

RECENT WORK

RECENT STUDIES OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY IN THE BALKANS

INTERVIEW WITH JANA S. ROŠKER BY NEVAD KAHTERAN

The Department of Asian and African Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana was established in 1995 when Andrej Bekeš, Jana S. Rošker, and Mitja Saje were among the first research Japanologists and Sinologists who were ready to make further steps in their research at the university. The first study programme has been adapted to the new Bologna reforms, currently the study programmes offer a BA and MA in Japanology and Sinology. Both are three-year undergraduate study programmes that can be further explored in postgraduate courses. The department also offers a PhD program in Asian and African studies.

Nevad Kahteran ('NK' for short below): *You are from Murska Subota (Slovenka, Premurka), so how did you become a pioneer of Slovenian studies and one of the leading sinologists in the Balkan region?*

Jana S. Rošker ('JR' for short below): Although I was born in a remote province – or maybe just because of this fact – I was always interested in foreign worlds, especially China – the ancient “Middle Kingdom”. This interest grew intensively after I took part at an English language course in London when I was 17. There, I met some Chinese students, who introduced Chinese characters and some general foundations of Chinese culture to me. I was fascinated and decided to study sinology after graduating at the high school. The closest opportunity was at the Vienna University, where I managed to receive a scholarship for foreign students. I never regreted this decision, especially because I had the opportunity to go to China for additional language training after the second year of my study. I stayed there for 2 years and fell deeply in love with the country and its people. I return regularly and

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spent altogether an additional 7 years in China after that. After obtaining my Ph.D in Vienna, I became the first Slovenian sinologist and devoted myself – together with my colleagues and friends, Mitja Saje and Andrej Bekeš, to establish the Department of Asian and African studies at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. I am happy and proud that we succeeded and our efforts were not in vain.

NK: *Obviously, according to many scholars, including yourself, the balance of economic, if not political, power is shifting from the Western to the Asian region. This shift confronts us with many problems, linked to transformations of material and ideal paradigms that not only define the development of Asian societies as such, but also strongly influence international relations on a global level. In this regard, how is Chinese philosophy relevant in the 21st century? China itself as well?*

JR: For China, the 20th Century was a period of continuous upheaval and sweeping social change. At the end of the 19th Century, the ancient "Middle Kingdom" - despite its immense geopolitical dimensions - found itself on the margins of the modern world, as part of its semi-colonial periphery. While Western culture manifested itself violently and aggressively in the form of economic and military invasions, Western philosophy, which entered China by means of Western capital and its troops, was seen mainly as a challenge. This challenge was expressed in the specific language of modern formal logic and analysis and in the social function of reason as embodied in modern science and technology, as well as in the Western idea of the state, law and democracy. At a more technical level, it also appeared in forms of Cartesian Dualism and their structure of mutually contradictory polarities and in the formal frame of traditional European dialectic, as well as in the concepts and categories specific to the Western history of thought, such as the notions of substance, objectivity, truth, and so forth. Especially challenging were the elementary methodological conditions that determined this confusing set of new, mostly unknown categories and concepts, such as the demand for evidence or the formally flawless establishment of essential assumptions and conclusions, explicit argumentation and accurately formulated definitions.

Despite the need to understand, explore and apply Western ideas and ideal concatenations, the acceptance of these foreign theories was essentially a superficial phenomenon and the Chinese tradition of thought proved to be much more resistant and flexible than first appeared. Although the sinificated "Marxism - Leninism" that prevailed in China during the latter half of the 20th Century as the new state ideology derived from Western theories, social functions continued to be regulated to a great extent by traditional philosophical concepts.

The contemporary quest for a "proper" orientation, i.e. the searching for new, clearly marked signposts which were seen as pointing the way towards modern culture, is nowadays also providing Chinese philosophers basic criteria for solving practical problems in the sphere of politics and the economy. In the contemporary Chinese theoretical contexts, such a framework of orientations is namely of ultimate importance, for without it, society would – according to their views - slip into a

generalized spiritual malaise, in which the actions of individuals would be determined by the purely mechanistic laws of technocratic utility.

NK: *You published many books in other languages besides Slovenian. So, strategic solutions for these problems need to consider broader perspectives in the context of particular cultural backgrounds. Such perspectives are not limited only to economic and ecological issues... I have to ask you this: what are the newest areas of research for intercultural dialogues at a global level?*

JR: The fact that the great majority of the systematized knowledge of humanities and social sciences is based on the investigation of Western data does not mean that the intercultural dialogue is impossible; rather, both parties must gradually learn to understand each other. A dialogue is different from a debate. The former is geared to reaching an agreement (consensus), the latter to obtain a “victory” in argumentation; one is inclusive, the other based upon exclusion. In an ‘authentic dialogue’ the participants do not talk to achieve certain goals, but actively listen to each other; rather than concentrating on proving themselves right, they are eager to gain new insights. A dialogue will necessarily lead to comparisons by placing together and examining two things in order to discover their similarities and differences, an activity that plays a crucial role in every scientific discipline. And this comparing (which should not be confused with equating) may result in a change of paradigms, or at least in a conceptual reconfiguration.

During the last decades the theoretical currents of contemporary sinology and modern Chinese philosophy have paid more and more attention to the investigations that deal with the comparison of substantial and methodological presumptions of the so called ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ traditions.

For European scholars, the understanding of East-Asian cultures is always linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and socialization processes. Thus, the interpretation of various aspects and elements of such cultures also involves the geographic, political and economic position of the interpreter, as well as that of the object being interpreted. In recent years, it has become clear to most people that "Western epistemology" represents only one of many different models of human comprehension. In current intercultural research, however, it is still common to project elements of the content and form of discourses which have been overshadowed by the dominant (Western) academic methodologies. Thus, any international academic dialogue has to follow the main methodological principles of intercultural research, taking into consideration the incommensurability between different, culturally divergently conditioned paradigms or, in other words, of theoretical frameworks which arose in differently formed discourses of various cultural and linguistic environments.

If we fail to take into consideration the specific conditions determined by different historical, linguistic and cultural contexts, we can easily be led to misinterpret our subject matter. This holds true even for investigations and interpretations of contents, which arose under different circumstances, in differently structured social and

cultural contexts. This danger has also been recognized by many contemporary Chinese theoreticians, who deal with research and renewed disclosure of traditional Chinese philosophical thought.

Due to their research, a certain fact, which seemed impossible to imagine by the majority of 'Western' theoreticians less than a century ago, became much clearer. The previously 'absurd' presumption, that 'Western' philosophy was not the sole and only universal valid philosophical discourse, is now becoming a generally recognized fact, accepted by representatives of the vast majority of existing cultural communities. This newly recognized fact awakens new hope for enrichment, arising from the awareness of the categorical and essential assumption of comprehension, analysis and transmission of reality that is being formed on a basis of differently structured socio-political contexts. This kind of enrichment is especially important for the creative impulsion of post-Christian civilizations, for it represents a possibility for a dynamic self-reflection, which is required for the overcoming of stuffy spaces of the post-modern era. It indicates an outlet from the *cul-de-sacs* of the mechanically dualistic comprehension of reality, as well as a new strength for a breakthrough from the moulds of determined cognitive patterns.

NK: *You teach Methodology of intercultural researches in Ljubljana and Zagreb. So, in your opinion, where does one place Eastern philosophical traditions in the Bologna reform of high education at our university centers? The younger generation of students of philosophy seem to have less difficulty breaking with that ongoing process...*

JR: It is impossible to divide the shortcomings of the Bologna process from the general problematic that we encounter in the fields of sinology, japanology and many other "area studies" The studies of China, Japan, namely belongs to the fuzzy category of "area studies," the numerous practitioners of which seem to believe they can do without a fundamental systematized theory. Sinologists are provided with an aggregate but not with a whole, with a pile of bricks but not with a well-founded and well-structured building. In other words, Chinese studies still didn't establish a model representing China in and of itself, as a complex system, linking human, social and natural features.

Because of its utilitarian neo-liberal goals which led to shorter and shortsighted, more "application-oriented" and technical – mechanistic study programs, Bologna reform has deepened this problem. Contemporary China students in Europe have a keen eye for details but do not let them speak as parts of a whole. They do not have an appropriate architecture for organizing the elements presented into an intelligible system. They are merely focused upon modern China, without considering the fact that it is impossible to understand without understanding its long lasting past traditions and characteristic epistemologies. Thus, Chinese philosophy belongs to the most overlooked fields in contemporary European sinology and does not belong to the priorities within the modern curricula, although in my opinion it is the only

sinological discipline, which could provide a much needed systematized theory and methodology for Chinese studies. Thus, our colleagues in China and Taiwan are much further in this respect.

NK: *No doubt that Confucianism's comeback is quite visible not only in China today through establishing so many Confucian institutes, but at the same time abroad as well. Actually, his texts lend themselves constantly to new developments, new commentaries, and different interpretations because he lived in a period of historical transition in an age of cultural crisis like our own. Of these questions, intellectuals in Bosnia-Herzegovina and our Balkan region caught up in the events of recent years are only too well aware.*

JR: In human history, periods of crisis and transition have always proved to be extremely creative. It is no coincidence that the Chinese word which means crisis (*weiji*) is composed of two notions, meaning „danger“ and „opportunity“ respectively. We should be well aware of this significant linkage and should try to see the present situation as a challenge. Confucius also lived in such a period.

Rediscovering his work, reading it based on our own hermeneutical context, and as texts of philosophical hermeneutics, it can be easily seen that he was indeed an epochal thinker. The contribution of his thought can be seen in the establishment of a humanistic moral ideal with cultural upbringing as its core. Based on this awareness, Confucius dealt positively with the human existential concerns and with socio-political problems that he faced during his own time; thus, his thought was more creative than conservative.

Therefore, the recent rediscovery of his philosophy, which began in the early 20th century in the framework of the new philosophical current of Modern Confucianism, is not coincidental at all. As a major source of social values, Modern Confucian theory assumes essential significance amidst the proliferation of instrumental rationality in modern China. This philosophical current is distinguished by a comprehensive attempt to revitalize traditional thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. The philosophical current defines itself with a search for a synthesis between “Western” and traditional Chinese thought, aiming to elaborate a new system of ideas and values, suitable for the modern, globalized society. Modern Confucian discourses are based on the supposition that Confucian thought could be amalgamated with capitalistic development. Its proponents also believe that a renewed form of this traditional Chinese system of social, political and moral thought could serve as a basis for endowing modern life with ethical meaning and as a “spiritual salve” for the alienation which appeared as an undesirable side-effect of capitalist competition and profit-seeking. Their efforts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Confucian thought can therefore be seen as an attempt to preserve Chinese cultural identity, while also contributing to the development of philosophical and theoretical dialogue between China and the West. Modern Confucian philosophers have namely tried to find a framework for the revitalization of traditional Chinese theories in Western methodologies and by

applying Western categorical structures. Through the lens of comparative philosophy, it is worth examining the ways in which Modern Confucian philosophers changed the framework within which traditional Chinese philosophical inquiry has been carried out. Recently, many researchers of contemporary Chinese philosophy try to examine this paradigm shift, critically focusing upon the question whether it has indeed – as has been widely presupposed in contemporary Sinology - become axiomatic for the further development of modern Chinese philosophy and society. Modern Confucians have pointed out that China's modernization did not represent a “natural” process that could be defined solely by the inherent dynamics of an autochthonous social development. Instead, it manifested itself in the 19th century as an urgent need for radical changes of the existing political and economic system which did not match the circumstances and the demands of the new era. In this context, I am following the supposition that Chinese modernization processes were thoroughly determined by the contacts with the West; in this sense, the European colonial past has to a great extent – although not always in a direct way – influenced these processes. In spite of these influences it became clear that Chinese modernization could not be equated with the Westernization of society. The Modern (or Contemporary) Confucian efforts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Confucian thought can therefore be seen as an attempt to counter the dominant ideological trends and preserve traditional cultural identity, while also contributing to the development of philosophical and theoretical dialogue between East Asia and the West.

NK: *At the end, how do we join hands with the ex-YU countries concerning this cross-cultural researches and intercultural exchange?*

JR: I believe that there are many possibilities to cooperate in this field. We have already established many fruitful academic contacts between East Asian departments in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade. I strongly hope that these contacts, exchanges and dialogues can be extended in the near future – especially regarding Sarajevo.

Of course, as in any cross-cultural cooperation, there is necessarily a gap and a distance between new knowledge and the harnessing of it for practical use; it can only be bridged by investments of time and effort involving many people of different disciplines. In addition to mutual good will and tolerance, such efforts require much developmental research, in which the ex-Yugoslavian academies can and should participate.

In my opinion, such a cross-cultural dialogue is immensely important, especially regarding our common recent history. For the active exchange of ideas not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking in which human beings, and not numbers, borders or profits are being placed into the center of our common interest.