals) primarily regards survival (of kin and individual) as the goal. To achieve the goal of survival, it is necessary for humans to take the right measures and do things just right when going about their businesses.” (p.1) Thereupon, the importance of *du* in Li Zehou’s anthropological-historical ontology begins to emerge: *du* is

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harmony of people, becomes the concrete content of ‘*du*’ and of mastering, understanding, and acknowledging ‘*du*.’” (p. 5)

<sup>555</sup> “the measurements, stipulations, consolidations, and declarations on the ontology of ‘*du*’ of the human subjectivity”: “ontology” cannot be measured; if it can be measured, it is not ontology. This indicates that, in fact, Li Zehou himself could not really regard “*du*” as ontology. What can be measured is just *du*, and what can measure *du* is still *du* - the *du* that *du* (as a verb, measure) *du*.

connected with the survival of humanity; it directly serves humanity's survival. As such, survival is affirmed as the goal of humanity without hesitation.

With regards to this survival teleology, we may need to first pay attention to two points. Firstly, by using brackets, the author exposes some hesitation in his thought: on the one hand, the author affirms that humanity seeks survival as the goal as a collection of individuals or as a whole comprised of many individuals. On the other hand, if only as an appendix, the author adds “and individuals” in brackets next to “humanity”. The use of “and” may confuse the careful reader. Is “humanity” not the collective noun for a collection of individuals? Is it necessary to add “and individuals” next to “humanity”? Perhaps, the “individual” was added by the author for the sake of accuracy or completeness, although it might be superfluous? However, this line of speculation is denied by the second appearance of the word in brackets. Almost as if the author were afraid of the reader misinterpreting his meaning, the phrase “of kin and individual” in brackets is added in his affirmation of humanity “and” individuals “regarding survival as the goal”. Clearly, in these instances, the author repeatedly requests his reader to understand his articulation as humanity and individuals both regard survival as the goal. The emphasis of “and” in this instance is not raised incidentally but deliberately emphasized. However, its emphatic force is diluted by appearing as a piece of inconsequential supplementary information within brackets. This might precisely reveal that the author feels a problem which he also intends to understate: there is a tension or “incompatibility” between humanity and individuals.<sup>556</sup> Moreover, the author uses the qualifier “primarily” in the articulation of his teleology. The use of “primarily” engenders further thinking and questioning: if humanity (let us not forget to add “and individuals” here) “primarily” regarded survival as the goal, then what comes “next”? What would be the “ultimate” goal? If humanity as a species, or as a whole, “primarily” regarded survival as the goal, then, what about individuals? For individuals, could they and ought they primarily regard survival as the goal? The author's usage of “primarily” without the “next” or “ultimately” make these questions remain in suspension.

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<sup>556</sup> We do not have the place for further discussion here on the important question about the relation between the uniqueness of an individual and the other or humanity in general. As an example of the thinking on this kind of “tension”, it might be appropriate to bring up Heidegger's idea of “Dasein”, its authenticity and own-ness, as well as Levinas' idea of “moi” - “being a class of its own” (which means not being as a member who belongs to some group) and being irreplaceable when facing the other. Li Zehou might not be familiar with Levinas's ideas. However, when he seemingly unintentionally but actually deliberately maintains some sort of dichotomy between humanity and individuals, articulating by adding brackets, it would be impossible for Heidegger to have no influence on his thought.

But it could be that for the author, the question (which may not even be a question) could not be simpler and more straightforward: of course, humans “primarily” (and “ultimately”?) have to live. Therefore, the “philosophy of the food on the table” is the first philosophy. Further, if people were to live a life, they have to do things well (here it should be added: at least the things related to being alive). To do things well, then it is necessary to take the right measures and do things just right. In this sense, taking the right measures and doing things just right is *du*. This is the fundamental importance of *du*, which is not at all complicated.

This may be the straightforwardness, plainness and simplicity which is requested by Li Zehou’s “philosophy of the food on the table”. However, this sort of simplicity creates unclarity which leaves the reader with a sense of regret. This is because people could also say that to achieve the goal, one must continue to break those established measurements and exceed the existing *du*. To achieve the goal, one must be adventurous, break boundaries, and go to extremes. However, the lack of rigour in Li Zehou’s philosophy is not the main concern of this paper. What needs to be pointed out first is that from the very beginning, there is a questionable teleology that dominates the author’s entire argumentation. It is not possible to discuss the various complex problems contained in this teleology here, but only raises questions about the idea that survival is the goal. Because whether survival is the primary or ultimate goal is far from obvious. Of course, humans indeed live lives. This is a tangible fact. Or, rigorously speaking, humans have always already found that they are surviving. It is a factuality that humans must have always already accepted concerning themselves. It is only through this factuality, humans (or those as philosophers) can conclude whether or not survival is indeed the goal. But this fact does not directly equate to the assertion that survival is the goal. To conclude that survival is the goal, Li Zehou needs to circumvent or overcome many obstacles. Within the Chinese tradition, he may need to first contend with Mencius’ eloquent argument: “I desire fish, and I also desire bear’s paws. If I cannot have both of them, I will give up fish and take bear’s paws. I desire life, and I also desire righteousness (*yi*). If I cannot have both of them, I will give up life and take righteousness (*yi*). It is true that I desire life, but there is something I desire more than life, and therefore I will not do something dishonorable in order to hold on to it. I detest death, but there is something I detest more than death, and therefore there are some dangers I may not avoid. If, among a person’s desires, there were none greater than life, then why should he not do anything necessary in order to cling to life? If, among the things he detested, there were none greater than death, why should he not do whatever he had to in order to avoid danger? There is a means by which one may preserve life, and yet one does not employ it; there is a means by which one may avoid danger, and yet one does not adopt it. Thus there

are things that we desire more than life and things that we detest more than death. It is not exemplary persons alone who have this mind; all human beings have it. It is only that the exemplary ones are able to avoid losing it; that is all. Suppose there are a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup. If I get them, I may remain alive; if I do not get them, I may well die. If they are offered contemptuously, a wayfarer will decline to accept them; if they are offered after having been trampled upon, a beggar will not demean himself by taking them.”<sup>557</sup> For those who choose to devote themselves to some sort of different goal or higher goal (for example, followers of certain religions or teachings), whether survival is their primary and ultimate goal is also far from obvious.

Furthermore, if *du* (taking the right measures, doing things just right) only exists for humanity to achieve the primary, basic or ultimate goal of survival, then *du* is just a means to fulfil a goal, even if it is the primary means or the only means. “Generally speaking, ‘practice’ as the ontology (*ben-ti*) of humanity’s survival and existence is realized on ‘*du*.’” (p.6-7) The logic of this argument should not be difficult to follow: As the ontology (*benti*), a living person needs to sustain her survival through production and practice. For such a practice to be effective, they must be ‘done just right’. Thus, *du* as a “means” (or the means of means, because if survival were the goal, then the production and practice itself are already a means to survival) is very important. Nonetheless, for Li Zehou to grant the ontological position to *du* as “the primary category of anthropological ontology”, he claims that: “The historical ontology (*benti*) is established on the realization of ‘*du*’ which is a dynamic and never-ceasing forward progression. It (namely *du*) is ... the life force of anthropology and is also the profound mystery of the new explanation for ‘the unity of Heaven (*tian*) and humanity (*ren*)’. The ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’ renovates itself day by day, day after day, pushing humanity’s survival, continuation, and development.” (p.7-8) To say that historical ontology (*benti*) is based on a dynamic realization of *du* logically makes sense, but to then say that “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” renovates itself day by day, day after day, makes matters confusing. Actually, the final sentence serves as a qualifying emphasis of the previous sentence: the *du*, being dynamically realized, as a means would definitely renovate itself day by day, day after day. As such, the *du* that renovates day by day and day after day refers to the *du* in the previous sentence; it is not “the ontology (*benti*) of ‘*du*’” written in the final sentence, whereby the added term “ontology” (*benti*) is perplexing.

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<sup>557</sup> Mencius, *Mencius*. Translated by Irene Bloom. Edited and with an introduction by Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 127-128.

### **Where is the *du* that distinguishes Humans from Animals?**

Let us continue in our reading of the text. If survival is regarded as the goal by Li Zehou and survival necessitates production, then “the *du* as ‘doing things just right’ is first generated and appears in the artistry in production.” (p.1) However, the author somewhat compromises in that he admits that “animals also have to survive” (although the author does not tell us whether animals “regard survival as the goal” in the same way as or to a greater extent than humans if only “subconsciously”), “and can also master “doing things just right”. At the same time, he also claims that this is just “the result of constant training on their species’ instinct as living creatures after their birth.” (p.2) He uses this qualification to limit the potentially subversive power of this compromise. The question here is precisely that, if the “doing things just right” mastered by animals is the result of “training”, then how would we distinguish this sort of “doing things just right” from the “doing things just right” that humans have come to master through constant training (through learning skills and artistry)? In other words, if “*du*” means “doing things just right”, or that it means “one extra inch is too long, one fewer inch is too short” (p.2), and if, moreover, without mastering *du* ‘just right’, it would lead to the danger of “a millimetre deviance, a thousand-mile error” (p.2), then how would we (as humans that are different to animals) master the “*du*” (here meaning “degree”) that determines what makes humans a human and animals an animal? What could we use to measure (“*du-liang*”) the difference between humans and animals? Is this difference a difference in quantity, quality or *du* (degree)? If the mastery of the *du* as “doing things just right’ of humans and other animals is only a difference in *du* (in the sense of “*cheng-du*”, which means degree or extent), then what could it otherwise mean by “doing things just right”? Could there be different kinds of “doing things just right”? Are there “doing things just right that is just right” and “doing things just right that is not quite right”? Is it possible to “excessively do things just right” and “insufficiently do things just right?”

These questions are not just nitpicking on the concept; it importantly concerns the nature of *du* that the author intends to ontologize. This is because, according to the author’s argument, we could say that even if humanity’s “*du*, mastered through their ever-expanding means of production, compared to the other species ..... is infinitely much more” (p.2), and even if *du* “concerns the ontological nature of human existence”(p.2), the *du* (in the sense of the *du* as conceived by Li Zehou) that humanity and other species must master, throughout various activities that dealing with external objects “for survival”, refers to the same sort of “doing things just right”, if “doing things just right” can fully define the *du* as *du*. But if that were the

case, the difference in the mastery of *du* between humans and other animals would not be “ontological”. Rather, it is only a difference of quantity or *du* – in the sense of “*cheng-du*”, which means degree or extent.<sup>558</sup> The difference between humans and other animals is not that humans are able to do things just right more just right than other animals. Instead, it is that humans are able to do more things just right. As such, the *du* that humanity masters and are capable of mastering is more than the other animals in its many varieties. But the so-called “many” is also a kind of *du*. It means that the degree to which “many” is “many” also has to be determined by a *du* that had been stipulated, in a sense whereby *du* is measurement or “*chi-du*”. Without such *du* as measurement, it would not be possible to speak of the multitude, since there would not be a set standard to “*du-liang*” or measure how many is many and how few is few.<sup>559</sup> Then, how could we “*du-liang*” or measure how many is many? How could we “*du-liang*” or measure that humanity’s mastery of *du* (in either *du*’s type or quantity) is more than other animals? How much and to what extent or “*cheng-du*” could be regarded as “just right”? Or is it that there is no “just right” left here, and that we could no longer speak of “just right”? Is it, instead, that *du* is a matter of “the more the merrier” and infinitely much more? We have already seen that the author praises the latter approach: humanity’s “*du*, mastered through their ever-expanding means of production, compared to the other species ..... is infinitely much more.” (p.2) But this “infinite” precisely implies the inability to “du-liang” or measure, or the impossibility to “du-liang”, it connotes that there would be no more *du* or that *du* becomes unlimited (“*wu-du*”). It connotes that *du* is exceeding itself or that *du* had become exceeded, and hence *du* would no longer be what it should be. Or it connotes that humanity, who need to master *du* in various activities, would admit their powerlessness when they ultimately need to master *du* (or when they need to master the ultimate *du*). But the author might not have realized this seemingly innocent admission would cause serious consequences. Consider the following arguments:

Firstly, according to the author, survival is the goal. In order to survive, humans and other animals need to master various skills and artistry. These skills (“*ji-neng*”) and artistry (“*ji-yi*”), or the skill (“*ji*”) that ancients regard as the opposite of *dao*, are the capacity required to conduct

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<sup>558</sup> Although the author says that animals can master “doing things just right” as well, he does not say that *du* also concerns the “ontological nature” of the existence of other species. Nonetheless, if animals also “regard survival as the goal” and thus need to master “doing things just right” when doing things for survival, which means they also need to master *du*, the, would *du* also concerns the “ontological nature” of the existence of other species? Would the survival of bees be affected if they could not build their honeycomb “just right”?

specific activities. The core of this capacity is the mastery and operation of a series of means or methods in order to achieve a specific goal. For instance, in *Zhuangzi*, the butcher Ding possessed the skill of dismembering ox; the wheelwright Bian possessed the skill of making wheels; the cobbler in Plato's *The Republic* possessed the skill of making shoes and so forth. However, on the matter of dismembering ox, making wheels, or making shoes, there are those who are able to perform well, while the others would perform poorly. The good performers would satisfy the need to survive; while for the poor performers, the satisfaction of the need to survive would be adversely affected. In this instance, the difference between matters done well or not done well is whether the matter is done "just right", or lack thereof. Learning to "do things just right" and thus being "just right" is proof of having mastered *du*. This means that the mastery of *du* is the essence of skill-artistry-technique ("*ji-neng, ji-yi, ji-shu*"), which is also to say that *du* is at the foundation of skills and artistry, or that the essence of skills and artistry is the very mastery of *du*. Within Li Zehou's framework, we may understand how the mastery of *du* is the essence of skill-artistry-technique. However, *du* cannot be immediately equated to skill-artistry-technique ("*ji-neng, ji-yi, ji-shu*") in and of itself. Be that as it may, with a slip of the pen, Li Zehou occasionally brings out this proposition: "'*du*' is technique or art." (p.2) The problem is that Li Zehou's arguments and writings themselves do not support this proposition, which directly equates "*du*" to "technique" ("*ji-shu*") or "art" ("*yi-shu*").

Secondly, the author also thinks that humans are not the only ones capable of learning to "do things just right". Other species are also capable of doing so as they also conduct activities that regard survival as the goal. Therefore, there is no such nature of *du* that can be used to essentially or "ontologically (by nature alone)" differentiate the *du* mastered by humans from the *du* mastered by other animals for the activities conducted in order to survive.

Thirdly, it is nevertheless said that there still exists some difference between humans and other animals regarding their mastery of *du*. On this matter, the difference is merely that the *du* which humanity can master is not in the "essence", but in "*cheng-du*" (degree) or the "quantity" – it "infinitely" exceeds the *du* which other animals can master.

Fourthly, the term "infinitude" implies that there would be no more *du*. The contradiction is thus: while humanity's mastery of *du*, in terms of quantity, exceeds the other species' "infinitely much more", humans would no longer master their ("infinitely much more") mastery of *du* in a manner that is "just right". But isn't this kind of "no longer just right" exactly the diagnosis of the fundamental problem of human society, made by philosophers such as Heidegger, criticising that modern technology has been developed in a way where *du* was too

much (“*guo-du*”) or is not limited by *du* (“*wu-du*”) altogether? To put it in the words in our current context: in modern society, humans allow themselves to master various kinds of *du* infinitely or without limits – which either overshoot *du* by doing too much or being not limited by *du* altogether. Humanity’s infinite and limitless mastery of *du*, or to say in their limitless pursuit of the development of modern technology, leaves no room for *du*. Li Zehou intended to elevate *du* as the primary category of anthropological-historical ontology, and in doing so he was obviously thinking about the various problems that humanity must face as a result of the development of modern technology, believing that his theory of *du* could be one possible solution to those problems. If we leave aside the background of philosophers such as Heidegger thinking on and criticising the essence of modern technology, we could not fully comprehend the meaning of Li Zehou’s philosophical undertaking. For instance, Li Zehou writes: “technology (mainly those from modern industrialization), machines, numbers, and mass production ..... since it adopts an extremely rationalized form and type, it conversely strangles, congests, and obstructs the authentic display of humanity’s ontological ‘*du*’. Therefore, on the one hand, technology exposes the ontological existence of the entire humanity’s *du*. On the other hand, technology strangles the ontological existence of the individual. As a consequence, a rallying cry for anti-technology is sounded loud and clear. Going back to foundations, back to the origin to re-discover and to re-explain has become an important mission for philosophy in our times. Affirming the ontological nature of ‘*du*’ is exactly this kind of effort.” (p.9)

At this point, we should also raise these questions: how should humans master the *du* of finding the right degree and extent among various kinds of *du*? How should we be taking the right measures while also having a capacity to infinitely or boundlessly master various kinds of *du*? How should the balance and fairness of the different kinds of *du* be maintained? These are questions which can be reduced to the question “what is the *du* of *du*”, or what is the degree of degree. One of the fundamental problems lies precisely in that humans may appear to be able to master different kinds of *du* infinitely or boundlessly, or they are able to infinitely and boundlessly expand their mastery of various kinds of *du*. Despite this, however, humans are unable to master their infinite and boundless mastery of *du* (or it is regarded as not necessary or even “ought not” to do so; this “ought not to do so” is because the “infinitely much more” mastery of *du* is regarded to concern the “ontological nature” of human existence). But if the mastery of *du* concerns the ontological nature of human existence, then if there is such a moment when humans allow themselves to pursue, as much as possible, the mastery of various kinds of *du*, which is infinite in terms of quantity and in principle, it will be the moment they begin to lose their humanity. Humanity is lost because humans have lost their “ultimate” ability

to master *du* (if this kind of “ultimate” could be discussed) or their “ultimate” mastery of *du*. According to the logic that is implied by the author’s argument, this means that humans are actually unable to master the *du* that defines their humanity. It also means that humans are unable to become or be a human “just right”. This is the exact reason why it becomes a problem concerning the relationships and differences between humans and animals. Humans wish to master various kinds of *du* boundlessly, but it is precisely at this moment they begin to lose their ultimate mastery of *du*. Because this is when and where humans no longer master *du* and would no longer acknowledge nor be able to do things “just right”. Hence, it would also mean that *du* is lost or *du* has become unlimited.

It is impossible to extract here everything that is contained in the above analysis. However, we can at least identify two points:

Firstly, if the mastery of *du* “ontologically” defines the humanity of humans, then the moment when humans fail to master their infinite mastery of the various kind of *du* “just right” or with *du* (or maybe we can put it concretely here that it refers to the infinite mastery of modern technology), would imply a sort of self-deconstruction of the human-centred assumption implied in the author’s theory.

Secondly, this would also lead to the self-deconstruction of the importance of *du* in ontology (to be exact, it means the primary importance of *du* in Li Zehou’s anthropological-historical ontology, rather than the importance of *du* as the ontology [*benti*]). This means the self-deconstruction of the *du* that the author regarded as the “primary category of anthropological ontology”.

### **How could *Du* become a human creation?**

The above is rather a simplistic reading of the beginning few pages of *Historical Ontology*. It does not intend to suggest or provide a theory that is different from the “anthropological-historical ontology” that the author had outlined. This “ontology”, which is itself based on the wisdom of the Chinese language tradition, deserves serious consideration and in-depth research, although we might not necessarily call it “ontology” in any rigid sense of the term. My initial intention was to read this text from the beginning. However, I found it difficult to go further than the beginning first few pages before being troubled by various questions.

The question raised in the above section, which concerns the difference between the *du* mastered by humans and by other animals, forces us to think about the more complicated

questions contained in the boundary drawn by the author between humans and other animals, as well as being contained within *du* as the “primary category of anthropological ontology”. If so, the author’s description of the *du* “in and of itself” being “a human creation, a human manufacture”, as he gives “*du* in and of itself” the primary importance, could also prompt further questions.

The author writes: “‘*du*’ does not exist in any objects, nor within consciousness. It first appears in human production and living activities, which means it is in the practice and the function. It is a human creation, a human manufacture. Therefore, rather than ‘quality’ or ‘quantity’, ‘being’ (*you* 有) or ‘nothingness’, it is ‘*du*’ that is the primary category of anthropological ontology.” (p.2-3) That this argument prompts further questions is first and foremost because Li Zehou affirms that animals can also master “*du*” as “doing things just right” (at least to some extent or “*cheng-du*”). If this were true, it is hard to claim that *du* is specifically a human creation and manufacture unless we add the specific pre-condition of “human” on to *du* in our argument. Despite that, how could the human species’ *du* even be a human creation? Let us roughly propose the following: if *du* means doing things just right, then *du* is merely (at least at first) an adaptation. The author argues for *du* with the aid of the conceptions of “*qiao*” (skillfulness), “*tiao*” (suit well, fit in perfectly), “*zhong*” (central, not leaning to any side), and “*he*” (harmony), which are found in the Chinese tradition, implying that the author in fact also regards *du* as the mutual adaptation between active actors and passive actors, or between interacting actors. It is not that the one (man as the active actor) imposes their own *du*, or their own measures (“*chi-du*”) and standards, onto the other.<sup>560</sup> In the example of horticulture, “doing things just right” means that humans first have to “suit” the “*du*” of the plant. Humans have to provide a “*shi-du*” or “suitable” living environment for the plant and “*shi-du*” or “suitably” water and fertilize the plant; they have to let the plant receive “suitable” or “*shi-du*” amounts of air circulation and exposure of light and so forth. This conception of suitability (“*shi-du*”) contains a sort of passivity on the part of the active agency of the human. As cultivators and farmers, the first thing for humans is not to create a *du* that could be imposed on the plant. Instead, humans need to suit themselves to the *du* of the plant. Thus in the human activities of

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<sup>560</sup> “From the ancient times, Chinese philosophy always emphasises ‘*zhong*’ (the middle or mean) and ‘*he*’ (harmony). ‘*Zhong*’ and ‘*he*’ is the realization and objectification of *du*. It can extend across all field, from music to books on the art of war, and to politics. The origin.....is the ‘*he*’, ‘*zhong*’, ‘*qiao*’ and ‘*tiao*’ in the artistry of production.” The expression of “the realization and objectification of *du*” seems to regard *du* as being pre-existing and waiting to be realized, but Li Zehou’s arguments make us feel that *du* does not exist prior to its realization.

cultivating the plant, it is not that I manufacture the *du* for the plant, but rather it is the plant that regulates (determines) the *du* for me. The *du* comes from the other, the plant. The reason why the plant is able to provide the *du* for me and thus regulate my cultivating activities is that the plant (the plant which I cultivated and the plant that needs my cultivation) itself is the *du* of my cultivating activities. Therefore, here, it is the other that requires me to treat it in the most suitable (“*shi-du*”) way, or in a way that is most suitable for letting the other be what it is and how it is.

Accordingly, in the cultivating activities, although I apparently seem to be the active actor, the imposer, it is always the other that first requires me to suit it (“*shi-du*”). The term “*shi-du*” means that I “suitably adapt” myself to the other’s “*du*”, or to the other as the *du* for me, and that I do my best to let the other “most suitably” be as the other. This is my original and unconditioned respect required by the other for the other to be the other—other people, other matters, and other things. Just as well, this might be exactly the ethics that we need given the nature of today’s modern technology. (For instance, specifically, when we begin to not only welcome the revolutionary changes in human society brought by artificial intelligence but also worry that artificial intelligence might bring about a devastating impact – on humanity itself, on the very nature of being a human). Modern technology represents humanity’s ever-strengthening control of the things and objects (of the whole world) they pursue. This is the ever-expanding power of dominance that humans pursue. Nonetheless, this limitless pursuit of power has to be balanced and regulated by some sort of ethics, that is “humans suitably adapting themselves to the other’s *du*”. Or, in Heidegger’s words, this sort of ethics is the requirement which stems from Being in and of itself (Sein) to Dasein or the human being.

As a matter of fact, in *Historical Ontology*, while Li Zehou made the argument that “*du* is a human creation, a human manufacture”, he inadvertently makes a claim which is not in accordance with this argument, and perhaps even contradicts it outright. For instance, the author quotes his early works and said that *du* means that “in successful practical activities, the subjective purposefulness and the objective regularity’s unanimous amalgamation”, (p.3) whereas “the subjectivity and consciousness precisely could lack ‘*du*’, since it is lacking the direct limitation and regulation from the objective material need of survival”. (p. 4) In addition, he says that “the ontological nature (*bentixing*) of ‘*du*’ as the foundation is not solely a (subjective) human invention (*faming*), but also a discovery of nature (objects)”. (p. 6) Here, in the so-called “amalgamation” of “purposefulness” and “regularity”; the so-called subject’s

consciousness has to be “limited and regulated by the objective material need of survival”; in a so-called “a discovery of nature (objects)”, he is actually admitting to or even emphasising that *du* in the sense of “*shi-du*”, and *du* as “doing things just right”, is impossible to be a human “creation” and “manufacture” unless we re-define the meaning of “*du*” or the meaning of “creation” and “manufacture”. Furthermore, the following descriptions that frequently appear in *Historical Ontology* seem also to run in the opposite direction from *du* being a human creation or manufacture. For instance, the author said that *du* contains “some sort of irregularity and unpredictability” or that it contains “unpredictable possibilities and contingencies”. (p.7) It is also said that *du* “is not the track, rules or consistency that can be framed by rationality. It is filled with uncertainties, un-conventions, multi-centres, and contingencies. It is open, vacillating, ambiguous, and full of sensibility (*ganshou*).” (p. 9) These descriptions run in the opposite direction from the former argument, since human creation or manufacture requires regularity, predictability, and consistency.<sup>561</sup> If the wheel I made is not rotund nor a square, or it seems rotund and a square at the same time, by lacking consistency, it becomes impossible for it to exist as a wheel nor would it function as a wheel. If the shoes I made have no difference from hats, and if the straw sandals I made have no difference from straw baskets, then there could not be such a thing as the manufacturing of shoes and straw sandals.<sup>562</sup>

The above articulates the necessary meanings in the topics of human creation or manufacture. Surely, when the author proposes *du* as human creation or manufacture, he was not discussing wheelmaking and shoemaking in the straightforward sense. Instead, if I may say so, the author is discussing the creation or manufacture that are engendered from the very activities of creation or manufacture in itself. It means that during the activities of wheelmaking and shoemaking, the activities themselves will generate the *du* of the creation or manufacture of the practical activities of wheelmaking and shoemaking in itself. This also means that the artistry of wheelmaking and the skill of shoemaking in itself are formed gradually through the process of constantly doing things “just right” and the continual process of adapting (“*shi-du*”). In this case, “doing things just right” and the “process of adapting (“*shi-du*”)” should be

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<sup>561</sup> This might make us think of the two causes in Aristotle’s “Four Causes”, which are the final cause and the formal cause. Both are, in some way, concerning regularity, predictability and consistency.

<sup>562</sup> Mencius says that “If someone makes shoes without knowing the size of a person’s feet, I know that he will not make baskets.”Mencius, *Mencius*. Translated by Irene Bloom. Edited and with an introduction by Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 125.

understood as verbs instead of adjectives.<sup>563</sup> Doing things just right and the process of adapting (“*shi-du*”) are processes that are dynamic rather than static. Nevertheless, as a formation, or as a creation or manufacture that produces a specific outcome, the activity of creation or manufacturing in itself and its outcome still has to be regulated, predictable and consistent. If it were true that *du* cannot be framed by rationality; *du* is filled with uncertainties, un-conventions, multi-centres, and contingencies; *du* is open, vacillating, ambiguous, and full of sensibility, then how could humans “create” or “manufacture” it as “some sort of thing” (a sort of thing that has identity and that could be differentiated from other things)?

Nonetheless, let us bracket these difficult questions on whether *du* is a human creation or manufacture and how it could be so. Let us stop for a moment and take another look at the vague or ambiguous expression of “*Du* is ..... full of sensibility.” It is impossible that *du* itself is full of sensibility. Therefore, to make sense of the sentence, it seems that this expression could only be filled out as “humans are full of sensibility in the mastery of *du*”. But why would humans be full of sensibility in the mastery of *du*? Because, according to the author, *du* is doing things and interacting with other people “just right”. However, to be “just right”, it is hard to have a singular and fixed rule. It is difficult to have a singular and fixed rule, because (in the final analysis) the other that I interact with is always individualized, different and unique. For this reason, *du* needs to be sensed, or I need to be sensible of or sensitive to *du*, which is to say that *du* needs to be sensed by the humans with sensibility. The process requires me to sense the subtle sentiments that are beyond the transmission and indescribable from the other—the other person, the other thing. Since, in the sense of “doing things just right”, *du* always means that “I adapt myself to the other’s *du*”. To take the example of cultivating a plant again: for me, the plant I cultivate is “the other”. During these cultivating activities, I have to suit and adapt to the needs of the plant, which means that I have to “suit” (“*shi*”) the “*du*” of the plant I am cultivating. However, there is not any *du* directly scribed on the plant’s face, and thus I need to “sense” it out. This sensibility is to sense the *du* without singular and fixed rules. To water and fertilize the plant, there is no single and certain *du* for humans to suit and adapt to. Even with the same kind of plant, planted in the same place, the cultivator still needs to constantly sense and adjust the *du* of watering and fertilizing according to the change of weather and soil. It is

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<sup>563</sup> The author, originally writing in Chinese, is making a distinction between the two forms of the terms which could be either understood as verbs and adjective. *Shi-du*, or 适度 in Chinese could mean things done to the right extent, which is an adjective that works like ‘suitably’ or adapting to the other’s (*du*), which is a verb, which works like ‘suit’.

precisely because in the cultivating activities, it is the plant as *du* that measures the result of my planting activities, rather than I “make the law” for plant, that I need to sense the *du* of the plant.

Of course, the above statement “the other that I interact with is always individualized, different and unique” needs to be specific and limited. Let us clarify this with the example of the wheelwright Bian making wheels in “The Way of Heaven” in *Zhuangzi*, which I had foreshadowed in a former paragraph. When the wheelwright Bian described his experience of wheelmaking, or, to be precise, his sensibility of wheelmaking<sup>564</sup>, he said: “When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel will slide and won’t take hold. But if they’re too hard, it will bite and won’t budge. Not too gentle, not too hard – you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can’t put it into words, and yet there’s a knack to it somehow. I can’t teach it to my son, and he can’t learn it from me. So I’ve gone along for seventy years, and at my age I’m still chiseling wheels.”<sup>565</sup> Making wheels is an activity of creating and manufacturing. This activity will generate a consistent outcome – the wheel. The skill of wheelmaking in itself is indescribable since the subject of this activity needs to constantly and meticulously sense the appropriate strength and speed required by the object (in this case, the wooden materials which need to be made into a wheel) during his activity of wheelmaking. The wheelwright Bian has to apply the strength just right and control the speed just right, in order to make the wheel just right or to make a wheel that is just right. That is to say, in making wheels, the wheelwright Bian has to handle and control the “just right” in the mutual interactions of three things: the activity, the instruments, and the materials throughout the entire process. “Humans, in the practical operation of applying and producing instruments, discovered the relationship of geometric and physical adaptation, confrontation and isomorphism in the triad of their own activities, instruments and objects.” (p. 4) To put it differently, in this task, he needs to handle and control various kinds of *du*, which include the strength and speed in the application of instruments, the degree of sharpness of the instrument itself, the degree of hardness and humidity of the material itself, etcetera. Thereby, all of these factors need to cooperate just right to generate the expected outcome. This kind of handle and control (the mastery of *du*) requires sensing out and is full of sensibility since the activity of wheelmaking is a dynamic process in which every element and factor needs to be mutually coordinated just right. Therefore, this kind of sensibility has to be maintained without remiss

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<sup>564</sup> Strictly speaking, experience can be formalized and become theory, while floating sentiments cannot.

<sup>565</sup> *Zhuangzi*, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 107.

throughout the entire process of the activity. This also conversely means that the actor will constantly sense and then adjust for every single activity of wheelmaking, or every movement throughout the entire process of the activity of wheelmaking. In this kind of continuous mutual adaptation, or in this kind of activity of letting myself constantly suit the others' *du*, every single activity of wheelmaking and even every movement in the activity of wheelmaking is “full of sensibility” and unique, and it possesses the nature of un-repeatability and particularity. This is why the wheelwright Bian could not transmit this sort of sensibility— which is a sensibility that could not be formalized rather than a kind of “experience” that could be formalized - directly to his son. In order to learn the skill of wheelmaking well, his son must sense it for himself.

Alternatively, we can take Traditional Chinese Medicine as an example. Every single diagnosis and treatment given by the doctor to the patient is firstly a unique activity of “I suit the other's *du*” (the patient's *du*), since each and every single patient is individualized, special and unique. Therefore, despite the various kind of proper names given to specific syndromes, and doctors are able to categorize such syndromes accordingly, different patients presenting the same syndrome are always somewhat different. Each patient is always unique in being “this particular one”. Hence, although the syndrome of “this particular patient” and that of the others are in theory or abstractly the “same”, the treatment needs to be adjusted from person to person and one should not keep to a singular regimen. The doctor needs to be constantly “full of unique sensibility for the specific patient”. It is precisely from this perspective that we may understand that a good Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner will give different treatments to different patients who appear to present “the same syndrome” while all of the treatments are the cures being just right – and this is what may be called “treatment based on syndrome differentiation” in Traditional Chinese Medicine.

### **From “*Shi-Du*” (moderation) to “*Zhi-Du*” (institution), and then to *Du* as “In-Between”**

Yet, when the diagnosis of medical cases could not be finalized or generalized, thus always remaining unique, and if the diagnosis solely depends on the sensibilities of the individual doctors, then we could not speak of any sort of medical expertise and medical sciences. Likewise, if the skill of wheelmaking could not at all be taught and passed down as a sort of “craftsmanship”, then we could not speak of any sort of expertise in wheelmaking. If the activity of practising medicine and wheelmaking could not at all be “normalized, regulated” or formalized, and if each and every Traditional Chinese medicine practitioner and wheelwright

had to start from scratch each and every time, it would then become impossible for humanity to master any sort of artistry or skill that is necessary for survival. Thus, it would become impossible for humans in and of themselves to have the so-called accumulation of progress. For this reason, it is necessary to normalize, regulate and formalize. Therefore, other than being necessarily reserved about the statement “regarding *du* as the ontology (*benti*)”, the following judgement rendered by Li Zehou is not mistaken: “The subjective requirement of humans in their own subjectivity, which regards *du* as ontology, is firstly the normalization and organization of operational activities.”<sup>566</sup> On the one hand, *du* certainly has “some sort of irregularity and unpredictability” or contains “unpredictable possibilities and contingencies”. *Du* is certainly “not the track, rules or consistency that can be framed by rationality. It is filled with uncertainties, un-conventions, multi-centres, and contingencies. It is open, vacillating, ambiguous, and full of sentiments.” (p. 9) In this sense, it is difficult to normalize and regulate *du*. On the other hand, the activities of production and operation are indeed required to be done “just right”, and thus there is a need for them to be normalized and regulated, which requires representing and establishing various kinds of structures and forms. To accomplish this, the subtle and unique sensibilities, or the indescribable “experiences of an individual” need to be transformed into expressible universal discourses that could then be conveyed and become the expertise that could be taught and passed down, the artistry that could be learnt, operational rules that could be mastered, and so forth. This is the kind of transformation where lies the origin of Li Zehou’s three-line teaching: “experience (a posteriori) transforms to a priori; history establishes rationality; psychology becomes ontology”.

As the primary category in Li Zehou’s anthropological-historical ontology, the concept of *du* within his discursive framework possesses a sort of duality, or that there is an internal tension that is contained within it, because although the necessity of being “just right” for the success of practical activities firstly requires humans to suit the others’ *du*, there is always a tendency for humans to transform the passive “suing and adapting *du* (*shi-du*)” to the active “systematizing *du* (*zhi-du*)” (this would be close to what Li Zehou claims to be the creation or manufacture of *du*), or humans are always in the process of transforming from passively suing and adapting *du* (“*shi-du*”) to actively systematizing *du* (“*zhi-du*”). Notably, the character “*du*” in the Chinese language contains this kind of transformation within the term itself. *Du* is not

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<sup>566</sup> *Historical Ontology* in the book *Anthropological-Historical Ontology*. Li Zehou, *Anthropological-Historical Ontology* (Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2008), 64. This may not be seen in other editions of *Historical Ontology*; it was later added by the author.

contained in humans themselves, since that *du* first comes from the other – the requirements from the other, or my sensibility of the other. As such, there is no such pre-existing or “a priori” *du* for me to dominate, or to impose on the other as an object.<sup>567</sup> I first need to suit myself to the objects’ *du*. This kind of suiting and adapting *du* (“*shi-du*”) as an activity which is passive but also active or both at the same time, requires differentiation based on its place, event, and object. This makes it hard for it to have fixed rules, thus it would be required for it to be sensed by people themselves corresponding to a time, a place, an event, and an object. Nevertheless, if every single interaction between humans and things (the other) ends up being in this manner, and people always need to learn from scratch, then the skills and artistry that could be passed on will not be formed. It would thus be impossible for any progress to be built through a “constant accumulation of experience”. Therefore, the “suiting and adapting *du* (*shi-du*)” that is “sensed” in humans’ practical activities, being a subjective sense of an individual towards “*shi-du*”, needs to be fixed objectively. That is to say, it needs to become an “object” that can be expressed and transmitted.

For this reason, humans require certain means or measures to objectively pinpoint and specifically fix the various kinds of *du*, which are the various kind of “doing things just right” that has been sensed in the ever-changing activities of “suiting the *du* of the object”. If wheelwright Bian the craftsman, needed to teach his son the skill of wheelmaking as the means to “put food on the table” – Bian certainly needs to do so; otherwise, there would be no such expertise that is wheelmaking. In that way, Bian has to be able to transmit to his son the senses of the ever-changing speed, strength, force, hardness, and humidity that he had sensed in the activity of wheelmaking and transmit it in a way that his son could “handle” (“*ba-wo*”) it. In this instance, as I use the term “handle”, I am referring to the word’s most basic definition, which is to mean to see, catch, and hold the thing in my hand.<sup>568</sup> To that end, certain

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<sup>567</sup> This might be precisely opposite to ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras’s idea that “man is the measure of all things”. However, affirming humans themselves are not the pre-existing *du*, or humans do not possess pre-existing *du*, does not mean that the object itself possesses *du* not relative to humans. *Du* is always a relative and relational concept. When saying the plant itself is the *du* for cultivators, it means that the plant, as “the other”, provides measurement (“*chi-du*”) for planting activities and thus humans can measure whether their activities are “suitable” (“*shi-du*”).

<sup>568</sup> Translator’s note: the word the author is originally referring to is the Chinese term 把握 (“*ba-wo*”), which literally means to hold (握) a handle (把) in one’s hands. It is often used as a noun to mean that one has a ‘handle’ on a matter, or as a verb in sentences such as “one is proficient in ‘handling’ a matter.” In both senses, the English term ‘handle’ fits the Chinese term.

measurements which can measure and point out speed, strength, force, hardness, and humidity are needed. That is to say, something like a ruler that can let me measure the length of an object or a scale that can measure the weight of an object. These things may indeed be said to be “a human creation”. They originate from humans in and of themselves. The etymological origin of the word “*du*” in the Chinese language lies in the human body.<sup>569</sup> The character designate an object which objectively and precisely measures the length of an object. At first, the human body performed the task of *du* which decided the objects’ *du*: stretching fingers and arms or the steps taken by foot became the *du* of length; lifting objects with either two hands or by embracing the object with both arms became the *du* of weight and volume etcetera. In this specific sense, humans truly became the “measure (*chi-du*)” of everything. A time later, the *du* which originated from the human body were imprinted on the object. This meant that humans started to manufacture specific tools and instruments for these *du* to be “normalized, regulated” and formalized. The produced tools and instruments are the *du* for me to decide on the various *du* of objects. I can now use this sort of *du*, which is the ruler that measures the length and the scale that measures the weight, to *du* (or measure) the objects. Now in possession of “objective” and “objectified” *du*, humans can subsequently normalize, organize, and formalize various kinds of being “just right” in their activities of production and operation, which makes the various kinds of being “just right” expressible and conveyable. In this sense, in the dual meaning of *du* as both the standard measure for various kinds of measurements and *du* as the method for production or the procedure for operation, *du* could certainly be said to be a human invention or manufacture, which means that *du* is, indeed, “human-made”.

Li Zehou’s *Historical Ontology* quotes the example of Alchemy in *Kaogongji*, which mentions the topic of smelting iron that could be used to explain the process of human “systematizing *du* (*zhi-du*)”, or the objectivity/objectification of *du*. The iron ore will melt at a certain temperature within a certain timeframe. Before the days of precise instruments for measuring time and temperature, smelters had to rely on their experience, which was gained

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<sup>569</sup> In Duan Yucai’s commentaries (*zhu*) in *Shuowen Jiezi*, he analyses the character 度 “*du*” as followed: “There were five “*du*” (measurement) in ancient times, ‘*fen*’, ‘*cun*’, ‘*chi*’, ‘*zhang*’, ‘*yin*’ ..... all measured with hands, and it is thus written with the radical 又, which also represents the hand 手.” Likewise, Xu Kai’s commentary is: “Stretching fingers then one can know the length of ‘*chi*’; stretching arms then one can know the length of ‘*xun*’. Therefore, the character is written with the hand 手. From its original meaning, “*du*” as a noun means the standard that is accorded to when one measures an object, which also means “*chi-du*”. When “*du*” used as a verb, it means to measure an object according to specific “*chi-du*”. <https://www.shuowen.org/view/1922>, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=54437&page=81>.

and accumulated from the practice of iron-smelting, to control the specific process of iron-smelting. This includes, for instance, the performance of the different fuels used in smelting, the relationship between the specific colour of the flame and its temperature, and the different timing required for the different kinds of iron ore, etcetera. This is also what Li Zehou claims: “‘*du*’ is originally generated according to various concrete conditions, including favourable timing of the heaven ‘*tian*’, geographic advantages of the earth ‘*di*’, and the harmony of humans ‘*ren*’ (group collaboration). Thereby, the handling of performance, scenarios, and conditions of various kinds of things, including favourable timing of *tian*, geographic advantages of *di*, and the harmony of humans *ren*, becomes the concrete content of ‘*du*’ and of the mastering, understanding, and acknowledging ‘*du*.’” (p.5) This kind of handling itself is *du* in the sense of “doing things just right”, yet this “doing things just right” itself is still indescribable. That is to say, the objective measurement to measure *du* as “doing things just right” has not yet formed. In fact, what Li Zehou intends to emphasise is the formalization of these experiences themselves. This means, for instance, representing the *du* required for iron-smelting either through the traditional way of observing the specific colour of the flame, or through the modern way of utilizing a thermograph. This is the exact reason why there is the term “*wen-du*” (the *du* of heat) in the Chinese language. In this regard, “doing things just right” in the smelting of iron has been formalized into concrete measurements (“*chi-du*”), which could then be “handled”. While *du* is inseparable from formalization, formalization might conversely set limits on mutual adaptation. That is to say, formalization could be the limitation of “doing things just right” in humanity’s practice and activities that was proposed by Li Zehou. For instance, I may just follow the regulated *du* in my operations. But as and when the specific situation changes, my operation results in “*ke zhou qiu jian*” (carving on the moving boat to look for the dropped sword).<sup>570</sup> The question raised here may be expressed as follows: without formalization, it is impossible to have *du* with any sense of objectivity. However, once it is formalized, the *du* understood as “doing things just right” will become affected. And exactly because “*du*” is human-made in this sense, different groups of people who lived in different times and places come to possess different *du(s)*. These different *du(s)* obstruct mutual communication, moreover, become sources of conflicts. Therefore, to communicate and to ensure peace, it is necessary for the different *du(s)* to be capable of being convertible, take the conversion between the British imperial system of weights and measures and the metric system for example. Furthermore, for

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<sup>570</sup> Translator’s note: This is a Chinese proverb that cautions against foolishly or slavishly following a rule without knowing when to switch course.

the sake of modern technology, it becomes necessary to conduct “standardization” globally, which is to establish a unified and universal *du* for all different kinds.

Once humans possess (and master) various kinds of *du*, and once “the structure and formation of *du* could be universally applied on objective objects” (p.6), the “doing things just right” proposed by Li Zehou begins to dissolve. The wheels manufactured on the assembly lines are produced on an industrial scale. Each one of these thoroughly and indistinguishably conforms to the pre-determined design, a design that is made according to the *du* that had already been mastered.<sup>571</sup> Oxen in the slaughterhouse are slaughtered en-masse. Each ox is dismembered perfectly (albeit bluntly) by machines (robotic arms or robots), while the dismemberment is executed according to the anatomical structure of the cattle that have been schematized and formalized. When all wheels are produced “just right” according to the *du* (design, craftsmanship, and operation) settled by humans, and when all oxen are slaughtered according to the anatomical schema that has been formalized, “doing things just right” in traditional artistry like the wheelwright Bian’s skill of wheelmaking and the butcher Ding’s skill of ox-dismembering appear to have lost their usefulness and the passageway that connects the skills (“*ji*”) and “*dao*” will be cut off.<sup>572</sup> The artistry and skill in the traditional productive activities have been transformed into the technology and technical skill in the modern productive activities. The producer is no longer an artist, and the product no longer bears the personal mark. With all kinds of *du* becoming a set of procedures, therein lies the beginning of mechanization and automation, and productive activities need not depend on the individual’s sense any longer. Consequently, the traditional way of “letting humans suit the objects’ *du*” gave way to the modern way of “making objects suit the humans’ *du*”, or at least, the former way becomes insignificant. Humans began to impose their *du* with increasing pro-activeness (or violence) on the objects. In the here and now, humans appear to have, in reality, become the measure (“*chi-du*”) of everything. Assuming today’s humans are not required to “do things just

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<sup>571</sup> Translator’s note: There is a lexical connection between ‘handle’ “*ba-wo*” 把握 and ‘master’ “*zhang-wo*” 掌握. In the literal sense, the first term means to hold at the handle whereas the second means to hold in the palm 掌, where presumably there is more control. It is in such a sequential order in which a handle on a matter becomes mastery of the matter.

<sup>572</sup> “The butcher Ding laid down his knife and replied, ‘What I care about is the Way (*dao*), which goes beyond skill (*ji*).’” Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 19. Wei Yuan also says: “Going beyond skill (*ji*) would be the Way (*dao*); going through art would lead to the Spirit (*shen*).” Wei Yuan, *The Collected Works of Wei Yuan* 魏源集. Edited by the editorial department of Zhonghua Book Company (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2018), 96.

right” in the way as done by the wheelwright Bian making the wheel and the butcher Ding dismembering the ox, this might only be because, in the modern technological society, it seems that all products are automatically produced to the degree of “being just right”. Throughout the process of normalization, regulation, and formalization, “*du*” has already lost its very meaning of being *du*.

Li Zehou’s “*du*” first “appears in the process of human production and living activities. *Du* means “being just right” in the satisfaction of an outcome that is generated through the process of human activities of production and subsistence. For survival, humans need to produce, and the activities of production rely on external objects as materials. Nevertheless, although humans are capable of learning to produce things they need “just right”, humans are not yet able to create the object itself (natural objects) ex-nihilo, as the Creator or God. Before an object can be used, and before becoming “a useful object”, the external object as an object needs to be fundamentally respected by humans. External objects, as things that humans themselves have to first “suit” in a fundamental way, are still silently resisting the *du* imposed by humans or the human violence that had been realized as *du*. This resistance marks the limitedness of humanity. Humanity is not God. We are faced with problems with the earth’s atmosphere, the environment, global warming, in ecological system and species becoming extinct. The solutions for all these problems fundamentally require humans to first respect the *du* of external objects. This is a requirement for humans to passively, submissively, or even considerately “do things just right” in dealing with external objects. Just as every time butcher Ding dismembers the ox, he is “frightened and cautious” (*chu-ran-cheng-jie*). Or, like the carpenter Qing, every time he sharpened and craved woods to make a bell stand, he would fasten himself and “forget I have four limbs and form and body.”<sup>573</sup> This kind of sincerity and respect, before the times when humans could not help but use objects for survival, shows that the relationship between humans and objects (objects that humans rely on for survival) is ultimately ethical. Li Zehou claims: “from the ancient times, Chinese philosophy always emphasises ‘*zhong*’ (the middle or mean) and ‘*he*’ (harmony). ‘*Zhong*’ and ‘*he*’ is the realization and objectification of *du*.” (p.3) “*Zhong – he*” is an ethical concept on the relationship between humans and between humans and objects. This might be what Li Zehou regarded as the most important “dimension” (the “primary category”) and he intended to emphasise, a point he caught a glimpse of in traditional Chinese philosophy. At the same time, “*mei*” (beauty) is the classical exemplification of “being just

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<sup>573</sup> Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. Translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 152.

right”. Or it is the most classical way of “being just right” that humans can achieve. “‘*Du* is establishing beauty’..... ‘*du*’ is the cornerstone of ‘*mei*’..... ‘*mei*’ is the free application of ‘*du*’.”<sup>574</sup>

The concept of *du* certainly deserves our attention and our thought. Nonetheless, it is not necessary to transform it into an ontology (*ben-ti*). Li Zehou claims: “The existence of ‘*du*’ contains enormous uncertainty and is therefore different from the ‘being’ and ‘essence’ in Hegel’s science of logic. *Du* is provided by ‘the rationality of experience’, relying on the basis of trial-and-error procedure in practical operations. It is the handling and control of the world, which is ever-changing and accumulating. ‘*Du*’ goes from the ‘operational level’ to ‘existential level’, playing the role of the mutual interchanger of the two levels.”<sup>575</sup> This is to admit that *du* is the “in-between” of the two. We could say that *du* is, actually, the in-between of all things. *Du* is actually simply “being in-between”, a “being in-between” in a subtle and ungeneralizable, universal way. This might exactly be the foundation for *du* being *du* as envisioned by Li Zehou. The reason why *du* has “some sort of irregularity and unpredictability”, containing “unpredictable possibilities and contingency” (p.7), the reason why *du* is “not the track, rules or consistency that can be framed by rationality”, and why it is “filled with uncertainties, un-conventions, multi-centers, and contingencies. It is open, vacillating, ambiguous, and full of sentiments” (p.9) etcetera, is precisely because *du* is simply “being in-between”: in between humans and things, and in between humans. Within this “being in-between”, the outcome of every single “doing things just right” as an activity (or as the passivity of the activity) would be a forthcoming and yet-to-come (future) ideal, and thus an endless pursuit. However, once, as the author said, *du* begins to take on the concrete structures in the different kinds of shapes and colours, and once “the structure and formation of *du* could be universally applied on objective objects” (p.6), *du* begins to lose itself from being *du*.

Li Zehou’s thesis on *du* actually already points to a new direction, it points to the subtle state of “being in-between” as described above, and it points to a profound mystery in Chinese philosophy. In fact, his thesis on *du* has surmounted his ontological theory (*ben-ti lun*), although he constantly drew it back into his ontological theory. This article is a preliminary attempt at

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<sup>574</sup> Li Zehou, *Anthropological-Historical Ontology*, 192-193.

<sup>575</sup> Li Zehou, *On Practical Rationality and the Culture of Optimism* 论实用理性和乐感文化. Seen in Li Zehou, *Anthropological-Historical Ontology*, 177.

explaining and “liberating” the potential power of the omnipresent and elusive *du* in Li Zehou’s thesis.

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