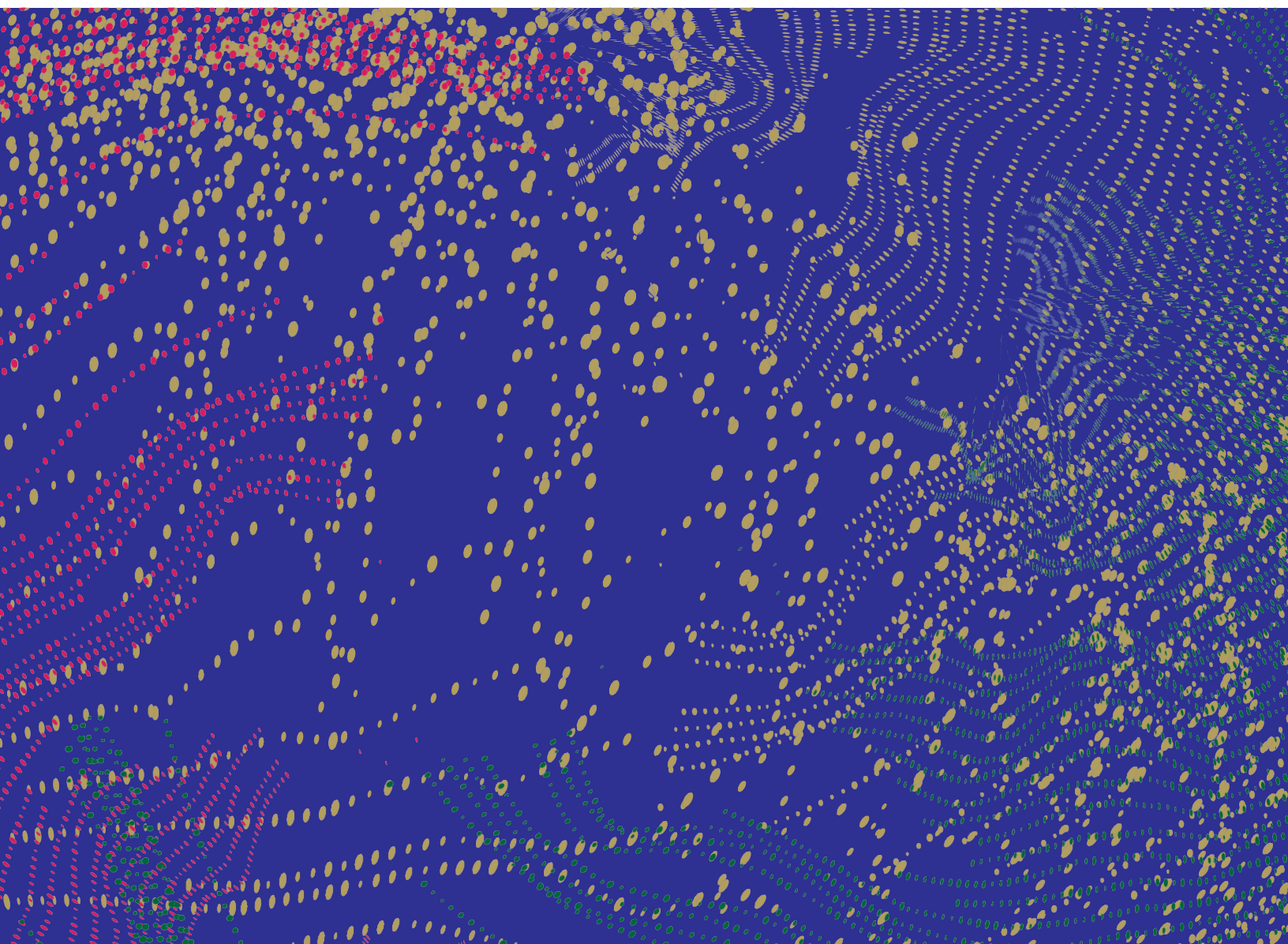


The World Humanities Report

Chinese Philosophy

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Chinese Philosophy

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The general trend of the development of Chinese philosophy over the last thirty years can be summarized as the true awakening and expansive development of its subjectivity. More specifically, there has been a series of transformations from the 1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, from a relatively general, popular enthusiasm for Chinese studies and Confucianism, to a deeper reflection on the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, and finally to a renaissance of Chinese classical scholarship over the last decade and the creation of a new Chinese philosophy. This grand development is accompanied by a continuous deepening and enrichment of studies in Chinese philosophy, as well as extensive dialogue and in-depth interaction between Chinese and foreign philosophies, on the basis of which awakening of Chinese philosophical subjectivity and its philosophical construction are formed. Therefore, this essay provides a brief outline of the trends in the development of Chinese philosophy, along with specific examples, so as to present the development of the discipline of Chinese philosophy academically and rationally.

From “Culture Fever” to “Chinese Studies Fever” and “Confucian Fever”

During the so-called Culture Fever of the 1980s, there were three major camps: the “walking toward the future” camp, the “China and the world” camp, and the “Academy of Chinese Cultural” camp. The first two were the most influential and representative of mainstream intellectual culture in 1980s China, namely criticizing tradition and pursuing Westernization, while the third maintained steadfast support for the value and recognition of Chinese culture.¹ Going into the 1990s, however, Culture Fever underwent an important change. The focus across the board shifted from prioritizing criticism

¹ See Chen Lai, “Sixiang chulu de san dongxiang,” in Gan Yang eds, *Culture Consciousness in 1980s*, Shanghai People's Publication House, 2006, 565.

of tradition to reaffirming and recognizing traditional culture, and what became known as the “Chinese studies fever” and “Confucian fever” then emerged. The 1990s saw a sudden renaissance of traditional Chinese culture, manifest not only in the proliferation of journals and book series, including the *Journal of Sinological Studies*² and *The Original Way*,³ but also in the appearance of organizations that used “national studies” [*guoxue*] in their official names.⁴ Reviving traditional culture became a common goal of the government, the academic community, and the people.

Behind the Chinese studies and Confucian fevers is a popular consciousness of the post-reform and opening up period. During the 1990s, the Chinese people experienced rejuvenation and uplift in all quarters and had the confidence to reexamine the manner in which we handled our own culture, as well as the cultures of others, over the last one hundred years. In particular, we had the confidence to reflect on modernization and the Enlightenment. As a result, our cultural identity became an important issue. Moreover, on account of this new confidence, we began to clear away the cultural radicalism of the twentieth century. On one hand, we could more objectively appraise cultural conservatism, and on the other, we could break from the limitations of the sweeping historical narratives of the past so that we could truly study traditional Chinese philosophy in an academic manner.

As some scholars have noted, a noteworthy feature of the 1990s was the withdrawal of ideology and the rise of academic research. However, a more accurate description would be that thinking opposed to tradition ebbed and a subsequent surge of specialized scholarship affirmed it. Figures such as Pang Pu and Li Zehou passed on the maxims of “reevaluating Confucius” and “reevaluating Confucianism” in the 1980s, and scholars followed in the following decade by beginning to reflect on the cultural radicalism and anti-traditionalism of the twentieth century. They then began to promote traditional culture, changing the manner in which they dealt with Confucianism. One particularly significant phenomenon from this decade is the deep enthusiasm

² The official English title for the *Journal of Sinological Studies* has been provided here, but it should be noted that the Chinese term translated “Sinology” is actually *guoxue* (“national learning” or “national studies”). —Trans.

³ The official English title for the *Journal of Sinological Studies* has been provided here, but it should be noted that the Chinese term translated “Sinology” is actually *guoxue* (“national learning” or “national studies”).—Trans.

⁴ See Shen Weirong, *The National Learning Revival in China* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2024). —Ed.

for Chen Yinke (1890–1969). In the image of Chen Yinke, who loved and preserved traditions, a large number of scholars reversed their previously radical attitudes toward traditional culture. Chen Yinke's outlook that scholarship ought to maintain culture and that one ought to manifest civilization through scholarship was also accepted and passed on by scholars. As a result, the scholarly world shifted from boisterous and lively intellectual discussion to silent and deep academic research. Following the advent of academic research as the dominant paradigm in Chinese philosophy, the 'creative transformation' of traditional Chinese philosophy emerged as a key objective and fundamental pursuit within the field of Chinese philosophical research. This entails a commitment to comprehensively and profoundly grasp the intricacies and depth of classical Chinese thought through silent and deep investigation into the historical evolution of Chinese philosophy, so as to explore the potential contributions and constructive applications of Chinese philosophy in shaping the future global intellectual landscape on the basis of dialogue with other civilizations.

Under the influence of these trends, scholarship on Chinese philosophy in the 1990s produced some of the field's now foundational works. First, some important discussions greatly expanded scholars' research horizons, which in turn spurred the transformation of lines of research. For example, after the introduction and initial discussion of Karl Jasper's Axial Age theory, scholars began to cast aside the monism of Western philosophy and reaffirmed Chinese philosophy from the perspective of pluralism. The academic community then discussed whether Confucianism ought to be conceptualized as a religion or a philosophy. This discussion led to a consensus that differed greatly from the past, that is, that Confucianism has its own religious quality. Second, a number of significant scholars have emerged since then, influencing the study of Chinese philosophy. They have established a series of academic fields of study and written a number of works that can be regarded as the classics of Chinese philosophical research in the past three decades. For instance, Zhu Bokun initiated an academic line of study that accorded equal significance to the philosophical and figurative dimensions of Yijing scholarship; Feng Qi pioneered the idea of developing a comprehensive philosophical system through an analysis of the history of philosophy; Meng Peiyuan, Chen Lai, Yang Guorong, and others established a research model for the interaction between text and thought in Song–Ming Neo–Confucianism; Fang Litian, Zhang Liwen, Li Cunshan, and others perfected the paradigm of the study of conceptual

categories in Chinese philosophy; Fang Keli, Zhang Xianglong, and others promoted the study of modern Chinese philosophy and comparative philosophy. Finally, increased emphasis on academic and professional standards in research on Chinese philosophy has helped form an academic community of researchers in the field, which strengthens the discipline of Chinese philosophy. Additionally, the training of new undergraduate and graduate students in the field of Chinese philosophy, the institutionalization of academic journals, and the regularization of academic conferences has all enabled the field of Chinese philosophy to take root in the academia of modern Chinese, producing valuable insights with each day. The fundamental work done in the 1990s enabled the twenty-first-century explosion of Chinese philosophy.

The Legitimacy of Chinese Philosophy

The early twenty-first-century debate over the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy is an important controversy that links the past to the future. The issue is not a new one since it was present at the discipline's beginning. The first work in the history of Chinese philosophy with modern significance—Hu Shi's *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy: Part 1* (published in 1919)—is considered a groundbreaking work in the field for the very reason that it uses Western philosophical systems and concepts to outline the history of Chinese philosophy. This is to say that his outline relies on Western philosophical forms. Within this outline Hu arranged the various scholars and lineages of the pre-Qin period that formed the foundation of the study of Masters' texts.⁵ He pared down the number of thinkers under consideration and began his analysis with Confucius and Laozi, discussing neither the primordial pre-Master period of Chinese philosophy nor the documents in which the thinking of this period was transmitted, known as the Six Classics.⁶ Behind this

⁵ The study of the Masters [*zixue*] is a branch of traditional Chinese scholarship focused on the study of Masters' Works [*zishu*], a collective term referring to canonical texts that were traditionally understood to have been authored by a single master or his disciples. Although the exact list of texts that were deemed worthy of this designation varied across historical periods, the core remained stable and centered around major pre-imperial intellectual figures such as Confucius ("Master Kong" *Kongzi*), Mencius ("Master Meng" *Mengzi*), Xunzi ("Master Xun" *Xunzi*), Mozi ("Master Mo" *Mozi*), Han Fei ("Master Han Fei" *Han Feizi*), and so forth. — Trans.

⁶ The Six Classics are the *Classic of Odes* [*Shijing*], *Classic of Documents* [*Shangshu* or *Shujing*], *Classic of Changes* [*Yijing*], *Annals of Springs and Autumns* [*Chunqiu*], *Classic of Rites* [*Liji*], and the now-lost *Classic of Music* [*Yueji*]. The pre-imperial primordial pre-Master period

approach was a wish to cut out classical studies, emphasize study of the Masters, and venerate philosophy. In his *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (1934) Feng Youlan divided the history of Chinese philosophy into a “Masters studies era” and a “classical studies era.”⁷ However, when Feng discussed the post-Qin and Han classical studies era, he did not pay close attention to the contents of the studies. Rather, he still relied on the attitudes and methods of the Masters’ Works period to explain the development of this historical period. Whether it was Wei-Jin Philosophy Studies, Jin-Tang Buddhism, or Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, Feng relied on the same methods in every case as those he used to discuss the philosophical lineages and ideas of the Masters studies era. He did not switch methodologies for a different era, which inevitably obscured some of the important philosophical problems and discussions at the core of the classical studies era. Responding to these issues, Jin Yuelin wrote in his “in-depth review” of Feng’s book: “Is this so-called history of Chinese philosophy a history of Chinese philosophy or a history of philosophy in China? . . . One approach would take Chinese philosophy as a specialized discipline of China’s national studies, which would mean there would be no problem of degrees of similarity and difference between it and what is commonly understood as philosophy. The other would take it as a species of philosophy discovered in China. . . . Mr. Feng’s attitude is to conceptualize the history of Chinese philosophy as the history of philosophy in China.”⁸ Both Hu and Feng were only able to choose the path of “philosophy in China,” using the Western philosophical lines of thinking in which they were well versed to sift through and analyze Chinese philosophy. Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, as well as later thinkers such as Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, all rely on some Western philosophical school or important historical figure to conceptualize Chinese philosophy. Even though the figures and schools on which they rely may differ—whether it is Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, John Dewey, or New Realism—their dependence on Western philosophical frameworks remains.

during which these texts were formed is roughly the late Shang through mid-Zhou dynasties, approximately the eleventh through the fifth centuries BCE. —Trans.

⁷ This is to say that in his intellectual history of China Feng identified the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE–220 CE) dynasties as a transformational era separating the Masters studies era that preceded it from a classical studies era that followed it. —Trans.

⁸ Jin Yuelin, “Shencha baogao er” [In-depth review two], in *Zhongguo zhixue shi* [A History of Chinese Philosophy], Feng Youlan (Shanghai: Huadong zhifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 436–37.

This tension between “Chinese philosophy” and “philosophy in China” finally sparked a debate on the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its fundamental questions include: Did China truly have philosophy? What are the forms of Chinese philosophy? What are the special characteristics of Chinese philosophy?⁹ The participants in this debate have approached these issues from multiple angles, three of which will be considered here.

First, some scholars propose that after experiencing close to one hundred years of development, Chinese philosophy ought to switch from “using the West to explain China” to “using China to explain China.” They believe that the Chinese academic discipline of philosophy, in the modern sense of the term, has had too large an influence from Western philosophy. However, research in Chinese philosophy is without the means to truly discuss Chinese philosophy itself, and the product of this research has not been enough to produce an accurate description or deep understanding of Chinese philosophy. Therefore, they then propose that research in Chinese philosophy ought to reject reference to Western philosophy and completely return to an awareness of the problematics, ideologies and theories, and manners of expression intrinsic to Chinese philosophy. They believe that researching Chinese philosophy must be a process of “using China to explain China” and using “Chinese words for a Chinese explanation.” This sort of theoretical outcry has its positive aspects, namely emphasizing the particular nature of Chinese philosophy for the purpose of breaking free from over a century’s worth of academic domination and linguistic hegemony from Western philosophy. Going forward, it will be possible to traverse an intellectual path based on the unique problematics and distinctive thought that are particular to Chinese philosophy. However, at the same time, this sort of intense rejection of Western philosophy contains within it a denial of the universality of philosophy, and it is perhaps quite likely that this sort of denial will lead to our research in Chinese philosophy becoming insufficiently professional and insufficiently scholarly in nature. As

⁹ Regarding this debate on the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, some scholars have reflected on the development of Chinese philosophy in articles looking back on the forty years since reform and opening up in the late 1970s or the seventy since the founding of the New China. See: Li Cunshan, “Zhongguo zhexue yanjiu 40 nian” [40 years of research in Chinese philosophy], in *Zhongguo zhexue nianjian (2018 juan)* [Chinese Philosophical Almanac: 2018] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2019), 24–26; Wang Zhongjiang and Yao Yurui, “Quzhe, zhuanbian yu xin jinzhan—Zhongguo zhexue 70 nian yanjiu licheng huigu” [Twists, turns, and new developments: A review of the 70 years of research on Chinese philosophy], *Shehui kexue zhanxian*, no. 8 (2019): 14–16.

a result, plans may backfire, and the field may be left without the means to take the place it ought to have within the global academic community. Second, some scholars have pointed out that the issue of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy is actually rooted in how we understand philosophy. More specifically, the issue is whether philosophy has a single form (exemplified by the philosophy of Western civilization) or many forms (i.e., Chinese, Indian, Islamic, etc.). As a result, the conversations about philosophical pluralism and multiculturalism became important issues for discussion. Many scholars use Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance to explain the diversity of philosophies, while other scholars use the ancient Chinese concepts of general, categorized, and specific names to conceptualize the plurality of philosophies. Indeed, Zhang Dainian has included an excellent discussion of this in the preface to his *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*: "We can also consider 'philosophy' to be a generic term, rather than referring exclusively to Western philosophy. One can say that there is a type of learning, of which one special form is Western philosophy, that can be generally called 'philosophy.' . . . Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy may differ with respect to fundamental attitudes; however, with respect to the problems and objects they consider and their positions among the various academic disciplines in their traditions, they are similar."¹⁰ This is to say, Chinese and Western philosophy are both concerned with the fundamental issues of the cosmos and life, but there are major differences in their outlooks and modes of expression: the same point is seen in the creation of the very term "Chinese philosophy"; the difference is seen in the characteristics unique to Chinese philosophy. From this debate on conceptualizing philosophy, dialogues between various civilizations—such as Confucian and Christian, Confucian and Islamic, Daoist and Christian, or Chinese and Indian—have, with the encouragement of Tu Weiming (the Dean of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University), become a trend within the Chinese academic community. Correspondingly, studies on topics like comparative philosophy are also ascendent within the Chinese philosophical community. This line of thinking—attempting to solve the problem of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy through philosophical pluralism—is of great significance, as it is not simply explaining Chinese philosophy in terms of Chinese philosophy, but rather

¹⁰ Zhang Dainian, *Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang* [An outline of the history of Chinese philosophy], vol. 2 of *Zhang Dainian quanji* [The complete works of Zhang Dainian] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1996), 2–3.

pushing for a fundamental change in philosophical perspective. And in an era where civilizations alternate between clashes and dialogues, this line of thinking has become a worldwide philosophical trend. However, we ought to recognize that this sort of pluralistic philosophical outlook risks making philosophy insipid and shallow—and is also likely to inhibit the depth of philosophy for the sake of prioritizing its diversity. These are the pitfalls we must navigate when reflecting on philosophical pluralism and discussing philosophical multiculturalism.

Third, some scholars have pointed out that when researching Chinese philosophy, we must first clearly state that Chinese philosophy is not a systematic philosophy in the Western style, nor especially in the classical German style, but rather it is a philosophy with a particular focus on annotation and exegesis. Therefore, when choosing our references to Western philosophy, we must be very careful. A group of scholars find scholarship on Western hermeneutics to be important ideological reference materials, attempting to use “Chinese exposition / Chinese hermeneutics / Chinese exegesis” to speak on Chinese philosophy. Along such lines, we see an attempt to carry out a wonderful transition between antiquity and modernity for both China and the West: unlike thinkers such as Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, or Mou Zongsan, whose philosophical backgrounds could not accommodate classical studies, Chinese hermeneutics is indeed very well suited to explain classical studies, which occupies such an important position in Chinese intellectual history. Unlike those scholars who insist on taking Chinese philosophy as the standard and fiercely rejecting Western philosophy, Chinese hermeneutics actively absorbs the ideological theories and philosophical methods of figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Leo Strauss and then places them in dialogue with the exegetical methods and hermeneutical principles native to Chinese philosophy. Unlike the treatment of exegetical methods and hermeneutical principles in ancient Chinese philosophy, which were insufficient in self-consciousness and inadequate in scholarly reflection, Chinese hermeneutics consciously explores the deep philosophical meaning and methodological systems contained within exegesis of the classical canon, thus allowing for truly philosophical interpretation. Unlike the past century of research findings in Chinese philosophy, which emphasized the so-called developmental logic of a philosopher’s thought or the evolutionary protocols of the history of philosophy, Chinese hermeneutics pays closer attention to the creation and continuation of the classical canon, as well as the unceasing emergence and

unfurling of argumentation around the canon. One can see that Chinese hermeneutics is attempting to bring about a wholly new transformation in Chinese philosophical research. Of course, at present the research findings that this approach has produced remain preliminary. Some topics under exploration include: the still important question of how one ought to understand the exegetical methods used in ancient Chinese philosophy; where similarities and differences between the hermeneutic principles of ancient Chinese philosophy and the explanatory principles of Western hermeneutics lie; and whether increased emphasis on the hermeneutic tradition will ultimately detract from the study of systematic thinking and theories within Chinese philosophy. Chinese hermeneutics is an exploratory attempt by some scholars to find a useful line of thinking and practical methodologies to address the issue of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, but it cannot fundamentally solve it.

Through this review of three approaches to solving this problem, one sees that although the discussion of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy brings with it pitfalls or even falsity, it has indeed also brought about an awakening of subjectivity in Chinese philosophy. That is to say, researchers in Chinese philosophy have, to a greater or lesser degree, cast aside their dependence on Western philosophy and have begun to conduct research in Chinese philosophy with a greater sense of subjectivity. Of course, we are not saying that it is necessary to completely reject Western philosophy, but in order to understand Chinese philosophy more profoundly and authentically, we must shift from the earlier complete formal reliance on Western philosophy to an approach that treats it as a body of methodological references and intellectual materials.

The Revival of Classical Studies and Ritual Studies

After the discussions about the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, a key issue confronted Chinese philosophical community. In traditional Chinese scholarship, much of the material that focuses on the fundamental issues of life and the cosmos does not appear in Masters' Works but is rather found in the texts of classical studies or literary anthologies and even works classified as histories. This means that the approaches of figures such as Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, Mou Zongsan, and Tang Junyi, –who used the study of Masters' Works as the template for conducting research in Chinese philosophy–were greatly limited. In response, over the past two decades, the Chinese philosophical academic community has led a resurgence of research in classical studies. Lü Simian has

commented on the relationship between the classics and Masters' Works: "As for the disciplines that study humanity, each must have its object of research. Books that primarily record phenomena are histories. Those that inquire into phenomena and invent axioms are classics and Masters' Works. . . . Classics and Masters' Works are fundamentally the same thing. Confucianism has been especially esteemed since the Han dynasty. Therefore, among the books of the various masters, those written by Confucian masters are called 'classics,' but these sorts of opinions need not be preserved today."¹¹ Therefore, when we research Chinese philosophy in the present day, there is no longer a need to maintain a division between classical studies and Masters' Works studies or to be obstinate about which group of texts is more philosophical. Moreover, since the Qin and Han began the era of classical studies, the philosophical texts being studied and the specific research methods being used naturally ought to closely match those found in classical studies itself. If scholars adhere to the philosophical perspectives, research methods, and choice of research objects of scholars like Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, and Mou Zongsan, they will not have access to the full, accurate content and varied intellectual materials of the Chinese philosophical tradition, and it will be difficult to create a new Chinese philosophy with Chinese characteristics. Of course, because of research in Chinese hermeneutics being so influenced by Western hermeneutics, the rebirth of research in classical studies in recent years cannot escape the influence of Western philosophy. In a sense, research in classical studies has gained a greater sense of validity within philosophical research circles precisely because of the "blessing" of hermeneutics.

In further exploring the reasons for the revival of research on classical studies, we discover another question of great importance to Chinese philosophy: When did Chinese philosophy begin? That is to say, what was Chinese thought like in the era preceding that of the pared down Masters' Works studies era of Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, which might be called the pre-Masters era? This is the period during which the Six Classics were formed, and, in another sense, it might be considered a classical studies era, when the Six Classics were not only interpreted but when they were created. To understand this era, one must rely on the Six Classics and breathe new life into classical studies, and such a revival is also necessary for the exploration of the sources of

¹¹ Lü Simian, *Jingzi jieti* [Introductory notes on the classics and master texts] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1995), 1.

Chinese philosophy.¹² Another reason that this revival is essential for research in Chinese philosophy is that once the field of Chinese philosophy is able to look squarely at the intellectual resources provided by classical studies, it will itself grow richer. “*Classic of Documents Studies*” and “*Spring and Autumn Annals Studies*” explore the philosophies of politics and history, “*Classic of Odes Studies*” explores the philosophies of art and education, “*Classic of Changes Studies*” explores cosmology and the philosophy of history, and “*Rites Studies*” explores the philosophy of humanity and politics. Therefore, without in-depth scrutiny of classical studies, not only will we overlook many important discussions and even key issues in Chinese philosophy, but we will also ignore many differences in intellectual orientations and modes of thinking between Chinese and Western philosophy.

Research in classical studies has thus blossomed in recent years within the discipline of Chinese philosophy, and neglected experts in classical studies throughout the history of Chinese philosophy have received due attention. These premodern experts include Zheng xuan He Xiu, Kong Yingda, Ruan Yuan, Jiao Xun, Liao Ping and Pi Xirui. Researchers in Chinese philosophy have published a number of important monographs. Examples of general histories of specific classical works include Jiang Guanghui’s *An Intellectual History of Chinese Classics*, which presents the intellectual lines of development throughout classical studies, *A History of the Studies on the Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, *A History of the Studies on the Classic of Filial Piety*, and *Academic History of the Classic of Rites*. Publications on the development of a specific classic during a certain period or on the thoughts of a particular classicist are too many to be counted. Previously, Classical Studies of the Han dynasty period received little attention within the research traditions of the history of Chinese philosophy, and yet the Han intellectual legacy to a large extent shaped Chinese philosophy in the thousand years that ensued. For this reason, over the last thirty years, the academic community has performed in-depth studies on Classical Studies of the Han dynasty period represented by Dong Zhongshu and Gongyang Studies, and even apocryphal texts of that period. Qing thought did not attract much attention from those

¹² Research on the period of “proto-Chinese philosophy” has become a hot topic within the academic community in recent years. Works such as Li Zehou’s *From Witchcraft to Rituals: Explaining the Rites to Return to Humaneness* (2015), Yu Yingshi’s *Between Heaven and Man: An Inquiry into the Origins of Ancient Chinese Thought* (2014), and Yu Dunkang’s *Chinese Religion and Culture: Volume Two* (2005) provide important discussions of this topic.

conducting research into the history of philosophy because it was closely related to classical studies. However, over the last few years, many schools of classical studies and famous scholars of the Qing Dynasty have been subjected to a period of reevaluation and reinterpretation by the academic community. This process of re-evaluation is paying particular attention to the relevance of the Qing Dynasty Confucianism to the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, as well as its significance as the beginning of the development of modern thought. In short, classical studies has already become an important subfield within research on Chinese philosophy.

Research in classical studies within the discipline of Chinese philosophy has now been going on for some time, but the relationship between Chinese philosophy and the traditional Chinese discipline of historical studies is a new research trend that has emerged over the last few years. The emergence and development of the fields of Chinese philosophy and the history of Chinese philosophy have been inextricably linked with Chinese historical studies as can be seen in the sizable portion of the contents related to Chinese philosophy in *Critiques of Ancient History*.¹³ The school that formed around *Critiques of Ancient History* was closely tied to many other researchers in Chinese philosophy at the time. Research on Chinese philosophy during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) also echoed research on Chinese history done by historians such as Qian Mu and Chen Yinke. Both were attempting to explain the old China in order to create a new China. In recent years, Ge Zhaoguang's and Xu Hong's research on the formation of ancient China and "the reason China is China" has to a large extent emerged out of the deep connection between Chinese philosophy and historical studies. Within the traditional Chinese academic world, the classics and the histories have been even more closely tied, as the following sayings show: "the Six Classics are all histories" (*General Principles of Literature and History: Responding to a Guest's Questions, Part 1*), and "There were no fixed forms in the writings of the ancients, no division between classic and history." (*General Principles of Literature and History: Biography*) The taxonomy for the Six Category bibliographic system (Classics, Philosophy, Literature, Military, Occultism, Technology) within

¹³ *Critiques of Ancient History* [*Gushi bian*] is a multivolume collection of essays on Chinese historiography, edited by Gu Jiegang, Luo Genze, and Lü Simian. The volumes were originally published between 1926 and 1941 and were considered central texts of the so-called doubting antiquity school of the early twentieth century, during which modern Chinese intellectuals began to strongly oppose the historical narratives and historiographical methods they inherited from the imperial era. —Trans.

the “Monograph on Literature” in the *History of the Han* does not include a separate section for historical studies; rather, historical studies is included as a subsection “Studies on the Spring and Autumn Annals.” One can then say that historical studies originated from classical studies, and that in the later eras, as the histories continued to grow, historical studies gained an independent status and significance as a category in the Four Category bibliographic system (Classics, History, Philosophy, Literature). In the minds of many scholars after the Ming and Qing dynasties, the reason that classical studies is important is that the argumentation and axioms it probes are related to why “China is China.” Therefore, classical studies also be understood to be historical studies. According to Jiang Quan, “As for the Six Classics, they are the grand histories of the founders of our lands as they expanded the frontiers and opened up new lands through hard work and careful planning, as if they were our own progenitors. . . . Although the Six Classics are traces of a distant past, they are boons to later generations. Although they are records of facts, hidden within them are scholarly truths.”¹⁴

One can see that historical studies and classical studies are inseparable from one another. For this reason, the rebirth of research on classical studies would naturally highlight the link between historical studies and Chinese philosophy. As Gan Chunsong and Chen Bisheng have written, “classical studies, as the source and core of classical Chinese civilization, is precisely the foothold upon which we might once more base the understanding of our national character, as well as the basis upon which we might once again understand our history.”¹⁵ In the minds of many scholars working today, research on classical studies carries with it a heavy connotation of historical studies, especially if their purpose in researching classical studies is to restore an understanding of China. In this academic context, more and more researchers of Chinese philosophy, or even philosophy in general, have begun to delve into historical studies to seek out a deeper understanding of China. As Zhao Tingyang has written, scholars “attempt to provide a philosophical explanation for the historicity of China . . . using philosophical methods to discuss and reflect on what may be called China.” The premise that underlies their thinking is precisely

¹⁴ Jiang Quan, *Xinti jingxue jiangyi* [Lecture notes on new style classics] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2014), 1.

¹⁵ Gan Chunsong and Chen Bisheng, “Preface,” in *Jingxue yanjiu di yi ji: Jingxue de xin kaizhan* [Research in classical studies, part 1: New developments in classical studies] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2012), 1–2.

that “the essence of the Chinese world is the unity of the classics and the histories; classics and history join together to form Chinese world's inner and outer layers.”¹⁶ In other words, philosophy appears no longer as systematic theory but as methodology. Scholars avail themselves of this methodology in order to be able to penetrate the grand course of China's history, reaching the historicity of its core— “the reason China is China” (e.g., in Zhao Tingyang's *The Making and Becoming of China*). When we conduct research on Chinese philosophy in this way, we are no longer fixated on disputes over the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, that is, whether we are writing histories of “Chinese philosophy” or of “philosophy in China.” Rather, with a deep self-consciousness and confident self-awareness, we face philosophy and China. Because of this, research on ritual studies is also experiencing a revival within research on Chinese philosophy. For example, Qinghua University, Peking University, and Hunan University have established research groups specializing in ritual studies, and scholars specializing in ritual studies, such as Cao Yu-anbi and Zhang Xigong, have entered the field of Chinese philosophy.¹⁷ Ritual studies had been called decadent and backward continuously over the last hundred years, which makes its current ascension obviously significant. Its revival within Chinese philosophy, however, has not been accidental but rather is the product of the combined influence of research in classical and historical studies. First, classical studies contains within it study of the Three Ritual Classics, so a field as deeply intertwined with classical studies as ritual studies would naturally draw the attention of the scholarly community. Second, ritual studies was of great importance in traditional China. As Liu Yizheng writes: “As for the rites, they are the core of all of the thousands of years of our country's history.”¹⁸ And, therefore, the scope of research for historical studies certainly extends to ritual studies. Liu Yizheng continues:

Ritual is the core of our nation's history. Our heroes, religions, and material society changed with the times, yet they were all driven by certain rules that were linked to human rationality. They did not become part of history by

¹⁶ Zhao Tingyang, “Preface,” in *Hui ci Zhongguo* [The making and becoming of China] (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2016), 1.

¹⁷ For the development of ritual studies in recent years, see Wu Fei, “Dangqian de lixue yanjiu yu weilai yuqi” [Current research on ritual studies and future plans], in *Zhongguo zhexue nianjian (2015 juan)* [Almanac of Chinese philosophy: 2015] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), 91–99.

¹⁸ Liu Yizheng, *Guoshi yaoyi* [Essentials of Chinese history] (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 12.

accident. . . . The rise of our people is not without martial achievements, not without religion, not without law, nor indeed is it without material goods. Our difference from other societies is that we care not about chasing after the historical models of other peoples; instead, we meticulously hold onto unfulfilled rituals and apply them to human relations and daily life. When we study history, how can we not trace the origin of our society and carefully evaluate its advantages and disadvantages?¹⁹

Ritual studies is not only an important foundation for the development of Chinese history; it is also an important aspect of rational behavior for the Chinese people. Therefore, it has had a dual nature connected to both historical and classical studies in traditional academics and is now a field that cannot be ignored by the rationality-focused discipline of philosophy. For this reason, research in Chinese philosophy should not be kept separate from historical or even ritual studies. The evolution of Chinese philosophical research topics from Masters' Works studies to classical studies and then from historical studies to ritual studies should be recognized as an inevitable trend in the development of Chinese philosophy itself. Such a development will show more clearly the vibrant and unique character of Chinese philosophy.

Developments in Chinese Philosophy

Propelled by the discussion over the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, the revival of classical studies and the renewal of ritual studies, together, can be regarded as either an irritated response to research in traditional Chinese philosophy or as the spontaneous rebirth of traditional Chinese philosophy. Either way, after dedicating a tremendous amount of effort to improving academic standards, the field has undergone a deep and profound development. Four important aspects of this development will be considered here: the expansion of historical categories; the excavation of early manuscripts and the return of ancient documents from overseas collections; the specialization of research that takes the philosophy of the Masters' Works, Wei-Jin Philosophy Studies, and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism as representative of traditional Chinese philosophy; and a changed perspective on modern Chinese philosophy. In addition, scholars have reflected on methodological matters in the study of philosophy, which we consider as well.

¹⁹ Liu Yizheng, *Guoshi yaoyi*, 13–25.

First, the history of Chinese philosophical categories has seen further expansion since the 1980s. In the first half the twentieth century, Zhang Dainian wrote *A General Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, which attracted attention in the 1980s, alongside his 1989 *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*.²⁰ These works guided research for a time, and a large number of books was published on the history of Chinese philosophical categories. The research paradigm of conceptual categories is instrumental in accurately understanding the ancient and modern evolution of a certain ideology in traditional Chinese philosophy. With such comprehensive understanding, it is possible to make comparisons with relevant ideas in Western philosophy. This research paradigm thus has the dual value of contributing to the history of philosophy and to the field of philosophy itself. It has therefore become a classic paradigm for the study of Chinese philosophy. Although this paradigm has remained the standard in research on Chinese philosophy, scholars have gradually expanded the earliest divisions (ontology, cosmology, theories of life, and epistemology) to include theories of the mind–heart and human nature, effort, principles and material force, motion and stillness, Heaven and man, historicism, and governance and administration—categories more closely aligned with Chinese characteristics.²¹ This expansion accords with Chinese philosophy’s own structure and uniqueness. Of course, this type of research has its limitations. When researchers confine themselves within the boundaries of a single independent category, they cannot draw out the interrelations between concepts or to combine the special features of their categories. Nonetheless, this sort of research paradigm will help to directly grasp the core of Chinese philosophy, and for this reason, its importance cannot be easily cast aside.

Second, research on newly excavated manuscripts has become a hot topic in Chinese philosophy over the last thirty years.²² The Guodian Chu slips, excavated in the 1990s, set off a wave of research on excavated documents, with some scholars even believing that the bamboo slips allow us to revise the histories of scholarship and philosophy. Among the Guodian Chu slips are not only original works on Huanglao Daoist cosmology like “The High One

²⁰ Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

²¹ The representative work on this topic is Li Cunshan, *Zhongguo chuantong zhhexue gangyao* [An outline of traditional Chinese philosophy] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008).

²² See Huang, Dekuan, and Cheng, *Bamboo and Silk Documents and the Development of Chinese Humanities* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2024). —Ed.

Gives Birth to the Waters,” but also different manuscript versions of the *Laozi*. There is a piece titled “Five Phases” that supplements Mencian Five Phases discourse, as well as a panoply of pieces that enrich Confucian thought between Confucius and Mencius, such as “One’s Nature Emerges from the Mandate,” “Poverty and Wealth Based on the Times,” and “The Way of Tang and Yu.” The Guodian Chu slips are indeed a treasure trove of materials for research on pre-Qin thought and philosophy. For this reason, scholars from around the country like Pang Pu and Li Xueqin, to Chen Lai, Li Cunshan, Liao Mingchun, Ding Sixing, Liang Tao, Guo Yi and others have all conducted varied and in-depth research on them. Their work indeed has markedly changed the nature of our understanding of pre-Qin philosophy. Subsequently, other collections of Chu-era slips at institutions like the Shanghai Museum, Qinghua University, and Peking University began to appear. Although there are competing interpretations and understandings of these materials, they have greatly enriched our understanding of pre-Qin philosophy. Among these materials, the Chu-era slips at Qinghua University led the Chinese philosophical community to recognize that the significance of Huanglao thought in the pre-Qin period had not been sufficiently acknowledged in previous scholarship on the history of Chinese philosophy. Therefore, in recent years, scholars like Wang Zhongjiang, Cao Feng, Li Rui, Zheng Kai and a group of other young and middle-aged scholars have all conducted in-depth studies on Huanglao thought. The research on newly excavated manuscripts plays an important role in our understanding of pre-Qin philosophy. In addition to addressing numerous gaps in our knowledge of this period, it also enables us to resolve some of the enduring mysteries that have perplexed scholars for centuries. Furthermore, it allows us to perceive the diversity and depth of the collision of the thoughts of the pre-Qin scholars and how they strove to construct a pluralistic and integrated philosophical form when contemplating the present and directing their gaze towards the future.

The third important development is that research on the philosophy of the pre-Qin Masters, Wei-Jin Philosophy Studies, and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism have all grown significantly in depth and sophistication. With regard to pre-Qin philosophy, many studies on texts such as the *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Han Feizi* have been conducted in recent years. Consider Peking University’s research on the *Zhuangzi*. Since Liu Xiaogan published *The Philosophy of the Zhuangzi and Its Evolution* in the 1980s, the

philosophy department at Peking University has continuously prioritized research on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*. In recent years, Wang Bo, Zheng Kai, and Yang Lihua have each published research on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*, all of which has greatly advanced understanding of the *Zhuangzi* with respect to both philosophical depth and, more generally, intellectual history. With regard to the *Xunzi*, the academic community has in recent years cast off its prior research models that were fixated on the *Xunzi*'s discussions of heaven and human nature, turning to more general explorations of the *Xunzi*'s moral and political philosophy. Liao Mingchun, Lin Honggg, and Liang Tao have all made important innovations in this field.

With regard to Wei-Jin Philosophy Studies, although the field has not broken the grip of Tang Yongtong's research paradigms, there have been innovations with respect to perspectives of understanding. For example, Yu Dunkang closely weaves together intellectual trends in Philosophy Studies with accounts of contemporary social and spiritual conditions, using a deep historical perspective to explore the real motivations for the development of intellectual trends in Philosophy Studies. He thereby moves Philosophy Studies from a philosophy of ontology to a phenomenology of spirit that is closely linked with social history of politics. Zhu Hanmin provides a link between the New Daoism of Philosophy Studies and the New Confucianism of Neo-Confucianism, with respect to the study of mind and body, the study of inborn nature, exegesis of the classics, study of the *Analects*, and study of the *Classic of Changes*. Wang Baoxuan synthesizes the philosophy of the Han and Jin dynasties to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the philosophical contributions of the Wei-Jin Philosophy, as well as the extent to which these philosophical perspectives influence academic content including classical studies.

Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism has been the hottest field of research in Chinese philosophy for the last thirty years, with the attention of the academic community focused on many figures, ranging from the lineage that includes Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan, Wang Yangming, and Wang Fuzhi to major figures related to the history of the development of Neo-Confucianism such as Fan Zhongyan, Sima Guang, Su Shi, Wang Anshi, Li Gou, Chen Liang, Wang Tingxiang, and Fang Yizhi, and other figures important in the overall intellectual context such as Hu

Hong, Zhang Shi, Chen Xianzhang, Luo Qinshun, Zhan Ruoshui, Wang Ji, Liu Zongzhou, and Huang Zongxi. Even more marginal figures in prior studies of Chinese philosophy, such as the disciples of Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming, have all been studied. A significant number of scholars, represented by Meng Peiyuan, Zhang Liwen, Chen Lai, Zhang Xuezhi, and Wu Zhen have all published classic works in this field. It bears noting that the study of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism has consistently constituted a prominent and extensively investigated domain within the field of Chinese philosophical studies, since it experienced a resurgence of interest in the 1980s. The reason for this situation is multi-faceted. Firstly, the development of the printing press has resulted in a vast corpus of literature from the Song and Ming dynasties, offering significant scope for further study. Secondly, in light of "The Tang-Song Transformation Theory" and other historical theories, the relationship between Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and modern Chinese philosophy has been re-examined. This has resulted in a reevaluation of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, which is no longer perceived as "corrupt and backward." Instead, it is now regarded as a "precursor" of classical China's transition to modern China. Thirdly, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism represents the intellectual pinnacle of traditional Chinese philosophy. Its contributions to ontology, metaphysics, the theory of mind, the theory of gongfu, and even political philosophy and moral philosophy can be regarded as the most profound and sophisticated expressions of traditional Chinese thought.

Of course, with this profusion in scholarship, a problem can arise when the growing trend towards too fine a focus that may obscure the problematics and philosophical context of a more general exploration of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism.

Fourth and finally, research on modern Chinese philosophy has undergone tremendous change over the last thirty years in its outlook. Before the 1990s, The development of modern Chinese philosophy has largely manifested in a negative and regressive manner. However, with the awakening of subjectivity in Chinese philosophy, our understanding of modern Chinese philosophy has undergone tremendous change. One important change has been the reevaluation of the philosophical thought of a group of thinkers from the late Qing and early Republican periods, including figures such as Kang Youwei, Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Pi Xirui, Liu Shipei, and even Hu Shi, Feng Youlan,

He Lin, and Jin Yuelin. In previous accounts of the history of Chinese philosophy, most of these figures were described in the context of being advanced or backward, radical or conservative, and reformist or revolutionary. This kind of simplistic and mechanical discourse was unable to adequately describe the vortex of thoughts that emerged in the late Qing and Republican periods in China. For this reason, since the 1990s, scholars have begun to cast off this binary discourse and reevaluate the scholars of the period for the sake of finding a “sympathetic understanding” of their pursuits of modernization, Chinese prosperity, and the rejuvenation of the Chinese people from a variety of perspectives and at a variety of levels. For example, Gan Chunsong’s study about Kang Youwei (1858–1927), as well as Zhang Zhiqiang’s study of Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936), have both profoundly changed the general understanding of the two most important intellectuals of this time. Other works like Wang Zhongjiang’s study of Yang Fu (1853–1921), Chen Lai’s study of Feng Youlan (1895–1990), and Zhang Xuezhi’s study of He Lin (1902–1992) have also enriched our understanding of the complex spectrum of thinking that existed during this era. Because we have begun to face head-on the tragedy and hardiness in the history of the Chinese people, we are able to awaken our own consciousness to the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy and to create an even more vibrant field of Chinese philosophy, perhaps creating a new Chinese philosophy.

Another important change occurred after the introduction and rediscovery of New Confucianism during the 1980s, when research on Chinese philosophy underwent a deep developmental process that began with New Confucianism and eventually surpassed it. During the “national studies fever” and “Confucian fever” of the 1990s, New Confucianism became an ideological symbol, or even standard, for a more modern and more academic form of Confucianism. Therefore, over the next two decades, the study of New Confucianism became a hot topic for the academic community, with scholars like Fang Keli, Guo Qiyong and Yan Binggang publishing many important research findings on this topic. However, after the debate about the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy, many challenged the excessive Western philosophical influence that is contained within New Confucianism, and critiquing and even surpassing New Confucianism became a major focus. Yang Zebo and Tang Wenming all have discussed this matter in depth. On one hand we need to recognize proponents of New Confucianism, because their intellectual depth and their efforts to “summon the soul” of traditional Chinese culture have influenced a

large number of scholars both philosophically and personally. On the other hand, we must also recognize the limitations of New Confucianism, namely that its adherents are excessively fettered by the twin issues of democracy and science, such that they cannot calmly conduct research on, or interpret the history of, Chinese philosophy. This leads their philosophical thought and exegesis to become overly reticent and unable to fully describe the richness and uniqueness of Chinese philosophy. A significant issue with modern Neo-Confucianism is its excessive reliance on Western philosophical traditions, which results in an interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy that is overly influenced by Western perspectives. For instance, Mou Zongsan's interpretation of Confucianism through the lens of Kantian philosophy, though it does shed light on certain philosophical characteristics and the depth of Confucian thought, ultimately reduces classical Confucianism to a mere reflection of Kantian philosophy, without due consideration for the multifaceted nature and distinctive rationale inherent to Confucianism. This results in a progressively narrower and less robust theoretical power of interpretation, which is why modern Neo-Confucianism ultimately lacks the requisite strength. For this reason, we must surpass New Confucianism to truly apprehend the unique characteristics of Chinese philosophy and allow the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy to stand tall, or else we will only be able to dance in an awkward manner constrained by the unnecessary shackles.

In short, these developments show how research on Chinese philosophy over the past thirty years has greatly expanded in scope and grown more refined in focus. This growth has led to a major renovation in our understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy and has laid a solid foundation for the creation of a new Chinese philosophy in the future.

Another important consideration is how scholars have begun to consciously reflect on the methodologies of Chinese philosophy in the hopes of finding a methodological foundation for the future development of Chinese philosophy. Let us consider just the most recent scholarly reflections. Chen Shaoming, for instance, has advocated “doing Chinese philosophy,”²³ by which he means casting aside the Western philosophical style when analyzing Chinese thought and instead directly using philosophy as a method to study the

23 Chen Shaoming, *Zuo Zhongguo zhexue: Yixie fangfalun de sikao* [Doing Chinese philosophy: A few thoughts on methodology] (Beijing: Shenghuo, Dushu, Xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2015).

traditional Chinese canon and its own major questions. Such a change in method would allow for Chinese philosophy to develop an immediate power. His “doing Chinese philosophy” addresses the limitations of traditional research on Chinese philosophy from a methodological perspective and stresses that research on Chinese philosophy must itself be philosophical. In other words, as researchers of Chinese philosophy, we must also engage in philosophical work. One must partake in the creation of philosophy in order to “do Chinese philosophy.” For Chen Shaoming, such a change will not only lead to the teasing out of more intellectual material from the Chinese tradition, but it will also allow the experience and spirit of the Chinese tradition to influence modern philosophy. Chinese philosophy would gain more power through its elevation of the spiritual quality of modern life.

Li Jinglin believes that philosophical methodology and content are unified, such that the methodology of Chinese philosophy ought to rely on its content, in contrast to Western philosophy.²⁴ He emphasizes “restoring methodology to content,” which means emphasizing that the methodology of modern Chinese philosophy must be imported holistically and creatively from the academic traditions of Chinese thought. Therefore, he argues that research methods for classical studies and philosophy do not contradict one another (in relation to researching modern Chinese philosophy) but are complementary. Others scholars point out that any effective and qualified research on Chinese philosophy must first pass an analysis of its internal logic against norms and standards. Otherwise, some research on Chinese philosophy may become too broad and degenerate into declarations of religious faith, educational materials (for national studies) that affirm cultural populism, or distorted interpretations of ancient thought stemming from arbitrary prejudice. In other words, the study of Chinese philosophy should always adhere to the highest standards of professionalism and scholarship. As a modern academic discipline, Chinese philosophy is first and foremost a field of rigorous academic inquiry. It is imperative that we do not diminish the study of Chinese philosophy to a mere popularization of ideas or a pan-cultural discussion.

Among these varied reflections there are shared implications, namely that Chinese philosophy is an academic field with its own unique research sub-fields in accord with the standards of modern academic professionalism, that it

²⁴ Li Jinglin, “Jiang fangfa shougui neirong—Zhongguo zhexue yanjiu fangfa zhi fansi” [Incorporating methods into content: Reflections on research methods in Chinese philosophy, *Tianjin shehui kexue*, no. 2 (2019): 27–32.

possesses its own academic context, and that it is constantly reinventing itself. On the one hand, therefore, this academic research is not arbitrarily conducted, tailored, or interpreted, but, rather, it requires its own corresponding philosophical foundation, academic training, and review of literature. But on the other, this academic research possesses its own internal developmental momentum, and it is always open, “constantly renewing.” This kind of openness, which insists on subjectivity, has enabled research on Chinese philosophy to produce such a brilliant bloom of philosophical findings over the past thirty or so years, what we might call a new systematic creation of Chinese philosophy.

The Creation of a New Chinese Philosophy

Over these thirty years of profound development, the subjective consciousness of Chinese philosophy has awoken and bloomed ever brighter. The result is the creation of many different forms of new Chinese philosophy. Following nearly three decades of intensive academic inquiry and philosophical discourse between China and the global community, a distinctive Chinese philosophical tradition that truly belongs to modern China is emerging. Unlike previous studies of Chinese philosophy, which concentrated on historical analysis, contemporary Chinese philosophy is shifting its focus towards systematic and rational philosophical inquiry. This shift aims to address contemporary issues, gain insight into Chinese culture, and engage in constructive dialogue about global civilization and the future. The work of scholars such as Chen Lai, Yang Guorong, Ding Yun, Sun Xiangchen, Ni Peimin, Huang Yong, Zhang Xianglong and others forms the true debut of Chinese philosophy in a spectacular and globally influential manner.

Chen Lai’s *The Ontology of Ren* was a philosophical leap in two important respects.²⁵ First, in place of the important proposition in modern Chinese thought that “freedom is the foundation,” Chen Lai proposes “*ren* ontology.”²⁶ “Freedom is the foundation” is a slogan that emerged not so long ago in

²⁵ Chen Lai, *The Ontology of Ren* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2014). English translation: *The Ontology of Confucius Jen (Humanity)*, trans. Chunlan Jin (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2022).

²⁶ As *ren* was one of the central virtues (and therefore topics of discussion) of premodern Chinese thought, it is impossible to provide both a succinct and complete translation of the term. It has meant too much to too many different people and groups. However, its core meaning concerns an innate desire to cooperate with and care for another person. For this reason, it is often translated as “humaneness” or “benevolence.”—Trans.

China to encourage the imitation of the West in pursuit of modernization and contained within it is the implication that China's political system and methods of governance are in need of fundamental transformation. Of course, this sort of slogan has played a positive role in the process of moving the Chinese people toward independence and modernization. However, at the same time, it carries with it a Western-centric worldview and even colonial substitutionism. Furthermore, because "freedom is the foundation" seeps into various aspects of morality, culture, and society, it inevitably produces negative effects, such as strong atomic individualism and moral nihilism. *Ren* ontology then is something of a corrective to the negative effects of "freedom is the foundation." It emphasizes rights but also simultaneously emphasizes responsibility; it emphasizes the individual but also simultaneously emphasizes the collective; and it emphasizes individuality but simultaneously emphasizes morality. Second, compared with the traditional Chinese philosophical ontologies of cosmic pattern, mind, and material force, *ren* ontology has greater significance to modern philosophy. If many of the traditional ontological forms are more systematic and metaphysical in nature, *ren* ontology is more of a relational ontology as one finds in modern ontology, thus shielding it from the attacks that metaphysical ontology may provoke. Notably, in *The Ontology of Ren* Chen Lai did not move away from his strong suit of research in the history of philosophy. Rather, he uses the history of philosophy to develop his *ren* ontology, which makes it more characteristic of Chinese philosophy rather than ontology in the Western sense.

Yang Guorong has also created his own ontology in recent years—an "affairs ontology."²⁷ He points out that the "affair" [*shi*] embodies the synthesis of ontology, epistemology, and ethics: affairs unfold in the process of "transforming the natural world into the real world" (and thus relate to ontology), and they are compatible with cognitive activities and moral actions, therefore

²⁷ See, e.g., Yang Guorong, "Jiyu 'shi' de shijie" [The world based on "affairs"], *Zhexue yanjiu*, no. 11 (2016): 76–84; Yang Guorong, "Xin wu, zhi xing zhi bian: Yi 'shi' wei shiyu" [The distinction of mind and matter: Taking "affairs" as the boundary], *Zhexue yanjiu*, no. 5 (2018): 47–57; Yang Guorong, "'Shi' yu 'shi'" ["Affairs" and "history"], *Xueshu yuekan*, no. 1 (2019): 11–23; Yang Guorong, "Cunzai yu shengcheng: Yi 'shi' guan zhi" [Existence and generation: From the perspective of "affairs"], *Zhexue yanjiu*, no. 4 (2019): 42–51; Yang Guorong, "'Shi' yu ren de cunzai" ["Affairs" and human existence], *Zhongguo shehui kexue*, no. 7 (2019): 27–42; Yang Guorong, "Zhongguo zhexue shiyu zhong ren yu shijie guanxi de goujian—jiyu 'shi' de kaocha" [The construction of the relationship between humans and the world in the view of Chinese philosophy—Taking the investigation of "affairs" as a basis], *Zhexue Dongtai*, no. 8 (2019): 13–20.

possessing epistemological and ethical significance. With this concept of affairs he attempts to understand the relationship between humans and the world, which is to say that he begins to conduct philosophical investigations into the relationships between affair and other concepts (affairs and the world, affairs and people, affairs and history, affairs and generation, and affairs and mind and matter). Yang goes on to point out that the real world is created through the process of people “conducting affairs,” and human existence also unfolds through this same process. Therefore, the emergence and development of affairs and humans are mutually unfolding and codeveloping. This understanding of the ontology of affairs is, on the one hand, modern or even postmodern, while on the other, it is a very Chinese, because in Chinese philosophy, people are not individual or instantaneous, and thoughts are not abstract or independent. Humans must be instantiated through practice, and thoughts must be integrated through action. In other words, Chinese philosophy is not purely speculative but rather aspires to a unity of knowledge and action. Yang’s “affairs ontology” is thus a true achievement in the development of a fully Chinese philosophy.

In recent years, one of the most productive topic areas for Chinese philosophical innovation has been around the concept of *shengsheng* [“procreation”²⁸]. Wu Fei, Ding Yun, Sun Xiangchen, Yang Lihua, and Yang Zebo are all deeply involved in this area of inquiry. Of course, this field has not emerged from a single lineage, but rather from the individual reflections of several thinkers and the discourse between them. We know that a fundamental feature of Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucian philosophy, is the “continuity of being,” that is, the belief that there is only one world and that there is no difference in this- or that-sidedness. With such an understanding, traditional Chinese philosophy positively affirms the value of the existence of this world, and the focused expression of this affirmation is *shengsheng*. The term originates in the *Classic of Changes* and has since been used to describe the endless cycle of procreation and the never-ending cycle of changes in this world. The term has not just cosmological significance but ontological and value significance as well. Regrettably, past research on Chinese philosophy has been restricted by the influence of Western philosophical paradigms,

²⁸ One of the key features of *sheng-sheng* is the possibility of generating both new and novel forms of life. “Procreation” was chosen here over paired terms like “birth/rebirth” or “production/reproduction” to minimize the possibility of inadvertently foregrounding a notion of copying or conservation of physical and spiritual matter into readings of the term. —Trans.

which has led to insufficient attention being paid to the concept of *shengsheng*. But in recent years, the academic community has changed course to explore procreation deeply, comparing it to Western theories of value and creation and discovering the unique value of traditional Chinese philosophy contained within *shengsheng*. Wu Fei has compared different modes of understanding “creation” [*shengcheng*] between China and the West, believing that the difference between “manufacturing” [*zhizao*] and “procreation” [*shengsheng*] are two basic modes of the human understanding of creation. Behind these two different modes lies the fundamental difference between the Chinese and Western philosophical understandings of change in the world. In the mode of “manufacturing,” form is regarded as essential and stable, and the material is phenomenal and changeable so that our real world can only be a limited one. When we understand the myriad things that populate the earth in the mode of *shengsheng*, the two factors of yin and yang (which possess form, material, and dynamics) reside in change, and this change is natural, so our world may be said to be infinite. Wu Fei argues that the concept of procreation can bring relief and rescue to a human condition sunk into the dilemma of modernity, even as it approaches an ever more precarious future.

In contrast to Wu Fei’s analytical and schematic understanding, Ding Yun has adopted a unifying and holistic approach to understanding *shengsheng*, and, to this end, he created his own system of thought called Dao Reality studies and set out in his book *Introduction to Dao Reality Studies*. Ding Yun pays special attention to Wang Fuzhi’s exegesis of the *Classic of Changes*, so his views on *shengsheng* can be said to have inherited Wang’s emphasis on “continuation” [*xu*]. Ding points out that Wang thought that “the Way pervades heaven, earth, man, and all things, while inborn nature [*xing*] resides solely in man.” “Continuation” is “the juncture between the transmission from Heaven to Man, where heaven’s mandate circulates among humanity.” After heaven’s mandate has circulated, “each man has his own inborn nature, and the way of one yin and one yang remains fixed in its marvel and harmony.” Using this expansive notion of “continuation” to link together the concepts of “Heaven and man” [*tian-ren*] with “the Way” [*dao*], “goodness” [*shan*], and “inner nature” [*xing*], Wang Fuzhi explained the cycle of *shengsheng*. Therefore, the reason heaven and humankind are considered one item instead of two is that there is continuity between them: continuity not only exists in the way of man, but also in the way of heaven. In other words, the continuity between heaven and humankind means they are one and the same. With respect to

human nature, its completion is nothing but the way of heaven, so “continuation” is the general form of *shengsheng*, from which the substance of the way can be interpreted, and “the Way,” “goodness,” and “inner nature” explained. The course traversed by “continuation” never ends, and the totality of the completed way of the accomplished man is *shengsheng*, the substance of the Way.

Unlike Wu Fei’s display of the special characteristics of Chinese philosophy and Ding Yun’s philosophical system, Sun Xiangchen adopts a more ethical approach to understanding *shengsheng*. On the one hand, he highlights the existential framework of “existing through the generations” in contrast to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. And he further points out that even though Heidegger integrates Dasein, “being there,” into the world, the way in which Dasein coexists with other generations is always obscured. Therefore, using Heidegger’s line of thinking, it is impossible to transcend the ego of Dasein. On the other hand, Sun believes that the Confucian concepts such as familial relations [*qinqin*], filial piety [*xiao*], and *ren* link creation theory, ethics, and even politics. In particular, he points out that the intergenerational structure of the filial piety valued by Confucianism completes the activation of ethical relations, and for this reason is the first step toward realizing compassion [*ren’ai*]. From this, Confucian thought can use the method of “extension” [*tuiji*] to overcome the initial finiteness and variability of “compassion,” and to expand the concept of benevolence in order to achieve “universal love of the people”—a love of all humanity. In other words, Confucian concepts such as familial relations are not limited to one’s relatives but extend to others “in the same era” [*gong shidai*]; the concept of *shengsheng* in Chinese philosophy is not limited to human life but can be extended to all other things in the cosmos “in the same era.” It is in this sense that Sun Xiangchen, in his book *On Family: Individuals and Relations* (2019), rediscovers the family’s significance in modern life, shifting away from the restrictive focus on the family as an individual unit since the May Fourth movement.²⁹ This is the realization of his understanding of *shengsheng* in modern ethical life.

Yang Lihua’s understanding of *shengsheng* is very different from the three philosophers we have so far considered, as he bases his arguments on the thinking of Zhu Xi (1126–1271), the second master of traditional Chinese philosophy, explains *shengsheng* from the perspective of “principle monism” [*liyi*

²⁹ Sun Xiangchen, *On Family: Individuals and the Relations* (Lun Jia) (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2019).

yuanlun].³⁰ Yang Lihua delves deeply into Zhu Xi’s text “Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate” and rebuilds and rewrites Zhu Xi’s principle of monism using modern philosophical discourse and the ideas of *shengsheng*.³¹ This kind of work by Yang has greater significance for the process of modernizing traditional Chinese philosophy. Because principle of monism and the theory of *shengsheng* have been related not only to ontology and cosmology, but also to theories of life, labor, and virtue, Yang Lihua’s new theory of the principle of monism, by revisiting the concept of *shengsheng*, provides a philosophical explanation of “the mind linking nature with disposition” [*xing tong qingxin*], “the understanding of virtue and nature and the understanding of hearing and sight” [*dexing zhi zhi yu wenjian zhi zhi*], “bringing oneself and one’s surroundings to completion” [*cheng ji cheng wu*], “the mean” [*zhonglun*], and “the four virtues” [*si de*].³²

Yang Zebo also takes traditional philosophy as the basis for elaborating the idea of *shengsheng*. In his recently published *Introduction to the Ethics of the Confucian Concept of Shengsheng*,³³ he probes the context of the development of pre-Qin Confucianism, taking Confucius as a foundation, and then uses it to establish his idea of *shengsheng* ethics. Yang has closely studied Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and has a deep familiarity with the modern New Confucian thinking of Xiong Shili (1885–1968) and his adherents. Because of this, he emphasizes the “inner awareness” as an intellectual starting point for thinking about the human and the mind. He divides the human mind into the three dispositions of desire, benevolence, and wisdom, as opposed to the dichotomy of the sensible and the rational found in Western philosophy. He uses this intellectual framework to conceptualize not only Confucius but also Mencius and Xunzi, and through this he discovers that the fundamental characteristic of the mind is *shengsheng*. All of the seemingly contradictory content within the mind, from good and wicked natures to the school of the mind and the

³⁰ “Principle monism” [*liyi yuanlun*] is a concept from the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosophy of the Cheng brothers, Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and Cheng Hao (1032–1085). A discussion of the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* (commonly translated as “principle” in English texts) exceeds the scope of this note. A succinct overview can be found in Cheng Hao’s entry in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See also Chen Lai, *The Spirit of Wang Yangming’s Philosophy: The Realms of Being and Non-Being*, trans. Guoxing Chen (Los Angeles: Bridge 21 Publications, 2021): 117. —Trans.

³¹ Yang Lihua, *Yi ben yu shengsheng: Liyiyuanlun gangyao* (Beijing, 2018).

³² These five items are references to topics of general interest in the Neo-Confucian philosophical tradition, quoting from passages from the *Mencius*, the writings of Zhang Zai (1020–1077), the *Book of Rites*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the writings of Zhu Xi, respectively. —Trans.

³³ Yang Zebo, *Rujia shengshenglun lixue yinlun* (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2020).

school of principle, can be understood using *shengsheng* as a fundamental principle. This is his ethics of *shengsheng*, and Yang believes that by starting from this sort of ethics, many of the problems of Western ethics can be solved.

Yang's ethics of *shengsheng* contains within it a Chinese philosophical subjectivity and is clearly a new Chinese philosophy. He even attempts to use this system to improve on Western philosophy, and that certainly is an important step in the development of Chinese philosophy.

Some other researchers in Chinese philosophy have in recent years also developed their own philosophical concepts or even constructed their own philosophical systems, which reveal unique characteristics of traditional Chinese philosophy through comparing Chinese and Western thought. Ni Peimin does not believe that the predicaments of modern Western metaphysics and ontology mean that metaphysics and ontology are unnecessary; rather, he urges a shift in our mindset toward the ontology of a theory of realm [*jingjie lun*].³⁴ In his philosophy of *gongfu* [lit., effort; the art of living], he searches for the value of ontology in terms of the effectiveness of *gongfu* rather than in the pursuit of the truth about reality.³⁵ Huang Yong's Confucian virtue theory finds virtue to be a useful intellectual resource for Chinese philosophy, but he shows that when we eliminate the philosophical background of Western virtue ethics and use pure philosophical structures to understand them, many Chinese philosophers, such as Zhu Xi, are more qualified as virtue ethicists than those in the Western tradition, such as Aristotle. Zhang Xianglong's philosophy of family compares ancient and modern families in China and elsewhere, both through philosophy and through their varied representations from the phenomenal world (such as films and novels), and he corrects the serious misunderstandings that have circulated in Chinese intellectual and cultural circles since the New Culture movement.

In short, after nearly thirty years of academic and professional development, the innovation and creation of a new Chinese philosophy have become an important ideological and cultural phenomenon. This innovation is a

³⁴ *Jingjie* (translated as "realm") is a contested topic in modern Chinese philosophy. The term is generally used to describe a space in which an ultimate form of reality, truth, or beauty exists and that an individual apprehends through appreciation or study of some text or object. A discussion of this concept can be found in Wu Jiang, "What Is *jingjie*: Defining Confucian Spirituality in the Modern Chinese Intellectual Context," *Monumenta Serica*, 50 (2002): 441–62. —Trans.

³⁵ See Ni Peimin, "Kung Fu for Philosophers," *New York Times*, December 8, 2010, <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/08/kung-fu-for-philosophers/>.

manifestation not only of the awakening of a Chinese philosophical subjectivity itself, but also of the establishment and development of such a subjectivity throughout the Chinese academy. This signifies that the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture have been demonstrated and realized in the study of Chinese philosophy. Furthermore, the development of these "Two Creations" has led to the revitalization of Chinese philosophy in contemporary times. On the one hand, many scholars from other philosophical disciplines are increasingly recognizing the profound value and global significance of Chinese philosophy, and are thus participating in the innovation of Chinese philosophy, such as scholars of phenomenology studying "Mind Phenomenology", and scholars of the philosophy of science and technology reflecting on the distinction between human being and artificial intelligence based on Confucianism's "distinction between human being and animal"; On the other hand, a group of Chinese philosophical researchers have begun to devote themselves to the flood of contemporary philosophical thinking and discussion as philosophical thinkers. For example, in contemporary philosophical fields such as philosophy of women, philosophy of children, artificial intelligence, applied ethics, and modern political philosophy, Chinese philosophers have made unique theoretical contributions that warrant serious consideration. Looking back on the last thirty years of Chinese philosophy, we see not only a deep and sustained commitment to rigorous inquiry but also a remarkable capacity for self-renewal, which fills us with hope for its future. Traditional Chinese philosophy will further display its uniqueness and richness as it profoundly influences our reality. The new Chinese philosophy will do the same, and it is sure to have worldwide significance.

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