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Philosophy in China

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Source: *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, June 2018, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2018), pp. 166-173

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26571932>

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Dermot Moran

Philosophy in China: Reflections on the 24th World Congress of Philosophy

I offer these reflections on philosophy in preparation for the opening of the 24th World Congress of Philosophy, to be held from August 13–20, 2018, at Peking University.¹ The World Congresses of Philosophy have been in existence since 1900, so we are now in the second century of this tradition. As the elected President of FISP (Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie, International Federation of Philosophical Societies), it is my great honour and privilege to preside also as President of this exciting and important 24th World Congress, which has enormous significance for China, and also for the whole international community of philosophy, and which will be, I believe, of ground-breaking importance for the future of philosophy in its expanding global context. Of course, the Conference is located in Peking University, but it is, in truth, a Congress hosted by the entire academic community in China, with the participation of all the philosophy departments in China. Based on the current number of participant registrations (more than 6000 as of middle of May), this 24th World Congress of Philosophy will be the largest and most diverse of all the philosophical congresses ever held since the first one was convened in Paris in 1900. Registered participants will arrive from more than one hundred countries around the world. I am certain that this important philosophical event will change our perception of philosophy for ever; it will also hopefully have an enduring impact on international cultural relations and promote mutual understanding, respect and trust around the world.

It is an especially important time for the 24th World Congress to be hosted by China. We are in the middle of global crises of many kinds—crises in politics, in economics, in society, in the large-scale displacement of peoples, in the environment, and, furthermore, crises in our traditions, beliefs, and values. Indeed, despite the extraordinary technological and scientific achievements of

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference in Peking University on 13 August 2017.

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our time, perhaps there has never been such a global sense of insecurity and distrust. Everywhere human relations with one another, with the social and natural environment, and with the cosmos as a whole, are challenged by problems of such an enormous scale that no one country and no one language-community or knowledge-economy on its own can address these challenges. I take the liberty of quoting an old saying or proverb from my own ancient Irish language: *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*: “We live in the shadow of one another.” That means that no group or community can live in isolation; we live in mutual dependence, in what Edmund Husserl called *Ineinandersein*, being-with-one-another.

Irrevocably, we are now interconnected globally and interdependent economically and politically. Never before has scientific knowledge been available to so many in such diverse platforms as are available to us today. Our academic practices must reflect this new reality. We have much to learn from one another, if we open our ears and our hearts and come prepared to have our presuppositions challenged in an atmosphere of friendly and supportive collegiality.

The overall theme of the 24th World Congress, “Learning to be Human,” rightly expresses both our commitment to “learning,” which has to be understood to mean also self-improvement and self-rectification, and to exploring the meaning of our common humanity while learning together for the progress, peace, and harmony of the whole world. There was much discussion about the meaning of this theme when it was first proposed. The slogan “Learning to be Human” has a mundane, everyday meaning, but also a higher significance especially within the Confucian tradition. In the mundane sense, and, I am told, in everyday colloquial Chinese, it means something like “grow up!,” “behave like an adult,” “don’t act like an animal.” It is minimally about respect and obedience and good manners and moral behaviour. However, in the Confucian sense, the slogan also embodies a call to reflect on the essential nature of being human and an imperative to learn to cultivate and improve our humanity; “to polish the mirror,” as the Buddhists say.

Incidentally, it is interesting to look back over previous World Congresses. The first one had no title, being generally recognized as an international meeting of philosophy. That gathering in Paris was timed to coincide with the Universal Exhibition or World Fair, inaugurating the twentieth century. It was held a few days after the International Congress of Mathematics in which David Hilbert gave his famous lecture, “On the Future Problems of Mathematics,” that laid out a list of 23 problems that remained to be solved by mathematicians. It was organized by a group of French academic philosophers, including Émile Boutroux (who was also President of the Congress), Henri Bergson, Louis Couturat, and E. Le Roy. There were subsequent international conferences in

Geneva (1904), Heidelberg (1908), Bologna (1911), and then following the disruption of the Great War (1914–18), in Naples (1924), Cambridge, USA (1926), Oxford (1930), Prague (1934) and Paris (1937), this last conference timed to coincide with the 300th anniversary of the publication of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637).

We can note how often the term “humanity” has appeared in the many titles of the individual World Congresses. After the Second World War (1939–1945), the first International Congress of Philosophy was held in Amsterdam in 1948, with the general theme of “Man, Mankind, and Humanity”; and the Congress held in Brighton, UK, in 1988, had the title “The Philosophical Understanding of Human Beings.” In Moscow in 1993, it was “Mankind at a Turning Point: Philosophical Perspectives”; and in Boston in 1998, it was “Paideia: Philosophy Educating Humanity.” The nature of humanity is a permanent source of wonder and astonishment. There has been considerable progress in the discussion, not just in the recognition of the importance of gender (where, in the English titles at least, “human” has replaced “man”), but also in the questioning of the nature of human existence together with the gradual emergence of stated World Congress themes concerning the posthuman and the transhuman. Human rights are of global significance but so also the issue of the non-human, whether it be the moral status of animals and living beings generally, or the value of protecting human habitats, natural and cultural, and indeed the human role as “shepherds of Being,” as Heidegger puts it.

It is also most fitting that the World Congress should now be held in Beijing after the very successful 23rd World Congress of Philosophy, held in 2013, which took place in the ancestral home of Western philosophy, Athens. In the Athens of the fifth century BCE, in the very places where the Congress convened, Socrates talked with Plato and Plato talked with Aristotle. Fittingly, the Athens Congress held actual philosophical events in the Academy of Plato and the Lyceum of Aristotle. I can personally speak of how moving it was for me to listen to a lecture on Chinese philosophy delivered by Professor Chen Lai in Chinese but translated also into English in the Pnyx, looking directly across at the Acropolis in the late evening light. The lecture involved a comparison between Confucian self-cultivation and Aristotelian *phronesis*. What an extraordinary coming together of traditions in the very place where public disputes took place and democracy had its birth. The Congress has now moved East, from Athens to Beijing.

China and Greece (if we can use this term as shorthand for that broad reach of Mediterranean lands and islands where Greek was spoken) are both ancient cultures with evidence of written language going back thousands of years, to at least as early as 1250 BCE. Ancient Greek culture has bequeathed to the world the great heritage of Greek philosophy, classical drama, literature, the arts and

sculpture, and was also responsible for the compilation and development of the Western scientific tradition, from geometry, astronomy and physics, to biology, medicine and logic. China has an equally long—perhaps even longer—*continuous* history of learning, science, medicine, literature, philosophy and the cultivation of wisdom more generally, and has also made an extraordinary and enduring contribution to our world heritage. Chinese philosophy represents an extended and continuous tradition that has, like its Western equivalent, absorbed many elements from other cultures, including Buddhism from India and, from the 16th century onwards, various philosophical forms from Europe (through the translations of the Christian missionaries and later through the influence especially of Marxism). But in all these cases, China has transformed them in harmony with its own unique ways of thinking and doing. Over the millennia, China has absorbed and adapted foreign currents and made them native, and Buddhism for instance, arriving from India, developed very specific local forms in China. Marxism too has a unique history and development in China which is strongly represented in this Congress. The bicentennial of Karl Marx's birth in 1818 was recently marked by an important conference which was addressed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping himself, who called Marx "the greatest thinker of modern times."

Just as Chinese culture absorbed and transformed foreign cultures, so too did Greek culture similarly absorb and transform the extraordinary achievements of the ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures. Later, Greek culture encountered Jewish culture, especially in Alexandria, when the holy books of the Tanakh, or Jewish scriptures, were translated into Greek as the Septuagint, commissioned by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Greek became the *lingua franca* of the Western civilized world. Athens and Jerusalem came together, something that perturbed Tertullian but which inspired Origen and St. Augustine. Indeed, Christian European thought is itself built on this synthesis of Greek and Jewish cultures.

Great breakthroughs leading to the transformation of cultures took place in India, China, Greece, and Judea, all around the same period from eighth to the third centuries BCE. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers coined a term for this transformative age: *Achsenzeit*, or "axial age" (Jaspers 2011; Armstrong 2006). In the late Bronze and Iron Ages, various forms of writing, tomb building, fortifications, temples, rituals and religions, and indeed even sceptics, emerged in the many different cultural traditions. We are discovering more and more about ancient contacts between ancient cultures, East and West, even as we learn more and more about the commercial and cultural exchanges along the Silk Roads. In ancient Rome, Emperors were wearing Chinese silk. It has even been suggested recently by scholars that the terracotta warriors and bronze figures of Xi'an, dating from the time of the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, may have been

influenced by Greek sculptors who travelled with Alexander. Chinese culture has deeply influenced the West, and Leibniz thought the Chinese script could serve as the basis of his universal sign language.

In many respects, the Chinese tradition is even older than the Greek tradition, and scholars now see the importance of tracing the roots of Greek thought back further and into the East. Confucius (c. 551BCE–c. 479 BCE), whose thought is often compared with Aristotle's (384–322 BCE), was, in fact, more or less a contemporary of the much earlier Greek sage Heraclitus (c. 535BCE–475BCE). Furthermore, much more of Confucius' sayings are preserved in the *Analects*, compiled after his death, in contrast to the rather limited fragments of Heraclitus that have survived. Greek philosophy and Chinese wisdom in their origins are shrouded in mystery and expressed in metaphor. Parmenides wrote a poem and Plato told fantastical stories and allegories even as he was writing dialogues. Confucius also taught by means of stories and allegories. The *Yijing (I Ching)*, or *Book of Changes*, is a most ancient book of divination that later was included as one of the Five Classics. It was already an ancient text—like Homer was for Plato—when Confucius wrote commentaries on it. It attracted Western interest through the reports of Christian missionaries in the 18th century and, in fact, Leibniz himself wrote a commentary on it in 1703. The Scottish missionary and Sinologist James Legge (1815–97), who eventually held a Chair of Chinese Language at Oxford, translated it into English in 1882 and the German Sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), who lived in China for 25 years, translated it into German. The depth psychologist Carl Jung was deeply interested in the *Yijing* and regarded it as an exercise in synchronicity and even wrote a Foreword to Wilhelm's German edition (Wilhelm and Baynes 1967). The British scientist and Sinologist Joseph Needham (1900–95) blamed it for holding back Chinese science (Needham 1959). Among many recent scholarly translations, the one by John Minford (2014) stands out. It has long been the darling of New Age alternatives in the West. I learned recently that there is even a *Yijing* phone app! The axial age meets the digital age!

We are only at the beginning of understanding the deep ancient contacts between these great living cultures. China, with its rich traditions of science and astronomy, has been in contact with the scientific traditions of Europe from very early on. The Western and Chinese cultures—which Leibniz characterized as two different worlds—have been trying to understand each other for centuries. They have also not developed in isolation but have been mutually intertwined. Specific mention must be made of the Jesuit missionaries, especially Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who resided at the Imperial court in Beijing and is buried in Beijing. It was Ricci who introduced Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, to China. In his own work, *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ricci (1985) presented the European view of human nature by drawing on Aristotle

and Aquinas. Ricci (2009) wanted to educate Chinese leaders about European culture and European leaders about Chinese culture. It was Ricci himself who coined the Latin name “Confucius,” and he regarded sincerity and the rectification of the mind as the great contributions of Confucianism.

Subsequently, philosophers in the West, from Kant and Hegel to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, have all sought to understand the essential character of the Chinese contribution, often making great errors in the process. Christian Wolff was one of the first to praise the virtues of Chinese philosophy in his academic lectures from 1721 entitled *De Sinarum Philosophia Practica*. For singling out Chinese “natural religion,” he was criticised by the authorities. From 1825, Hegel added lectures on Chinese philosophy (including on Confucius, the *Yijing*, and Laozi) to his lectures on the history of philosophy (see Kim 1978).² Hegel also saw the Chinese tradition as exemplifying what he calls “natural religion.” He saw Chinese philosophy as absorbing the individual into the universal. He translated Dao (“Way”) as equivalent to the Greek *logos*. Of course, such early efforts only mark the beginning of the great dialogue that is on-going between Chinese and Western philosophy. There is now a huge field of culture studies exploring the riches of both Chinese and Western philosophy, with scholarly editions, translations and commentaries on the great texts.

Today the challenge becomes even greater—we must develop hermeneutic frameworks for understanding—and critiquing—the contributions of all the world’s cultures—including not just East and West, but North and South, the thought forms and wisdom traditions of Africa, the Middle East, Meso-America, the native traditions of North America, of the first inhabitants of Australia, and indigenous cultures everywhere. The very meaning and definition of philosophy must be challenged and expanded—and indeed, for this reason, this Congress includes sections, not just on Indian philosophies, Chinese Philosophy, Ancient Greek Philosophy, and so on, but also on Intercultural Philosophy, Philosophy and Oral Traditions, Philosophy of Indigenous Cultures, African and African Philosophy, and a host of other areas.

Let me explain a little more about the organization of the World Congress of Philosophy. Since the International Federation of *Philosophical Societies* (FISP) was established on the instigation of UNESCO at the Amsterdam Congress in 1948, immediately following the end of the Second World War, it has been the official body charged with organizing the Congress. Normally, the actual responsibility for each Congress lies with a host philosophy society, which is a

² One of Hegel’s sources is *Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les sciences, les moeurs, les usages, etc. des Chinois par les missionaries de Peking*. 16 vols. Paris, 1776–1814.

member of FISP. In the case of the World Congress recently held in Athens, for instance, it was the Hellenic Philosophical Society. In the present case of China, the original FISP member societies were the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (CASS and SASS, respectively). Thus, a new Chinese Organising Committee had to be and was created, and I am pleased to say that it is functioning extremely well. Last year, in August 2017, a “kick-off” conference was held in Beijing, exactly a year before this up-coming Congress, and all the Deans of Philosophy in China were invited. It was an historic event and I was very pleased and honoured to have been able to take part as President of FISP.

The diversity of the academic program of the 24th World Congress of Philosophy is testimony to the richness and diversity of philosophy itself. We all now live in a global culture, and philosophy is challenged to respond accordingly. The planning for the 24th World Congress of Philosophy was sensitive to the need for international inclusion and diversity, and this resulted, for example, in the inclusion of a section of contributed papers on the Philosophy of Globalization. The titles of the plenary sessions were selected to recognize and celebrate traditional Chinese—primarily Confucian—classifications, in terms of the human being (self), the social context (community), the relationship with the natural world (nature), and the desire of all humans to look above themselves in various forms of transcendence (spirit). In this Congress, no one is being excluded, and no tradition or way of thinking is excluded. Of course, no one conference can cover everything, but by listening and debating with each other, we are participating together in building an enduring platform for global dialogue amidst the endless philosophical challenges of learning to be human!

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