

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EMPIRICAL INTO THE TRANSCENDENTAL: LI ZEHOU'S DEVELOPMENT OF KANT'S THEORY

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Li Zehou ranks amongst the most influential contemporary Chinese philosophers and theorists. After the Tian An Men incident, he was forced to immigrate to the USA, where sadly he passed away last November. His philosophy has often – and mostly against his own will - been compared to the work of numerous Western theoreticians. Remaining mainly loyal to the conceptual framework of early Marxist historical materialism, he was simultaneously influenced by the works of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, Lukács, Piaget, Lacan, Sartre, Althusser, Habermas and others. In spite of this colourful palette of different influences, his work has most often been seen as being rooted in certain basic paradigms derived from (or comparable to) the ones defining the thought of Marx on the one hand, and Kant on the other. Most of these comparisons were grounded in the assumption according to which the majority of Li's theories were based upon insights derived from the philosophies of these two great European thinkers. On this basis, he developed several innovative approaches and new methods of anthropological philosophy; in this context, the present article focuses on his theory of the transformation of the empirical into the transcendental.

Keywords: Li Zehou, Kant, Marx, the transformation of the empirical into the transcendental

Introduction

Most often, Li's central work has been viewed as a philosophy in which the basic framework of Kant's theory was placed upon a social and materialist foundation, and which simultaneously recovered the original Marxist definition of human beings as "*homo faber*".

Yet, while Li Zehou agrees with Marx's emphasis on the primary importance of objective conditions, productive forces, and the material base, he essentially diverges from orthodox Marxism in his conviction that the objective content of human practice cannot be separated from all those factors that constitute human beings as autonomous subjects, especially their creativity, innovativeness, and their inclination to act. Li Zehou has tried to resolve this inconsistency with the help of Kantian philosophy, aiming 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. Hence, at first glance, Li's theory appears as a kind of interaction between, or a synthesis of, Marx and Kant.

As soon as one delves a bit deeper into Li Zehou's theory, however, it quickly becomes clear that its Marxist provenance is more or less limited to the basic historical-materialist framework.¹ This becomes particularly evident considering the fact that Li has quite clearly despised most of the central concepts fundamentally defining Marxism as a theoretical system, namely class struggle, revolution and the teleological ideal of a communist society.

And even when analysing the Marxist framework which underpins Li's work, we inevitably come across several striking similarities which undoubtedly connect it with traditional Chinese, especially Confucian, discourses. In his mature and later work, Li himself often clearly set out and emphasized these commonalities.²

If we aim to compare Li's philosophy to the thought of his greatest sources of inspiration, then it is certainly Kant – rather than Marx – who arouses our interest. By unfolding and mutually contrasting the elementary groundwork of Kant's and Li's systems, we can find rich and diversified material for stimulating contrastive analyses that can lead to promising and possibly innovative results.

¹ In his early work, Li also seemed to be very interested in the Marxian notion of alienation. However, in his first academic essay, he confused it with the concept of objectification, see ROŠKER, J. S. *Following his Own Path: Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 2010–11, and afterwards he fitted it within the scope of his ethical debates on beauty and on human dignity, which is – on the other hand – again an important Kantian notion.

² See for instance LI, Z. Kongzi zai pingjia 孔子再評價 [A Reevaluation of Confucius]. In *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, 1980, No. 2, pp. 78, 79; Ruxue zuowei Zhongguo wenhua zhulide yiyi 儒學作為中國文化主流的意義 [The Significance of Confucianism as the Mainstream of Chinese Culture]. In *Kongzi yanjiu*, 1992, No. 1, p. 10; Chu ni ruxue shengceng jiegou shuo (1996) 初拟儒学深层结构说 (1996) [A Draft Proposal of a Theory of Confucian Deep Structures]. In *Huawen wenxue*, 2010, No. 5, p. 8; *Renleixue lishi bentilun* 人類學歷史本體論 [Anthropo-historical Ontology], pp. 196, 205ff.

Numerous scholars who have tried to grasp and to analyse Li's thought from the angle of comparative philosophy, have therefore aimed to posit in it a constructive contrast to Immanuel Kant's theory. Such a scheme appears an interesting way to approach their theories from different perspectives and to shed in this way a new light on certain general issues regarding the nature of human perception and comprehension of external reality.

Following and elaborating upon the recent debates about the methodological problems arising from traditional comparative intercultural philosophy, the present article aims to illuminate the possibility (or better, the reasonableness) of such comparisons. It aims to show that this problem has much to do with basic dissimilarities between different frameworks of reference that have determined the theories of each of these two philosophers. Namely, in spite of the overall cosmopolitan nature of his work, Li's philosophy is still rooted in specifically Chinese theoretical and methodological approaches.

Most of the scholars who have tried to apply the traditional comparative perspective in their investigations of Kant and Li, have failed to pay enough attention to or to fully consider the all-inclusive nature of this characteristic which thoroughly underlies and permeates Li Zehou's thought and has far-reaching consequences.³

³ See for instance BRUSADELLI, F. A Tale of Two Utopias: Kang Youwei's Communism, Mao Zedong's Classicism and the "Accommodating Look" of the Marxist Li Zehou. In *Asian Studies*, 2017, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 103–109. [online] [cit. 26 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2017.5.1.103-122>; CHEEK, T. "Subjectality": Li Zehou and his Critical Analysis of Chinese Thought. In *Philosophy East and West*, 1999, Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 117; GU, X. Subjectivity, Modernity, and Chinese Hegelian Marxism: A Study of Li Zehou's Philosophical Ideas from a Comparative Perspective. In *Philosophy East and West*, 1996, Vol. 46, No. 2, p. 206; LIN, M. The Search for Modernity: Chinese Intellectual Discourse and Society, 1978 – 88: The Case of Li Zehou. In *China Quarterly*, 1992, No. 132, p. 984; LIU, K. Subjectivity, Marxism, and Culture Theory in China. In *Social Text*, 1992, Nos. 31/32, p. 125. [online] [cit. 16 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.2307/466221>; CHONG, W. L. Combining Marx with Kant: The Philosophical Anthropology of Li Zehou. In *Philosophy East and West*, 1999, Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 128. [online] [cit. 26 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.2307/1400199>; LAMBERT, A. Determinism and the Problem of Individual Freedom in Li Zehou's Thought. In AMES, R. T., JIA, J. (eds.). *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*, pp. 103–104; SERNELJ, T. Medkulturni Pristop K Li Zehouhevi Teoriji Sedimentacije – Primerjava Z Jungovimi Arhetipi [Intercultural Approach to Li Zehou's Theory of Sedimentation - A Comparison with Jungian Archetypes]. In *Asian Studies*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 58. [online] [cit. 27 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2018.6.1.137-160>; and Different Approaches to Modern Art and Society: Li

Yet, the connection between Kant and Li can be observed and studied from various angles and in many different ways. The search for a more suitable approach is certainly worthwhile, for it can offer us new insights into the nature of human perception and point to some new answers to some basic onto-epistemological questions. In the following discussion, I will try to formulate a proposal for such an approach that might serve as one of the numerous new alternative models for theoretical work in the area of intercultural philosophy. However, in order to elaborate upon such a proposal, we first have to summarize existing research questions and offer a brief overview over the problematics of cross-cultural comparisons.

In order to fulfil these requirements, I will, proceeding from the current debate on (post)-comparative intercultural philosophy, first delineate the crucial problems regarding the socio-historical and linguistic conditioning of the different theories under consideration by outlining the impact of diverse culturally defined reference frameworks in which every theory is always necessarily embedded. I hope to show the far-reaching influence of these frameworks through the example of an intersection of Kant's epistemology with Li Zehou's anthropo-historical ontology, and to illuminate in this way the question of why and how this junction can lead us either along the path of new philosophical horizons, or into the cul-de-sac of intercultural misunderstandings. And let us hope we shall arrive at the former.

Zehou Versus Xu Fuguan. In *Asian Studies*, 2020, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 77. [online] [cit. 26 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2020.8.1.77-98>, etc. It is also due to this characteristic that many scholars who are not trained in Chinese, but merely in Western (and especially Kantian) philosophy, simply cannot understand the core of Li's theory of human consciousness or simply see it as a complete nonsense. Due to the extensive efforts that have resulted in recent large-scale translation projects (and thanks to the hard work of many highly competent translators), many of Li's crucial works are now accessible to Western readers. But since most of these works were originally written exclusively for Chinese readers who are (in principle) much better acquainted with specifically Chinese lines of reasoning, most of them had to be furnished with lengthy and complex explanatory notes. However, for many readers it is still hard to switch from one basic paradigm (in which one was socialized) to another (foreign) one and this difficulty can still lead to major misunderstandings. I will elaborate on this problem more in detail in the following sections.

Intercultural Comparisons, “Fusion Philosophy” and “Philosophy of Sublation”

In recent decades, the method of comparative philosophy has been subjected to many controversial debates. Some scholars believe that in principle, all philosophy is comparative, for “comparison in general is a basic function/apparatus of critical thinking, which characterizes philosophy”.⁴ It certainly holds true that contrasting, i.e. distinguishing between and associating different concepts, categories as well as lines, patterns and models of reasoning belongs to the basic features of any reasoning, for thinking as such is based upon contrasting objects and forms. However, comparison is a cognitive method that goes beyond simple contrastive procedures and mostly surpasses them. In this sense, the term “comparative philosophy” is not tautological, nor is it redundant.⁵ However, recent controversies in academic circles have clearly shown that the concept of comparison as such is a rather problematic one.⁶ In addition, they have shown that the very process of comparing different philosophies as such is

⁴ OUYANG, X. Rethinking Comparative Philosophical Methodology: In Response to Weber’s Criticism. In *Philosophy East and West*, 2018, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 244.

⁵ LI, C. Comparative Philosophy and Cultural Patterns. In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2016, No. 15, p. 534.

⁶ See for instance CHAKRABARTI, A., WEBER, R. Introduction. In CHAKRABARTI, A., WEBER, R. (eds.). *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, pp. 2, 3; BANKA, R. Psychological Argumentation in Confucian Ethics as a Methodological Issue in Cross-Cultural Philosophy. In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2016, No. 15, p. 605; BURIK, S. *The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking*, pp. 3–9; COQUEREAU, E. From Comparative Philosophy to Fusion Philosophy. In *Journal of World Philosophies*, 2016, No. 1, p. 153; LI, C. *The Tao Encounters the West: Explorations in Comparative Philosophy*, pp. 6–9, and Comparative Philosophy and Cultural Patterns. In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2016, No. 15, pp. 533–534; NEVILLE, R. C. Turns of the Dao. In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2016, No. 15, pp. 499–500; OUYANG, X. Rethinking Comparative Philosophical Methodology: In Response to Weber’s Criticism. In *Philosophy East and West*, 2018, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 243; WEBER, R. A Stick Which may be Grabbed on Either Side: Sino-Hellenic Studies in the Mirror of Comparative Philosophy. In *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 2013, No. 20, p. 3ff, Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect? In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2014, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 151, and Reply to Xiao Ouyang. In *Philosophy East & West*, 2018, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 258ff; SHEN, V. Some Thoughts on Intercultural Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy. In *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2003, Vol. 30, Nos. 3&4, p. 358, and others.

necessarily linked to numerous methodological problems, which have hitherto not been comprehensively reflected upon and are thus still far from being solved. These problems are certainly even more complex when dealing with intercultural philosophical comparisons. The following citation is one of the many different formulations of these tricky issues and their possible reasons:

The fact that comparative philosophy deals with thought systems of different cultural provenance necessitates a different methodological approach than in the case of focusing on a single philosophical tradition. Comparative methodology is deeply concerned with revealing possible conceptual and heuristic (in)commensurabilities in order to produce a unifying discourse supervening on them. In other words, we have a unifying methodology built on culturally discrete materials... Second, although comparative philosophy creates space where different philosophical traditions can be encapsulated in one philosophical language, it treats the material it works on as culturally discrete.⁷

But unfortunately, the problem goes even further, especially in the realm of comparing Chinese and Euro-American philosophies. It is not only connected to the fact that we have a “unifying methodology built on culturally discrete materials”. The core problem is that the methodology in question is a system underlying one of the philosophies under comparison, namely the Western one. There is no third, objective methodology. And the same applies for the abovementioned “one philosophical language”. Because of this, all intercultural philosophical comparisons are rooted in the “now well-known but still persisting (political) reality of overall western-centric academics”.⁸ This is even more troublesome if we reflect upon the fact that genuine and coherent philosophical comparison cannot be limited to the level of paralleling and describing differences and commonalities of different abstract entities. In this sense, intercultural comparative philosophy is certainly more than just

the erecting, detecting, smudging, and tearing down of borders, borders between philosophical traditions coming from different parts of the world, different time periods, different disciplinary affiliations, and even within a single period and pedigree, between opposite or at least distinguishable persuasions. Philosophical comparisons, more often than not, separate and

⁷ BANKA, R. Psychological Argumentation in Confucian Ethics as a Methodological Issue in Cross-Cultural Philosophy. In *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 2016, No. 15, p. 605.

⁸ COQUEREAU, E. From Comparative Philosophy to Fusion Philosophy. In *Journal of World Philosophies*, 2016, No. 1, p. 152.

connect at the same time what are very likely or unlikely pairs of, or entire sets of, comparanda (that which we set out to compare).⁹

Any comparative discourse or procedure which aims to provide new knowledge, must therefore also include interpretations, evaluations and hence, judgements. In intercultural comparisons, these evaluations are necessarily linked to the abovementioned problems of western-centric methodology and its axiological presumptions. Therefore, the relatively common supposition of comparative philosophy as a discourse which establishes fruitful interrelations and dialogues between different traditions is not only idealistic, but also superficial and hence, it “may not turn out to be the magic formula to which all comparison can be reduced”.¹⁰

On the basis of thorough reflections on and analyses of such axiological and conceptual issues, Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber propose the idea of “fusion philosophy”¹¹ as an innovative method of transforming traditional comparative philosophy by surpassing its limitations and resolving its inconsistencies. “Fusion philosophy” means cross-cultural philosophizing rather than doing comparative philosophy. In other words, it means “philosophically comparing” rather than merely “comparing philosophies”. This challenging idea is based upon a self-critical account of comparative philosophy that has been long overdue. Chakrabarti’s and Weber’s argumentation provides us with a sound and ambitious definition for the future of such a new model of cross-cultural philosophies.¹²

However, the notion of fusion seems to be a rather unfortunate terminological choice, for it refers to the process or result of joining two or more things together to form a single entity.¹³ It is often even associated with the process of melting, which normally results in a unity in which particular elements of the two or more entities that have been melted (or fused together), become completely unrecognizable and are essentially alienated. The amalgamated unity, which arises through a fusion, is, of course, a qualitatively new substance. Now, if we consider fusion as a metaphor for a certain mode of philosophical reasoning, then we have to admit that new philosophical insights are always based upon new cognitive substances. Yet, genuine philosophizing as a creative process can

⁹ CHAKRABARTI, A., WEBER, R. Introduction. In CHAKRABARTI, A., WEBER, R. (eds.). *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² COQUEREAU, E. From Comparative Philosophy to Fusion Philosophy. In *Journal of World Philosophies*, 2016, No. 1, p. 152.

¹³ The definition of the term “fusion” in English by Oxford Dictionaries.

hardly be based upon an amalgamated unity of distorted elements, for it must be based upon certain discrete philosophical grounds. Instead, we might consider denoting this new methodological transformation by the term of synthesis philosophy. Synthesis is also a qualitatively new stage of development, and one in which some elements of the two or more entities from which it arises are preserved and others discarded. Yet, precisely in philosophy, the term synthesis is often overburdened with the orthodox Hegelian view, in which synthesis is a result of two reciprocally excluding and mutually contradictory entities, while comparisons can include both distinctions and commonalities of the comparanda. An additional (and perhaps even more severe) problem arises when we consider the mechanistic nature of such dialectical processes, which seem to develop through and by themselves and to proceed more or less automatically from one stage to the next. Thus, a “synthesis philosophy” would probably mostly be seen as something that fails to provide space for new conceptions created by individual minds.

Although the term “sublation” also forms a part of Hegelian lines of thought and hence could be problematic, it is still much less more suitable. It encompasses, on the other hand, all three notions that are of crucial importance for any process of creating something new from interactions between two or more existing objects. In this philosophical sense, it has the three connotations of arising, eliminating and preserving.¹⁴ Besides, in contrast to “synthesis”, the notion of “sublation” refers to a process rather than a stage. For all these reasons, I believe a “sublation philosophy” could better and more precisely denote new forms of cross-cultural philosophizing, rather than the term of “fusion philosophy” proposed by Chakrabarti and Weber. But ultimately, this is only a question of nomenclature. In spite of the importance of precise designations, what finally counts is certainly the actuality rather than its name.

Hence, in the following discussion, I intend to use the method of “sublation philosophy” to re-interpret the complex philosophical intersections between Immanuel Kant and Li Zehou and, hopefully, to shed some new light upon the question of the precarious relationship between apriorism and empiricism. In my view, this relation is namely the core part of both differences and similarities that manifest themselves in any contrastive view upon these two theoretical systems. And even though much (perhaps too much) light has already been shed upon this basic epistemological problem, such a cross-cultural perspective may offer us a new dimension of their mutual interaction.

¹⁴ Actually, as the word “sublation” occurs as a *terminus technicus* in the field of chemistry, implying a technique of adsorbing material to be separated on the surface of an immiscible liquid (mostly in the form of gas bubbles), it could also serve as a good metaphor for such “cross-cultural philosophizing”.

The Transformation of the Empirical into the Transcendental

The question of the gradual conversion of empirical elements into universal mental forms is one of the key issues concerning which Li Zehou has altered and transformed Kant's views on pure and practical reason, on the very nature of perception and cognisance, and also on the autonomous human subject and his or her actions. The process of transforming the empirical into the transcendental can be seen as a kind of synthesis of empiricism and rationalism. This transformation takes place in the process of evolutionary sedimentation, in which the experiences of all humankind are being transformed into the transcendental forms incorporated in the cultural-psychological formations of each individual.¹⁵

In such a view, all forms of understanding are *a priori* only from the viewpoint of the individual; from the viewpoint of humankind, they are derived from experience, and are therefore *a posteriori*,¹⁶ for they were gradually shaped through the practices of the human species over millions of years. This theory of "psychosedimentation"¹⁷ is comparable to Piaget's view, according to which forms of logic and mathematics, for instance, come from the abstraction of such practice-related activities.

Li has explicated the theoretical grounds of such transcendental notions with the help of his own interpretation of Kant's epistemology:

Kant's "transcendental reason" is a uniquely human form of perception and cognition. Where does it come from? Kant never answered this question. He merely stated that "transcendental" is prior to experience. With my elaboration on the problem of "how is humankind possible," I have replied to Kant's question: "How is the faculty of thought itself possible". In this context, I have proposed the notion of experience transforming into the transcendental. The transcendental forms of the individual are shaped through the historical sedimentation of experiences... Heidegger explained the famous Kantian problem of the unknown common origin of sensitivity and cognition as originating in the transcendental imagination, but I believe it is a result of producing and using tools, i.e., of vital practice. Sensitivity

¹⁵ LI, Z. A Response to Michael Sandel and Other Matters. In *Philosophy East and West*, 2016b, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 1140.

¹⁶ LI, Z. Subjectivity and "Subjectivity": A Response. In *Philosophy East and West*, 1999, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 175–176. [online] [cit. 26 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.2307/1400201>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

arises from individual sensitive experiences of practice, and cognition from psychological forms shaped by the practices of humankind.¹⁸

Although there is therefore no supernatural or metaphysical origin of human cognition, neither is it simply established in one-to-one correspondence with an empirical world. The transformation of the empirical into the transcendental is a dynamic, nonlinear and long-lasting procedure, evolving through and within human beings over millions of years, which takes place in their concrete and tangible world. In addition, this process offers human beings possibilities of consciously restraining their natural inclinations, instincts, and desires and adapting their behaviour in accordance with social norms. It leads to the condensation of reason (*lixing ningju* 理性凝聚). In such a framework, there is no room for any isolated forms of pure, nor for any independent kinds of practical reason in the Kantian sense. Li's pragmatic reason (*shiyong lixing* 實用理性), on the other hand, is an assortment of both types; it is rational and practical at the same time and therefore, it belongs to both epistemology and ethics.

In this framework, no transcendental form can exist independent of experience. The transcendental arises from the empirical through sedimentation, and reason is therefore nothing mysterious, but rather something constructed from the historical practices of humankind. Through their formal qualities, these practices are sedimented into human psychological formations. As already mentioned, in Li's view these processes are not only primarily linked to epistemology, but even more to ethics. The transformation of the empirical into the transcendental helps us understand Li's conception of the categorical imperative. Just like the Chinese concepts of the coherent cosmic structure (*tianli* 天理) or inner knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知), it is absolute and universal, but simultaneously, it is the result of a process, which leads from external norms to internal values.

On such a basis, it is easier to investigate the grounds of Li's transformation of the empirical into the transcendental.¹⁹ Because of limitations of space, however, we cannot go deeper into these issues. But in order to enhance our understanding of the very groundwork of this transformation, and to provide a solid basis for our later re-interpretation of Li's interactions with Kant, we have to clarify some terminological questions.

¹⁸ LI, Z., LIU, X. Li Zehou tan xueshu sixiang san jieduan 李澤厚談學術思想三階段 [Li Zehou Discusses the Three Phases of His Academic Thought]. In *Shanghai wenxue*, 2011, No. 1, p. 77.

¹⁹ See e.g., VAN DEN STOCK, A. Imprints of the Thing in Itself: Li Zehou's Critique of Critical Philosophy and the Historicization of the Transcendental. In *Asian Studies*, 2020, Vol. 8, No. 1. [online] [cit. 24 June 2018]. Available from <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2020.8.1.15-35>.

In Kant's philosophy, the terms "a priori," "transcendental," and "transcendent" have different meanings. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he explained *a priori* knowledge as knowledge that does not rely on any kind of experience. It means "before experiencing," and refers to necessary truths (or knowledge) that are independent of reason. Kant also clearly and unambiguously defined the notion of the transcendental:

I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy.²⁰

Here, "transcendental" means the necessary conditions for the possibility of every experience. Some *a priori* truths also refer to transcendental conditions, for example, time and space, basic categorical judgments, or the law of causality. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant associated "transcendental" principles with "those, through which we represent *a priori* the universal condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition generally".²¹ Hence, the term transcendental refers to that which enables the human mind to constitute concepts and thus to experience them as objects. In contrast to everyday knowledge, which is knowledge of objects, transcendental knowledge is knowledge of how human beings experience those objects as objects. Kant believes that our consciousness provides us with structures that make this kind of experience possible. The human mind generates both such structures and its own unity through a synthesis.

The term "transcendence", on the other hand, refers to that which has surpassed the limits of physical existence and does not necessarily depend on it. The differentiation between the transcendental and the transcendent designates the boundary between theoretical knowledge and mere thought, for beyond all possible experience we cannot have theoretical knowledge but can only think. For Kant, the "transcendent", as opposed to the "transcendental," is that which lies beyond what our cognitive ability can reasonably know. In this context, Li emphasizes the important role of experiences in the functioning of transcendental structures.

I certainly believe Kant has paid close attention to experiences. In Kant's theory, transcendental is different from transcendent. Transcendental is transcendental precisely because on the one hand it precedes experiences, but on the other hand, it cannot be separated from them. Therefore he wrote at the very beginning of his *Critique of Pure Reason* that all began with experience, but experience could not be equated to knowledge. Kant's

²⁰ KANT, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 133.

²¹ KANT, I. *Critique of Judgement*, p. 181.

transcendental categories tell us precisely this, namely, that there can be no science without experience.²²

Li argues that the realm of transcendence is illusionary but it still has a positive influence on people, for it provides them with ideals and enhances their activity.²³ On the other hand, he points out that, due to Kant's dualistic worldview, his *noumenon* also belongs to transcendent notions:

For him, *noumenon* and reason are without origin and they are simultaneously higher than humankind. Hence, we can speak here about a two-world view. However, I have established a different concept of the thing-in-itself. For me, it is material substance, which exists as a synergetic interaction between the universe and human beings. Such a conceptualization is directly linked to my "one-world view," in which both of them are parts of one world. Since they still belong to this one and the same world, this is not a contradiction.²⁴

In such a context, it becomes clear that Li understands and applies Kant's notion of transcendental in a different way. In a one-world paradigm, transcendence in the sense of surpassing one world and existing in another is impossible. Hence, Li concludes that in Chinese philosophy, there is no transcendence (*chaoyan* 超驗) but detachment (*chaotuo* 超脫).

But while the Chinese one-world paradigm cannot include transcendence (*chaoyue* 超越), it certainly includes a kind of transcendental (*chaoyan* 超驗). Li's conceptualization of transforming the empirical into the transcendental is a processual account of the elementary construction of such transcendental. In this framework, Li has tried to elaborate on some of Kant's central concepts. In this process, he aimed to replace certain "problematic" definitions of such concepts with others that have – in his view – better expressed their positioning in the schema of a processual, dynamic and materialistic-historical development.

²² LI, Z., YANG, G. Lunli wenti ji qita – guocheng fenxide shijiao 倫理問題及其他 – 過程分析的視角 [About Ethics and Other Issues – from the Perspective of Processual Analysis]. In *Shehui kexue*, 2014, No. 9, p. 125.

²³ LI, Z., LIU, Y. Li Zehou, Liu Yuedi 2017 nian zhexue duitan lu (xia): Ziyou yizhi, yingguo lü yu juejin lun. 李澤厚、劉悅笛 2017 年哲學對談錄 (下) 自由意志、因果律與決定論 [The Philosophical Debate between Li Zehou and Liu Yuedi from 2017, Part II: Free Will, the Law of Causality and Determinism]. In *Ziyou ruan zhide boke*, 2017, p. 8. [online] [cit. 26 June 2018]. Available from http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5fab50bf0102x7dq.html.

²⁴ Ibid.

Referential Frameworks

It is often claimed that in this respect, Li's theory can be considered as an upgrading or a completion of Kant's philosophy.²⁵ Nonetheless, in terms of philosophical reflection, this can hardly be the case, because Kant himself repeatedly warned against a mingling of the empirical with the rational:

I here ask only whether the nature of science does not require the empirical part always to be carefully separated from the rational, placing ahead of a genuine (empirical) physics a metaphysics of nature, and ahead of practical anthropology a metaphysics of morals, which must be carefully cleansed of everything empirical, in order to know how much pure reason could achieve in both cases; and from these sources pure reason itself creates its teachings a priori, whether the latter enterprise be carried on by all teachers of morals (whose name is legion) or only by some who feel they have a calling for it.²⁶

Therefore, Li's aim to synthesize the two approaches (or disciplines) within this process of transformation is rooted in the holistic, "one-world" nature of the Chinese philosophical tradition, the existence of which has not been acknowledged by most of the traditional European thinkers, including Kant himself:

That which mixes those pure principles among empirical ones does not even deserve the name of a 'philosophy' (for this distinguishes itself from common rational cognition precisely by the fact that what the latter conceives only as mixed in, it expounds in a separate science), still less of a 'moral philosophy', because precisely through this mixture it violates the purity of morals and proceeds contrary to its own end.²⁷

Irrespective of what one might think of such approaches, it is pretty clear that Li's "transformation of the empirical into the transcendental" (*jingyan bian xianyan* 經驗變先驗) is by no means an element that could be directly compatible with, or even assimilated into, Kant's transcendental philosophy. Hence, it seems certainly better and more suitable to categorize Li's ethical system as a theory which rests on completely different paradigms that are not comparable to (and, even less compatible with) the ones that determine Kant's

²⁵ DING, Z. J. Li Zehou: Chinese Aesthetics from a Post-Marxist and Confucian Perspective. In CHENG, C., BUNNIN, N. (eds.). *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, p. 248.

²⁶ KANT, I. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 23–24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

referential framework. Instead of speaking about Li's theory as a system, based upon Kantian approaches, it could therefore be claimed that for Li Zehou, Kant's philosophy was but a valuable source of inspiration.

But before rushing to any premature conclusions regarding the complicated relation of these two beardless philosophers, let me first briefly explain my understanding of referential frameworks and their influences on conceptual developments and theories.

Many scholars of Chinese-Western comparative philosophy believe that there is a certain degree of incommensurability between the methodological systems of the so-called Western and East-Asian traditions. This phenomenon is connected with the incommensurability of referential frameworks, which occurs due to the impossibility of transferring certain concepts from one socio-cultural context to the other. The specific features of a particular referential framework are determined by explicit definitions and applications of specific concepts and categories (as well as different kinds of relations between them), resulting in specific referents, and consequently, in dissimilar methodological procedures necessary for their investigation, their ordering and communication. All this leads of course logically to a certain degree of impossibility of comparison of different frameworks.

These problems are not limited only to theories or methods, which arise from different cultural traditions; they normally also occur within all research focused on objects within one single language or tradition. Actually, what we are faced with here is a universal problem, which has been discussed by a broad range of Western theorists (Kuhn, Quin, Lakatos, Feyerabend, etc.). Feng Yaoming, for instance, reminds us here of the well-known example of the relation between Newton's and Einstein's theories: because they represent different referential frameworks, the functions and semantic connotations of the same notions applied in them are also different.²⁸

Basically, the notion of referential frameworks relates to Thomas Kuhn's concept of the paradigm. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he described the problems linked to different frameworks of reference in the following way:

More is involved, however, than the incommensurability of standards. Since new paradigms are born from old ones, they ordinarily incorporate much of the vocabulary and apparatus, both conceptual and manipulative, that the traditional paradigm had previously employed. But they seldom employ these borrowed elements in quite the traditional way. Within the

²⁸ FENG, Y. *Zhongguo zhaxuede fangfa lun wenti* 中國哲學的方法論問題 [Problems of Methodology of Chinese Philosophy], p. 179.

new paradigm, old terms, concepts, and experiments fall into new relationships one with the other. The inevitable result is what we must call, though the term is not quite right, a misunderstanding between the two competing schools... Consider, for example, the men who called Copernicus mad because he proclaimed that the earth moved. They were not either just wrong or quite wrong. Part of what they meant by 'earth' was fixed position. Their earth, at least, could not be moved. Correspondingly, Copernicus' innovation was not simply to move the earth. Rather, it was a whole new way of regarding the problems of physics and astronomy, one that necessarily changed the meaning of both 'earth' and 'motion'.²⁹

Because of this, scholars like Feng³⁰ conclude that it is impossible to systematically transplant or inlay the concepts contained in a certain framework into another one. This would imply, on the one hand, that it is impossible to understand Chinese philosophy through the lens of Western referential frameworks, which is certainly true. But on the other hand, it also implies that there cannot be any systematic exchange between different philosophies. I do not believe this second proposition is true. (If I did, I would start looking for another job). I am convinced that such a fruitful and constructive transfer is possible, even though it is more or less taking place in a one-way direction.

From Li to Kant and Back

Li's philosophy is rooted in a referential framework which is reminiscent in many respects of the basic paradigmatic network determining the dominant streams of traditional Chinese philosophy. It is holistic, but structured in accordance with binary categories that function on the principle of correlative complementarity. Its main characteristics, perhaps, can be found in its dynamic, processual and contextual nature.

In Li Zehou's system, the concepts of the empirical and the transcendental interact in a dynamic, correlative and mutually complementary way. They are both parts of a processual philosophy in which movement is always followed by a standstill. In such a worldview, they always appear as essentially interrelated and interdependent realms of life.

Kant's transcendental forms, on the other hand, are pure and perfect, like frozen images of a timeless world. Even though the empirical sphere is discrete

²⁹ KUHN, T. S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 149.

³⁰ FENG, Y. *Zhongguo zhaxuede fangfa lun wenti* 中國哲學的方法論問題 [Problems of Methodology of Chinese Philosophy], p. 180.

and multifarious, composed of innumerable different moments and countless particularities, it cannot influence the sacred realm of rationality. If it could, its impact would have devastating consequences for the entire system of Being, which can only exist without any contact to the manifold and changeable varieties of being. Therefore, Kant's system is completely incompatible with Li Zehou's philosophy.

But Li's own system, on the other hand, can well borrow and apply concepts and ideas from the one created by Kant. This asymmetry is possible due to the simple fact that dynamic systems can incorporate static components, but not vice versa. In this sense, Li's philosophy can truly be seen as a sublation of Kant's transcendental theory.

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