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A Translator's Response to Reviewers' Comments: On Li Zehou's *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*

Andrew Lambert, City University of New York, College of Staten Island,  
[Andrew.lambert@csi.cuny.edu](mailto:Andrew.lambert@csi.cuny.edu)

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I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss Li Zehou’s work in this interdisciplinary forum, particularly because Li’s ideas are well suited to a cross-cultural and multi-perspectival approach. His bold ideas seek to bridge cultural traditions; yet their suggestiveness is sometimes criticized as vagueness. Certainly, they await fuller articulation. A forum such as this can do much to tease out the implications of Li’s thought. As several of the discussants make clear, Li’s work is also suited to discussion via SERRC, because his conception of fundamental reality starts from practical everyday social life. A feature of his work is the denial that answers to the most fundamental questions of order and meaning are found through abstract intellectual pursuits or in transcendental sources (*pace*, for example, Abrahamic theology); yet nor does science reveal what is ‘ultimately real’ (*zuizhong shizai*, to use Li’s term). Li believes a practical, social and historically-informed sensibility was a strength of the Confucian tradition; the tradition appreciated the role of culture in structuring human subjectivity. *A History* illustrates this outlook by exploring the tradition’s various intellectual schools and movements. At the same time, Li is ready to be critical of that tradition while also advocating, “the upholding of those elements of the tradition that are rational and full of vitality” (Li 2019, 327).

I thank my respondents for their insightful comments and will address their points shortly. However, I assume that readers of this exchange have limited familiarity with the Confucian tradition or Li’s works, and since some of the reviewers’ comments are quite specific to Li’s theoretical framework, a preliminary sketch of Li’s approach will help to promote dialogue. This will also bring out the comparative and cross-cultural aspects of Li’s wide-ranging oeuvre. My aim is to highlight how Li draws on theoretical frameworks drawn from the West to interpret the Chinese tradition, while also using Chinese, specifically Confucian, thought to offer critiques of social and political thought in the Euro-American tradition.

### **A Brief Overview of Li’s Thought**

Li describes his broad comparative project as a “three-in-one theory” (Li 2018, vii), which draws on elements of Marx, Kant and traditional Confucian thought. The place of these three elements in Li’s theorizing can be briefly introduced.

Li, who came of age in Maoist China, takes several intellectual commitments from Marx. However, as to whether he is a Marxist, he answers ‘both yes and no’ (Li 2018a, vi). No, because Li sets aside many aspects of Marx’s work, including class, social antagonism, and much of his economic analysis that implies the inevitable move towards a crisis of capitalism and its replacement by a more ideal social system. Furthermore, Li believes that *Das Kapital* relied upon abstract transcendental suppositions, such as “abstract labor” and “socially necessary labor time,” which fit poorly with the actual experiences of capital and a market economy. Such abstractions thus potentially distort social theorizing. However, Li agrees with Marx on one fundamental point: “the collective practical activity of using and making tools is the definitive factor in the origin and development of humankind” (Li 2018a, vi). Stated another way, both agree that the starting point for understanding human action—which for Li also means the starting point for human nature or even ontology—is concrete

human life and the satisfaction of basic need (Li 2016a, 406). Li labels his approach as *anthropo-historical ontology* (*Renleixue lishibenlun* 人类学历史本体论)(Li 2016a).

Li views the Confucian tradition as being similarly focused on “human beings’ material life, worldly existence, and real life” (Li 2018a, vi). Understanding humanity begins from analyzing the nature of the shared social existence that generates humanity. Li sees in early Confucian thought a recognition of the most basic purpose of human life as the maintenance and reproduction of human existence. This involved no appeal to transcendental or religious sources of knowledge. The *Analects of Confucius* declares: “Not understanding life, how can you understand death?” (11.11).

In Li’s explanation of how humans relate to the world, indigenous social forces and practices cohered to form a “culture,” and this shaped the conscious lives of individuals embedded in it. Li’s describes this arrangement as a “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua-xinli jiegou*; Li 2019, 1, 7, and *passim*). Social practices condition human thought, values and feelings, influencing how people conceptualize the world, what is considered valuable or reasonable. The Chinese tradition had its own distinctive cultural-psychological formation. Key features included kinship ties, a reliance on ritualized forms of social order, pragmatic reasoning, the need for humans to harmonize with, rather than control, the natural world, and the empiricism of small-scale agricultural production. This way of life, Li argues, predates Confucian thought but was first articulated in it (Li 2019, 21). The relation of external world to inner life of the subject is historically sensitive—social forces evolve over time, and so moral, epistemological and aesthetic standards change (261). However, the idea is that certain deep-rooted features, which identify the tradition as Confucian, remain constant while expressed in different ways in various subsequent eras. Li describes this consistency underlying inevitable social and historical evolution as “sedimentation” (*jidian*)(2019, 330).

While Li’s sees connections between Confucian thought and Marxism, he is also critical of the latter. Specifically, “Marx and Engels discussed the historical aspects of the material existence of human society, yet failed to place sufficient emphasis on human beings’ inner psychology” (Li 2018a, vii). Li turns to Kant to overcome what he sees as the more dogmatic and deterministic elements of Marxist theory. Kant’s account of cognition, sense and reason appeal to Li and enable him to develop a nuanced and complex picture of human psychology. Li is sympathetic to Kant’s insistence that the individual matters (how this can be reconciled with Li’s social holism and a social system rooted in kinship relations is a difficult question). In particular, Li develops Kant’s notion of the rational will. Humans’ ability to willfully override desire and even apparent self-interest, for the sake of moral conduct, is a distinctive ‘suprabiological’ (*chaoshengli*) feature of human nature, which distinguishes humans from animals. The ability to exert such rational control, even if reason is socially conditioned, partly informs Li’s rejection of sociobiology as a reductionist explanation of human nature: “A human being is not merely a biological entity; to become a human being, necessarily means to possess an inner, conscious rational moral character” (Li 2016a, 20; trans., Rošker 2019, 39).

The appeal of Kantian ethics as an antidote to the constraints on thought in Maoist China is obvious. But Li is also critical of Kant. He creatively reimagines some of Kant’s ideas, especially his account of synthetic *a priori* judgment or knowledge. Kant identifies necessary *a*

*priori* conditions of experience—concepts such as time and space or cause and effect—that are independent of experience (i.e., transcendental) yet make experience possible for beings like us. Li agrees that we experience the world in much the way that Kant claims—through concepts such as free will that seem necessary or inescapable—but rejects the *a priori* grounds of Kant’s claim. This rejection involves a turn back to Marx. The apparently universal nature of such experiences does not originate in *a priori* knowledge or universal and timeless features of the human mind; rather, the general categories through which people make sense of the raw data of experience are the result of human practice and activity. The necessity of finding the means for subsistence and (re)production of social existence, which involves making and using tools and thus interacting with the world and with other people, conditions cognitive processes. This interaction gives rise to the “necessary” forms of human experience that enable us to perceive and make sense of the social world. Li’s debt to Kant, especially in the emphasis on free will in response to concerns about feudalism, underlies the progressive spirit of *A History* and Li’s later work.

Li thus constructs a dialectic: an inner subjectivity (Li uses the term *subjectivity* to capture the distinctive nature of his human subject) formed by external forces that, in turn, acts on and transforms the external world. This also reflects the spirit of traditional Chinese thought. Represented by texts such as the *Yijing*, this adopts a holistic view of the cosmos: relationships of interdependence and mutual influence determine outcomes. In traditional Chinese cosmology, the cosmos and its effects on humanity can only be contemplated, not known (Li sees parallels here with Kant’s notion of the unknowable thing-in-itself). Nevertheless, against a backdrop of ceaseless generation (*shengsheng buyi*), stable forms of human life can be established in response to the ebb-and-flow of elemental forces. In fact, Li’s Marx-Kant infused theory is a contemporary interpretation of the traditional idea of “the unity of humanity and the cosmos” (*tianrenheyi*), which insists on the inseparability of humankind from the contextualizing whole. This idea has been expressed in various ways in different eras by pre-Qin, Han and Song Confucian thinkers (Li 2019, 325-31).

Beyond cosmology, Confucian thought is particularly amenable to the idea of social structure shaping human values and action. Ritualized forms of conduct were pervasive, a basis for everything from family life to keeping nobles loyal to centralized rulers. Furthermore, abstract ethical norms were intertwined with concrete and stratified webs of social relationships. These started with the family and expanding outwards to include ever-larger communities. Also, the Confucians explore the psychological experiences that accompany such social structure, such as reverence, resentment and shame. According to Li, traditional Confucian thought granted a prominent role to emotion in practical and moral judgment; Western accounts of practical judgment that strongly emphasize rationality and universality could learn from the more “balanced” emotional-rational structure of Confucian social thought (Li 2016b). Practical wisdom in the Confucian tradition thus took the form of pragmatic reasoning (*shiyong lixing*); not only could emotion and intuitive response guide conduct, but practical reasoning was directed towards this-worldly practical problems, not to abstract perfections or to other realms.

This deep-rooted concern with the dynamic and interdependent connections between the social world and humans’ inner life, as well as a pragmatic attitude, and the desire to move

beyond Maoism, has prompted renewed interest in China's own intellectual and cultural traditions. Li has been in the vanguard at this revival.

### Criticisms of Li's work

The above sketch provides a brief introduction of Li's thought. His strikingly original approach differs from most other contemporary scholars working on Confucian thought. The scale and ambition of Li's program, however, render it vulnerable to various objections. A feature of Li's work is that he rarely exhaustively defines his terms or fully explores the implications of his many claims. While much of his work awaits detailed examination, a few criticisms can be noted here.

Li's attempt to bring together Marxism and Confucian thought gives rise to a concern. Li highlights the Marxist emphasis on tool use, and its effects on human psychology and social structures; he sees similarities here with traditional Confucian thought. On a superficial level, this is plausible—both intellectual traditions strongly emphasize the social and practical aspects of human life. However, while the Confucians focus on practical and this-worldly existence, they show little obvious concern with tool use and, by extension, productive forces that ordered social life and stimulated social change. Admittedly, perhaps ritual could be understood in an extended sense as a kind of technique or 'tool'. But this equation seems a little strained. In the *Analects*, Confucius distinguishes between those who cultivate personal excellence and those who merely labor with their bodies. The former provide the model that brings about the good society; the laboring masses play only a minor role (e.g. *Analects* 13.1, 13.4). While Marx implies that productive activity or labor make us fully human, the Confucians often think that full humanity (*ren* 仁) is achieved through social relationships and a role-governed ordered society. Furthermore, Marx's view of human relationships often seems antagonistic (class war, etc), while the Confucians hold to the ideal of harmonious human relationships.

More generally, early Chinese texts clearly emphasize interdependence and shared social existence, and that human conduct originates in forces other than the individualist story of free choice and personal decision; but that is far short of understanding early Chinese thought as being driven by a gradual evolution in productive forces. There is little explicit evidence in the text that the early schools themselves thought within this conceptual framework. Still, none of this shows Li's claims are invalid per se, only that he offers a particular interpretive approach to the Confucian texts, which challenges some well-known traditional readings.

Thus, a possible weakness in Li's work is the difficulty of connecting his ambitious macro-level theorizing, which makes use of Kant, Marx and others, to the concrete realities and texts of early China. The suggestiveness of Li's contemporary glosses on traditional ideas is appealing, but filling in the details is a task that falls to others.

A difficulty in assessing Li's work, which spans more than 50 years, is knowing how to read Li's earlier work, such as *A History*, in light of his later work. Li's focus has ranged widely over that time and has yielded various neologisms, whose relations are not always made explicit. For example, the *cultural-psychological formation* is prominent in *A History* but less so in

later work where various additional technical are added to his lexicon. Terms such as *emotional formation* (*qingli jiegou*) or “social ethics” and “religious ethics” appear in recent writings but not at all in *A History*. Another relatively recent neologism captures an old idea: *chifan zhexue*, or “philosophy of eating,” (2016a, 2016b) captures the imperative that a culture aim first at meeting everyday human needs, and the effect of this imperative on inner life.

The relationship between these various technical terms is not always clear. Are they different aspects of a single social system? And does the emergence of the newer, partly overlapping terms, indicate deficiencies with the older ones? Li’s concern is rarely with precise conceptual engineering and his shifting vocabulary can be a challenge for the reader. That said, perhaps Li’s work is best read as trying to capture the Confucian tradition within a framework that facilitates discussion and comparison different cultural and intellectual traditions; within such a heuristic, perhaps asking highly analytical questions about equivalence, consistency and definition misses the point.

That said, Li’s thinking has not changed so much since the publication of *A History*. Much of his later work builds on themes laid out in this book. One driving concern has remained constant in Li’s work. This is the question of Chinese modernity. How should established and entrenched forms of Chinese social life confront forms of life associated with the European Enlightenment, such as liberalism and democracy? This is discussed further below. In *A History*, this bringing together of different intellectual and cultural milieus largely takes the form of exploring traditional Chinese thought using concepts and frameworks alien to the original texts—Marx, Kant and occasionally Freud—but which reveal new ways to read those texts.

The above survey of key themes of Li’s thought and some critical questions is intended to prepare the reader for a more detailed engagement with the book. In what follows, I respond directly to some of the concerns raised by the reviewers.

### **Response to Michael Nylan**

Michael Nylan’s review brings her diverse scholarly interests to bear on the book. Her review nominally focuses on three points: how much more we now know about early China than when the book was written, Li’s account of how culture and history “sediment” into individual and social life, and Li’s interest in Marxism (40). She makes a variety of points under these headings, and here I can address only some of them. I will focus on the first and second points, since Nylan’s discussion of Li’s Marxism largely accords with the above outline of Li’s Marxist influences.

### **On Li being out of date**

Nylan raises the issue of whether *A History*, written some 35 years ago, might now be dated, given the early China scholarship done since the book’s publication. Nylan is certainly correct that this book reflects some textual assumptions of the time. As she notes, for example, excavated texts discovered since have challenged some traditional understandings of early Chinese thought; and the important Han scholar Yang Xiong, about whom Nylan

has written much, is regrettably absent from the book. As Nylan also points out, the first edition of the book also contained references to “slave” societies in China, which were the product of anachronistic Marxist dogma (these references were removed in later editions, as China’s political climate altered and Li no longer felt compelled to employ officially sanctioned language).

In fact, Nylan makes clear that the age of the book doesn’t much detract from its worth. This is a relief, as it’s an exaggeration to declare an interpretive and theoretical work on Chinese thought to be “some forty years out of date” (40), just as it would be jarring to call theoretical works such as Kant’s first critique or Marx’s 1844 manuscripts—two works on which Li draws heavily—“out of date.” Nylan appears to hold the newest and emerging theories about dating and textual composition in early China in high regard, but one can wonder how these theories themselves will be viewed in 40 years time. She faults Li for implying that Dong Zhongshu was the author of the *Chunqiu Fanlu*, since many now believe that parts of that text date from several hundred years after Dong’s death. However, what matters to Li’s theory is that the ideas presented in that text, some of which might be attributed to Dong or his school, are thematically coherent and represent an interpretive tradition, a sub-species of Confucianism, during the Han Dynasty.<sup>1</sup> In which case, Li’s general characterization of this lineage remains valid. Setting aside this issue, Li’s approach does accord with some recent scholarly trends. As Nylan outlines, much recent scholarship argues against reading the early thinkers as representing discrete philosophical schools, such as “Daoism” or “Legalism, and Li has consistently challenged some of these orthodox categorizations. For example, as Adam Riggio outline is his review (8-9), chapter 3 explores the continuities among Laozi (“Daoist”), Sunzi (“Military Strategist”) and Han Fei (“Legalist”).

### **Li as More Concerned With Historical Tradition Than Textual Accuracy**

Another current trend in textual scholarship is to dissolve the notion of a coherent received text into layers of accretions. Within a certain disciplinary approach this seems appropriate, and often leads to revisionist readings of texts that reject the notion of unified composition or single authorship. While sensitive to such textual questions, Li is often more interested in a philosophical issue: how these texts have functioned within a living tradition. As sinologists such as Roger Ames have argued, recently excavated texts have in fact regularly confirmed traditional interpretations of the received texts, contra revisionist tendencies. The later tradition has assigned these texts a degree of coherence and found within them a way of life. This influence on the intellectual and cultural life of China has endured, and come to operate independently of the texts’ original historical milieu. The Bible has functioned similarly in Christianity. In this sense, the “truth” of the texts lies in how they have lived on in the cultural memory of later generations, and their role in generating a viable cultural tradition. Li’s project is to illustrate how a set of texts, as well as other cultural, economic and environmental forces, gave rise to a folk tradition; this methodology contrasts with purer forms of textual exegesis and dating. Li works from a theory about how human nature and social life can evolve, producing a form of life with its own conceptions of human

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<sup>1</sup> On the dating and composition of the *Chunqiu Fanlu*, see Sarah Queen’s & John Major’s translation (2016,12-17). Queen and Major argue that it is a composite text with multiple authors, which sustained a constellation of what can reasonably be called Confucian values within the *Gongyang* learning tradition,

flourishing. The Confucian tradition is one exemplification of this ontological process. Flawed or not, I take that to be Li's project. This means that, in his approach to the Chinese historical and philosophical tradition, Li is frequently more concerned with constructing text-based arguments that support his account of an enduring cultural-psychological formation than strict historical accuracy.

In summary, it not entirely clear how much difference Li's ignorance of contemporary scholarship would make; his recent work, which does have such access, revisits and refines ideas first laid out in *A History* but does not abandon them. As Nylan acknowledges, even if the text repeats a few questionable orthodoxies of its day, "the central insights in Li Zehou's general history of Chinese philosophy do not suffer substantially" (43).

Nylan insightfully describes Li as an "institutional historian" (46) and her use of path dependence theory (44-5) suggests a promising inter-disciplinary approach to Li's framework. Institutions are central to how history unfolds, but are particular or idiosyncratic, the product of local conditions. Their trajectories are not easily reversed, nor easily improved by the application of "reason." Nylan's framing here neatly highlights a contrast in approaches to the Confucian tradition between Li and contemporary Anglophone philosophy. The latter largely begins from existing Western concerns or debates—artificial intelligence, for example, is one recent motivation for consulting Confucius—and seeks to import answers piecemeal. In contrast, Li's approach might be analyzed in terms of path dependence, to reveal how cascades of historical contingencies are gradually institutionalized and "sedimented" into a stable cultural-psychological formation.

### **Li's Critique of the West**

Nevertheless, Li's interest in the future prospects of a distinctive "Confucian tradition" is a useful reference point for understanding his work. A key theme in *A History* is the reappraisal of Confucian thought within China itself. One of Li's most important papers, and the first chapter of *A History* ("Revaluating Confucius"), attempted to rehabilitate Confucius after intense government criticism during the Cultural Revolution. Li's achievement therein was to revive interest in Confucian thought while remaining sensitive to criticism of traditional culture. Li had to satisfy the still-conservative guardians of intellectual space in China, while also making Confucius a figure of innovation. Li achieves this by criticizing the reactionary aspects of Confucian culture while highlighting values useful for a modernizing China that would soon discard Marxist-Leninism. Confucius was made respectable again, and on Marxist terms.

Li not merely defends the Confucian tradition against familiar criticisms, however; he also views it as a global resource. Writing during the early phases of China's liberalization, Li's writing about history can be read as addressing, albeit sometimes obliquely, the question of Chinese modernity. How should China and its vast cultural heritage respond to the success of a very different cultural entity—the liberal capitalist democratic West?

An implicit goal of Li's appears to be securing greater appreciation for the cultural and intellectual life of China. He was writing, initially, during an era in which a once globally pre-

eminent country had lost influence and confidence. Following earlier reformers in China, Li uses Western ideas to re-invigorate that tradition. Ironically, in facilitating new readings of the Confucian tradition, they also served to generate challenges to Western hegemony. This meant challenging various forms of liberal and neo-liberal thought, which present both society and people in terms of market-based economic rationality. Such thinking also conditions moral and political theorizing, as seen in the work of figures such as John Rawls. As Western political liberalism became the dominant social formation, awareness outside of China of how China has approached questions of human flourishing and social order has dimmed or been equated with the politics of Communist China. Li aims to rekindle such interest, and explore alternatives to Western modernity.

This is another reason why Li has been less concerned with the complex historical details of early China, and more interested in advancing a particular interpretation of the historical or intellectual tradition. Consider, for example, Li's claims about the role of Shamans in early China (Li 2018b). Li claims that shamans led communities in ritual practices, as important figures of authority, and such social practices molded communities and determined people's sensibilities; shamans were thus instrumental to the Confucian cultural-psychological formation. However, scholars are divided over whether or how important shaman were in early Chinese social life and political organization.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Li focuses on a limited set of sources that propagate the shaman hypothesis. This might be because the "pro-shaman" view coheres with other parts of his theory, and leads him to a distinctive account of social life and human flourishing. This is one that is thought-provokingly different from the European Enlightenment's atomistic and contractual notions of the relation between self and society. Li often makes comparative claims within a broadly China-West-India framework, and often identifies how China is different from the West. Li is not alone in this approach. Francois Julian, and David Hall and Roger Ames, have developed similar methods. The difficulty of such comparisons means that they are often accused of simplifying one or more traditions, and Li is not immune to such criticism.

Still, at least in *A History*, Li does not rely on many contrastive comparative claims to develop his arguments. As Nylan carefully catalogs, Li offers various innovative readings of the Chinese intellectual tradition whose frames of reference lie solely within that tradition. One such claim is that Chan Buddhism is rooted in an aesthetic detachment found in the classical text the *Zhuangzi*.

It remains uncertain what will be the outcome of the Confucian tradition's encounter with the West. Li has a kind of cultural confidence in Confucian practices, which are grounded in non-dogmatic pragmatic rationality, are free from troubling metaphysical dualism and have greater respect for the emotions in practical judgment. But, according to Li's account of the evolution of human nature and of social forces, the Confucian tradition is vulnerable to change, and might evolve upon encounters with new forms of life and alien values, such as free-market competition. As Nylan points out, "Cultural inclinations are fragile, and cultural memories all the more so" (47). Li's system provides not certainty here, but open-ended historical evolution. Whether the idea of a Confucian tradition can retain distinctive meaning and resist dilution in the modern world is an open question; Li's ontological framework is compatible with a future without anything recognizably Confucian.

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<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the debate, see Michael Thomas (2015).

## Jana Rošker's Comments

In Jana Rošker's review, she first notes the absence of the title of the original Chinese text. I thank Prof. Rošker for pointing this out, and will rectify this in future editions. Explaining what led to the omission is instructive for understanding the aims of the translation. My focus in translating was on engaging Western scholars unfamiliar with Chinese thought, bringing out commonalities and points of possible mutual interest for Chinese and Anglophone scholars. Anglophone philosophers, steeped in the Western canon, sometimes regard other cultural and literary traditions as lacking philosophy (here, I urged readers to explore Bryan Van Norden's book *Taking Back Philosophy: Cultural Manifesto* and which has also features in SERRC). My aim was to counter such perceptions by showing, through choices made in translation, in the introduction and in footnotes, that Li Zehou is concerned with many issues that Western thinkers would recognize as philosophical. The English title chosen reflects this concern to draw philosophers into an engagement with Chinese thought. It alludes to perhaps the best-known English-language work on the history of Chinese philosophy—Fung Yulan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Given this focus on facilitating conversation with an Anglophone audience with little prior exposure to China, locating the text in its original linguistic milieu—through inclusion of the original Chinese title—was a secondary concern.

Let me address a few specific translation issues that Rošker raises. She questions the translation of *bentilun* as metaphysics, or even as ontology, since in traditional Chinese thought “there is no concept of being in the Western sense” (3). Without arguing against this general gloss (though see A.C. Graham's 1967 paper “Being' in Classical Chinese”), I think there are reasons for translating Li's terminology as “metaphysics” or “ontology.” Li locates traditional Chinese texts within theoretical and conceptual frameworks, drawn from Marx and Kant. Therefore, while the original Chinese texts might not engage in metaphysics in the traditional disciplinary sense, Li arguably does and his language reflects this.

Prof Rošker also discusses Li's well-known phrase *xiti zhongyong* (西体中用), roughly: “Western substance (or structure) and Chinese application.” As this term offers important insight into Li's philosophical orientation, it is worth briefly unpacking Rošker's concerns. Li's playful neologism is a reworking of a slogan popular among pragmatic conservative in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, *zhongti xiyong* (Chinese substance and Western application). This phrase suggested that traditional Chinese culture, while remaining foundational to national life, could be augmented by Western science and technology in order to meet societal challenges facing the country. As Rošker helpfully points out, Li's reworking of that famous slogan aims to highlight that, in Li's view, technology is not merely an application, but rather forms part of the base that shapes and directs consciousness and social values. Rošker suggests (5) that, in my introduction, I misunderstand the meaning of *ti* (体) in Li's slogan as “theory” rather than “substance.” However, while I wish I had explained the slogan's context as clearly as she has done, I am merely trying to show how Li's neologism reflects his Western (Marxist) theoretical commitments, rather than claim that *ti* refers ultimately to concepts rather than the most basic elements of reality.

“Western substance” does indeed flag an important part of Li’s ontology; but it makes use of the Western intellectual tradition to do so. After all, the phrase is not emphasizing a “western metaphysical reality” rather than a Chinese one; it is merely pointing to how a Western account of the basic nature of social order—something like historical materialism—can help China respond to the challenges of modernity. In taking such a stand, Li is distinguishing his philosophical approach from those of other Chinese intellectuals. These include: staunch defenders of traditional Chinese culture, pragmatic or piecemeal reformers, and those who advocating the wholesale rejection of Confucian social morals in favor of complete “Westernization.”

### **Adam Riggio’s Comments**

It is encouraging that Adam Riggio finds many points of agreement between his view of how philosophy should be conducted and Li Zehou’s approach; this leaves little to take issue with in Riggio’s review. Still, I’m curious how Riggio regards the broad theoretical framework that Li employs: extracting an ahistorical theory (including the cultural-psychological formation) from the particulars of a historical tradition (the Confucian tradition), with the aid of Western theory. Some might question the need for such elaborate theory; although the use of Marxist thought to read the Confucians is precisely what makes Li interesting.

This possibly conflicting nature of Li’s theoretical commitments can be illustrated as follows. Li makes claims about the Chinese tradition, but behind these claims is a more general claim about how human subjectivity is conditioned by social and historical factors. At the same time, however, Li also claims a degree of freedom and willful self-determination for the human subject (following Kant). However, I’m not sure whether Li ever reconciles these two forces in his thought: social determinism and individual self-determination. Another example is Li’s commitment to the categorical imperative—experienced as *a priori* though explained empirically—versus his commitment to family and social relations as the grounds of moral and emotional life. These two forces are rarely thought to be complementary. One treats impartiality as morally basic, the other prioritizes partiality. Here, again, we see the tendency of Li to lead the reader to a thought-provoking claim but then defer further articulation and defense to some later time. Interestingly, Riggio appears to sympathize with Li’s “qualifying statements” and reluctance to be drawn into dense argumentation in defense of his broader framework: “This is a function of taking philosophy seriously.” (Riggio, 13). It would be instructive to hear more about this defense of Li’s style.

Finally, I am not sure Confucian thought is best thought of as “systematic philosophy” (6), in so far as this suggests explicitly laying out propositions or theories. The Analects does not do this; although, the view that the historical Confucius was providing a defense of traditional practices is quite widely accepted (hence, the famous comment that Confucius marks a shift from describing the courtly “nobleman” to the moral “noble man”). There is much to say here about what counts as “philosophy.”

### **A Concluding Thought**

Let me finish with one reflection on the significance of Li’s work. *A History* might be read as a work of intellectual history—either as a rethinking of the origins and concerns of the early

schools and previously unrecognized connections among them, or as a more general theory about a Confucian cultural and psychological order. But Li's aim is not merely history, but philosophy—encouraging the contemporary reader to try on the ideas, values and emotions that Li identifies in traditional Confucian life. It is in this regard that Li Zehou's work should interest those open to comparative philosophical studies, particularly in social and political thought.

Some recent defenders of the Chinese tradition see a future in a liberalized Confucian value system (Stephen Angle, Sungmoon Kim, etc). This version of Confucianism retains traditional values such as reverence for the family and respect for ritual and community-sustained custom, but is attractive to individualism in that it prioritizes personal cultivation (a traditional Confucian concern), and holds that political equality and democracy are compatible with Confucian identity; there is nothing explicitly anti-democratic in the classical texts or in traditional Confucian social values.

But, on my reading of Li at least (other approaches might foreground LI's admiration for individual rights and aspirations that characterize the liberal tradition), his work suggests an alternative social vision (Lambert 2018). In addition to classical Confucian thought, this reading draws also on Li's account of the Zhuangzi, Chan (Zen) Buddhism and his aesthetics. This alternative vision presents a challenge to the liberalized Confucian account, based on an alternative picture of human flourishing. This vision focuses on extended networks of human relationships, from the family to wide communal relations, which are sustained by complex ritual and cultural forms of life. Li calls this *guanxiism* or 'relationality': human flourishing requires the generation and maintenance of personal and social relationships. These various relationships are characterized by rich and complex emotional and affective experiences. Such experiences are integral to Li's notion of *qingbenti*: what is ontologically basic or foundational are affective experiences, which, ideally, reflect and accord with external social structure. Well-ordered relationships, and the requisite cultural life that makes them possible, yield satisfying first person experiences. Furthermore, as Li's notion of *legan wenhua* or a culture characterized by a sensitivity to delight indicates, this is a culture in which the most complete forms of meaning, satisfaction or purpose are found within such relationally-orientated lives. This represents a picture of human flourishing, one importantly different from (though perhaps compatible with) more individualized notions of flourishing in liberal society. Such alternative accounts of the good life show the value of the Confucian tradition as an ongoing object of study.

Some familiar objections arise here. The culture or social structures within which such relationships arise can be oppressive or unjust, and whether this idealized account can overcome such dangers—which include seeking subjective satisfaction while ignoring objective injustice—is a legitimate concern. One response is to show that such forms of life don't violate justice but rather can be guided by it. But perhaps another response is worth exploring, even if initially unsettling. Namely, perhaps the satisfactions of such a richly-textured social life are their own reward; each social encounter evokes an attentive concern and sense of occasion that can be absent in more voluntaristic models of relationality. The goods realized through such social interactions simply matter more, as human goods, than justice. Satisfaction in multiple small social interactions, which includes aesthetic

appreciation of the well-conducted nature of everyday life, form the framework for this conception of flourishing. This contrasts with notions of autonomy and fairness that assume a developed account of individuality and the importance of pursuing private projects or goals. The idea of integrated and complete social experiences are one modern interpretation that Li bestows upon the traditional Confucian ideal of the unity of humanity and the cosmos (*tianrenheyi*) (Li, 325-31), and the idea of full integration (*cheng*). This response is not orientated towards justice as the highest regulative ideal, and as a means to deal with the separateness of persons. It offers an alternative, Confucian, ideal: harmony (*he*). Finding meaning and suggestiveness in the various social relationships in which one is embedded might be such that questions of justice or fairness are indefinitely deferred, for better or worse.

Such a social ethic might displease those insist that ethics be rooted in abstract or community-transcending standards of fairness. In truth, this tension between justice and such harmony is never really resolved in Li's work. As we have seen, Li admires Kant, and seeks to incorporate the categorical imperative into this practical ethics. Yet Li's reconceptualizing of the Confucian tradition also places great weight on relationality and treating aesthetic experience as something close to ethical data. This Confucian social vision of relational harmony deserves careful and rigorous evaluation while resisting premature or romantic notions of unity. But rather than try to show that Confucian values meet the pre-conditions set by liberalism, Confucianism's own rich and nuanced alternative vision(s) should be imaginatively and carefully explored. Few scholars have taken on this daunting task as earnestly as Li Zehou.

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