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Enriching the Chinese Intellectual Legacy: A Review of Li Zehou's *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*

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A History of Classical Chinese Thought

Li Zehou

Andrew Lambert (Translation, Introduction)

Routledge Studies in Contemporary Chinese Philosophy, 2019

pp. 382

Regarding the issue of social epistemology, the present book is an important source for obtaining a better understanding of such models of constructing knowledge which are based on collective experiences, and which simultaneously offer manifold insights into its social dimensions. This is the epistemological basis of Chinese, and especially Li Zehou's, philosophy. Another characteristic feature of this work, that is likewise linked to social epistemology, is the plain fact that it is rooted in a so-called "non-Western" culture, a culture defined by linguistic structures and referential frameworks that differ immensely from the ones with which the Anglophone readers are commonly familiar. It is hence a work that arose from intercultural and transcultural discourses, and one which required for its creation a solid implementation of the so-called discursive translations.

Discursive translations contain elucidations of the original texts that cannot be limited to a linguistic transfer, but must additionally include the interpretation of specific textual/speech structures, categories, concepts and values existing in diverse socio-cultural contexts. In recent years, there has thus been a growing demand to revive the classic categories and concepts of traditional Chinese sources. Andrew Lambert, the translator of this book, is one of the rare scholars of comparative philosophy who possesses both the knowledge and sensibility necessary for an (almost) perfect mastering of such complex tasks.

Such an approach, however, involves the intercultural relativization of the contents based on methodologies that correspond to the specific requirements of research in the Chinese ideational tradition, and comparative philosophy or cultural studies in general. The priority in this approach is preserving traditional Chinese philosophical characteristics and maintaining autochthonous and traditional methodological principles. However, this does not mean denying or excluding an intellectual confrontation with Western (and global) philosophical systems. As the author of this book is well aware, global (especially European and Indian) philosophy includes numerous elements that cannot be found in the Chinese tradition. The book will doubtless be prized by many readers, as it clearly shows that the investigation and application of these elements is not only a valuable means for fertilizing new systems of ideas, but also offers an important comparative tool for a better understanding of one's own tradition.

Li Zehou, the author of this intriguing and somewhat unusual book, is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished, significant, and influential Chinese philosophers of our time. Even though he is one of the very few Chinese intellectuals whose work has acquired some readership outside of China, most of his important books are still not translated into Western languages. Therefore, although he has had and continues to have a huge influence on Chinese scholars, Li is still relatively unknown in the West. Until recent years, translations

of his works into English were limited to those on aesthetics, which represented his main field of interest in the 1970s and 80s. His books that dealt with the introduction and analysis of Chinese aesthetic thought were translated into Western languages under the following titles: *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (1994), *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global Perspective* (2006), and *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (2010).

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, a few of Li's essays on such topics as the rehabilitation and revival of Confucian thought, interpretations and upgrading of Kantian philosophy, and studies of Chinese Marxism have also been translated into Western languages (see Chong 1999, 15; Rošker 2019, 10). Most of these translations, however, were published in journals or monographs with a relatively narrow range of distribution and impact in the Euro-American region. Somewhat more influential and certainly very valuable is the special issue of the journal *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, which was published in 1999 and edited by Woei Lien Chong. It contains seven translations of Li's articles on various topics, ranging from his theories on the origins of human beings and his concepts of sedimentation and *subjectality*, to his elaborations on Chinese modernity (Rošker 2020, forthcoming, 9).

In the last few years, especially since the international conference “Li Zehou and Confucian philosophy”, that was organized in 2015 by Roger Ames and Peter Herschok at the East West Center of the University of Hawai'i, substantial efforts have been made to translate at least some of his most important works into English. As a result, a multivolume series is set to be released in English in the near future, including some of his most influential works, such as *Outline of a Philosophy* and *From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humaneness*, (D'Ambrosio, Carleo, and Lambert 2016, 1057–1058). In 2018, Jeanne Haizhen Allen published her translation of Li Zehou's book *Pipan zhexuede pipan* under the English title *A New Approach to Kant: A Confucian—Marxist Viewpoint*. However, given the fact that Li is not only an immensely important, but also an extraordinarily productive writer, who has altogether published over 30 books, we can in no way claim that his philosophy has been thoroughly introduced to the Western world yet.

The present book, i.e. Andrew Lambert's translation of Li's *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*, is therefore especially important and precious.

However, because nothing in this world, even the most important and valuable things, are completely flawless, I will start this review with a minor critical comment. A rather annoying formal flaw of the book is namely the lack of the original title of the work that was translated. Truly serious publishers should always include the original titles of translated works into the colophons, but this is not the case in this book. This is even more unfortunate because the editors did not even record the year of publication of the original book, although the work has been republished several times and its different versions are far from identical. The Chinese title is also missing in the translator's foreword, even in its last part entitled *A Note about Translation*, although this is the very part which Andrew Lambert has—*inter alia*—explored on the question of different versions of the book.

Nevertheless, if one is familiar with Li's work it is of course still clear that the present book is a translation of *Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun* (中国古代思想史论). As Andrew Lambert notes in his *Introduction*, there are many different versions of the book and the text has been rewritten and reworked several times. Hence, it is not surprising that the translator could not consider all of these different versions. He has obviously not been working on the same version that I read and which was published in 1985 by the Renmin chubanshe in Peking. In Lambert's translation, some of the minor parts that are included in the 1985 version are thus missing, while others must have been added later, for he has evidently been working on a more recent version of the same book.

Overall, the translation of this work, which is among Li's most important books, is excellent. It proves the translator's thorough and scholarly knowledge in the field of Chinese intellectual history, and his mastery of both the general terminology of Chinese philosophy and Li's specific conceptual framework. This is not especially surprising, because Andrew Lambert has been working intensely on the Chinese philosopher for some years, and has previously published some of the results of this in several articles and translations (see for instance D'Ambrosio, Carleo and Lambert 2016, Lambert 2018). Currently, he is also working on a monograph about Li Zehou's philosophy—a work we should certainly be looking forward to.

Nevertheless, I could point out a few translations of certain terms that might be questionable, such as that of 本体论 as *metaphysics*, even though the term has usually been rendered as *ontology* in English. On the other hand, however, the application of the latter notion in the context of traditional Chinese philosophy is also highly problematic, given the fact that in its general framework there is no concept of being in the Western sense. Therefore, even such minor elements that could be—at first glance—seen as inaccurate, might perhaps be result of Lambert's thorough and exhaustive reflection.

Another issue linked to the translation of Li's specific terminology is the translation of his concept of *legan wenhua* 乐感文化. Even though in many existing translations this concept has been rendered as “the culture of optimism”, such a translation is problematic. The reason for such a translation—which is misleading in my view—might lie in the fact that the pronunciation of the Chinese term *legan* 乐感 sounds quite similar to that of *leguan* 乐观, which means “optimism”, so the first English translators may have confused them. However, optimism is actually only one of the connotations of this phrase¹.

¹ Li himself claims that this concept has a threefold semantic connotation. First, it denotes “a culture of worldly happiness”, which is typical for Chinese tradition, for it centres on the material factuality of human life, which, in itself, is directed towards worldly happiness and relational harmony. Secondly, it implies “a culture of optimism”, for it is focused upon opportunities for improving one's living environment from a humanistic and optimistic viewpoint despite history's progression through tragic and depressing events (Wang, Keping 2016, 117). Thirdly, it indicates “a culture of music and aesthetics”, for it “helps facilitate the final accomplishment of human nature by virtue of musical appreciation and aesthetic feeling at its best” (ibid.)

The translator of the present book is also highly critical of such a rendering, as he states that the term “is sometimes translated as ‘a culture of optimism’, but is better understood as indicating a culture characterized by a sensitivity toward socially grounded pleasure or delight” (xvii). On the other hand, he appropriately preserved all partial references to the notion of optimism, which is necessary, for the concept is widely present in the traditional Chinese, and especially Confucian, culture.²

The translated book comprises several essays, written separately at various points in Li’s career, and addressing a variety of topics in Chinese philosophical thought. Taken together, however, they are surprisingly consistent and offer a good picture of the fundamental structure of Li Zehou’s philosophy.

The work, which is thus certainly worth reading, opens with a philosophical introduction written by Andrew Lambert. This *Foreword* is entitled *Translator’s Introduction* and is especially helpful, because it offers the reader a useful orientation regarding the specific features and general structure of Li’s philosophical system. It is divided into four sections; the first deals with Li Zehou’s interpretation of Chinese modernity, while the second introduces the specific features of his characterization of the Chinese intellectual tradition. In the third section of his introduction, Lambert evaluates Li’s philosophical system, sketching the main lines of his thought that have profoundly influenced modern Chinese intellectual history and philosophy. The introduction concludes with a final *Note on Translation*, in which Lambert illuminates some of the difficult problems occurring in the rendering of Li’s thought into English language, especially when dealing with his (often unorthodox) interpretation of classical quotations.

In this highly informative and vibrant explanatory introduction, Lambert elucidates the very structure of Li’s philosophical theory and describes its crucial notions such as the *xiti zhongyong*, cultural-psychological formation, sedimentation, humanization of nature, the culture of delight, pragmatic reasoning and the basic underlying paradigms, such as the so-called one-world view. The *Foreword* also includes a good explanation of certain central concepts of Li’s philosophy, for instance the connection of the aforementioned notion of the cultural-psychological formation to Marxist and Hegelian modes of thought. In this context, Lambert rightly exposes the topical nature of Li’s work:

Furthermore, as the zeitgeist in public debate and social theory move back toward a concern with social polarization and economic inequality as accoutrements of globalization, so some of Marx’s ideas once again provide a focal point for discussion. Given this, Li’s work can be considered timely,

² See for instance for instance page 120 (in the 1985 original) : “荀子尽管少讲先验道德和心理情感，却仍然突出了孔门‘积善而不忘’的乐观奋斗精神”，a passage correctly translated as “Although Xunzi seldom discussed *a priori* morality or the psychology of emotions, he nevertheless had the Confucian school’s spirit of optimistic striving—accumulating goodness and not losing it” (122).

as a contribution to this renewed debate about the role of economic and political forces in shaping the human subject and its values (xiii-xiv).

Lambert's explanation of *xiti zhongyong* 西体中用, however, might not be completely correct or might at least be the result of a slight misinterpretation. He describes the phrase as follows:

Subverting the notion that an established Chinese tradition (*zhongti*) can make use of features of Western civilization such as science and the technocratic management of society (*xiyong*), Li's analysis of Chinese history appeals to theoretical frameworks and social analysis that originates in the West (*xiti*) in order to derive conclusions about, and prescriptions for, Chinese society (*zhongyong*) (xiv).

While Lambert is certainly right in stating that in this “playful term” (ibid) which means “Western root with Chinese application” one can also sense a Marxist influence, it is important to note that Li has actually understood the central character in this phrase, namely *ti* 体 as the material basis of society, not as a kind of theoretical framework. In his most complete explanation of this “playful term”, Li Zehou first defined both oppositional terms, with *ti* 体 defined as “body, substance, principle” and *yong* 用 as “use, function, application”. He then wrote:

I understand the word ‘substance (ti)’ differently from others. In my opinion, it primarily expresses social substance... I have always stressed the fact that social existence represents the substance of society, and that ‘substance (ti)’ for me means social existence, which for the most part was not defined by ideology (Li Zehou 2002, 155).

Hence, one must not confuse the social substance as such with its theoretical framework. The correct interpretation of the new slogan thus hinges on the understanding of the concept of *ti*, or *substance*, which the proponents of the original motto viewed as the “*substance of tradition*”, while Li Zehou instead saw it in Marxist terms, as the “*material basis of society*.”

The main flaw of the (slogan) ‘Chinese substance and Western applications’ is to be found in the assumption that technology is application and not substance. But the exact opposite is true: technology is substance, because technology is connected with social existence, as well as with productive forces and the modes of production. (Li Zehou 1996, 253)

This slight misunderstanding is certainly linked to the fact that Li's specific understanding of Chinese modernity is not only rather unorthodox, but also firmly embedded into the basic characteristics defining the referential framework of Chinese philosophy, which is—for the scholars trained in Western philosophy—often extremely difficult to grasp. The translator rightly notes that

there is a Chinese tradition that exerts a wide-ranging and coherent influence on an emerging Chinese modernity; but it is not monolithic or inert. New ideas or practices can become sedimented into the evolving cultural-psychological formation of the tradition (xxiv).

It is a pity that in the present work Li has not yet explained the concrete mode of such sedimentation in detail, his important concept of transforming the empirical into the *a priori* (*jingyan bian xianyan* 经验变先验).³ On such grounds not only could his specific view of Chinese modernization, but also his entire philosophical system, have become more understandable and hence even more enriching.

As such, we have even more reason to look forward to further translations and critical introductions of Li's work, that will hopefully be published by Andrew Lambert—and many other, comparably brilliant scholars, translators and researchers in the near future.

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³ For a detailed explanation of this important notion see Rošker 2020, chapter 7.2.

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