

La sottoscritta Erica Onnis, co-autrice con Xiao Ouyang dell'articolo

INTRODUCTION. THE UNBALANCED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STUDY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA AND THAT OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY IN THE WEST, *Rivista di Estetica*, 72(3).

dichiara che, benché l'articolo sia frutto di una collaborazione tra i due autori,

- - Erica Onnis è autrice dei primi quattro paragrafi;
- - Xiao Ouyang è autore dei restanti quattro paragrafi.

In fede,
Erica Onnis

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erica Onnis', written in a cursive style.

Vista di
estetica

Rosenberg & Sellier

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Bridging Traditions.
Chinese and Western
Philosophy in Dialogue

edited by

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INTRODUCTION. THE UNBALANCED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE STUDY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA AND THAT
OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY IN THE WEST

In the Western World, the academic study of philosophy is an ancient practice. The first organised *universitas* in which philosophy was studied as an autonomous discipline was founded in Paris in the 13th century, and was promoted by both the kings of France and the popes of that period, especially Innocent III, Honorius III and Gregory IX.¹ In those decades, which were so important for the birth of the European cultural and religious identity, Gregory IX significantly warned the masters of theology “nec philosophos se ostendent”.² Despite the resistance of the religious authorities, in fact, the study of dialectics and logic not directly aimed at theology, as well as the study of Aristotle, flourished in the Faculty of Arts in Paris, and the significance of these studies would only increase in the following centuries, producing a rich, structured and robust philosophical education.

Yet, as noticed by Anne Cheng in her contribution to the present issue of “Rivista di Estetica”, the first Chair in Sinology in France dates back only to the beginning of the 19th century, with Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat. As a matter of fact, however, the first organised Western school of Sinology and Chinese culture was founded in Naples, Italy, in 1734 by the priest and missionary Matteo Ripa, who worked in China at the court of the Menchu emperor Kangxi 康熙. Matteo Ripa had stayed in China from 1711 to 1723; when he came back to Naples, he brought along four Chinese students he had converted to Christianity and founded the Collegio dei Cinesi (Chinese College), destined to become the current University of Naples “L’Orientale”. The first organised

¹ See Gilson 1952: Chapter VII.

² Id. 1921: 40.

centre for the study of China in the West, therefore, was established six centuries after the birth of the first faculties of Philosophy.

The interest for the Chinese world that was rising in the 18th century, however, did not turn into an authentic fascination for Chinese thought. Even before that period, in fact, Dominicans and Jesuits, such as the well-known Matteo Ricci, reached China and studied Chinese, but their purpose was to spread the Catholic religion and Western culture, rather than learning and studying Chinese culture; even the Collegio dei Cinesi was conceived as an institution where missionaries were formed to be sent to China and proselytize the Chinese people. For this reason, despite providing several studies on Chinese medicine, geography, botany, history and so on, the Jesuits' interest in Chinese culture has been especially linguistic, because – obviously – speaking Chinese was the easiest way to communicate with Chinese people. Moreover, the Chinese language had always been attractive to Western thinkers because of its particular character and its diversity from the Indo-European languages. In philosophy, for instance, there is a well-known hypothesis for which Chinese would be a special, universal language: this was first suggested by John Webb in his book *The Antiquity of China, Or An Historical Essay: Endeavouring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language Spoken Through the Whole World Before the Confusion of Babel* (1678), but was also claimed by Jacob Golius and, of course, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

In the 20th century, some significant changes occurred. After the Second World War, Chinese studies became pervasive in North America and Western Europe, and new courses and specialisations appeared in many departments, such as those of history, economics, philosophy, literature or foreign languages. What is curious, however, is that the study of Chinese *philosophy* was not really absorbed by the study of philosophy *tout court*. In Italy, for instance, despite the presence of a huge number of excellent universities offering philosophy courses, only a few institutions offer courses in Chinese philosophy: these are usually supplementary ones that usually belong to other departments, such as those of foreign languages and literature. This implies that very often the person who teaches Chinese philosophy is not a trained philosopher.

The academic study of philosophy has had a very different history in East Asia. In 1874, the Japanese scholar Nishi Amane was the first person to translate the term “philosophy” with two Chinese characters, namely, 哲学,³ pronounced as *tetsugaku* in Japanese and *zhe xue* in Chinese. In China, traditional scholarship “did not distinguish between philosophy and religion or other forms of learning” (Mou 2009: 2). Today “philosophy” is a relatively modern discipline imported from the West, but philosophical studies in China are never entirely based on the Western take of the discipline. There is always an “innate” West-East com-

³ See Nishi 1897.

parative dimension to it: in China, ever since its birth, philosophy has largely functioned as “Western-Chinese comparative” philosophy, insofar as it deals with “data analysis” from intercultural sources. For more than a century, there has been an ongoing introduction of Western philosophical texts and research by means of large-scale translations, not only matching the terminologies between Chinese and Western languages or constructing new words in the former, but also significantly shaping Chinese contemporary thinking and social reality.⁴

Historically speaking, this “innate” Western-Chinese comparison has had a remarkable impact on the birth and development of the academic narrative of so-called “Chinese philosophy”, carried out by scholars like Feng Youlan and Hu Shi since the early 20th century. Cai Yuanpei (1918) argues that ancient Chinese works offer little help in bringing out a systematic narrative of Chinese philosophy, and so the Chinese have had to imitate the writings of Western philosophy: “only the ones who have studied Western history of philosophy are able to establish a proper form of Chinese philosophy”. Since the 1940s, the New Confucianism movement has also aimed to “understand Western Culture [...] digest, transform, utilize and reform it for the sake of forging new Confucian thinking and new national culture” (He 1947: 3-4). By and large, many of these writings on “Chinese philosophy” have consciously adopted – one way or another – a certain legacy of Western philosophy, even if to justify the legitimacy of Chinese thought as a philosophy in its own right.

Nowadays, a typical Western philosopher is still likely to know nothing about Chinese philosophy. Instead, a Chinese counterpart would suffer serious damage in her or his qualification for claiming to know little about Western philosophy. The aforementioned “innate” Western-Chinese comparative dimension is even more salient in individual Chinese philosophers, because it is almost impossible to reject the Chinese-Western comparison or to separate the two major sources of thinking in their work. This has a lot to do with philosophical education in China. Indeed, a typical Chinese philosophy department consists of at least two main branches: Western Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy. Correspondingly, the modules for philosophy students are often equally divided. Thus, it is no surprise when one reads that experts in Western philosophy often seek inspiration in Chinese thought, and established scholars in Chinese philosophy constantly refer to Western philosophers, as described in Chungying Cheng’s introduction to the most prominent contemporary Chinese philosophers (2002: 349-363).⁵

Given these differences between the Chinese and the Western context, this issue of “*Rivista di Estetica*” wishes to contribute to counterbalancing this persistent unequal relationship between the study of Chinese philosophy in the West and the study of Western philosophy in China. It aims to provide

⁴This passage paraphrases some ideas from Ouyang 2018.

⁵This passage largely paraphrases Ouyang 2018.

an extensive dialogue between Western and Chinese philosophers through an analysis of more or less ancient texts belonging to both traditions, while also addressing philosophical problems of universal interest using both Western and Chinese conceptual tools.

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