


The “Other” and the “Self”: The Modern Interpretation of Chinese Philosophy from a Global Philosophical Perspective—A Review of *The Methodology of Chinese Philosophy: How to Engage with “Chinese Philosophy”*

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Abstract

This book addresses the contested “legitimacy” of Chinese philosophy, arguing the debate is misdirected. The author, Peng Guoxiang, contends that the field’s priority is to establish its own “subjectivity”—an autonomous paradigm grounded in Chinese culture and discourse. The work outlines key methodologies for this task, emphasizing textual mastery, Western philosophical literacy, and a global comparative perspective. It analyzes exemplary 20th-century scholars to advocate for a dual approach: integrating Western concepts into Chinese frameworks and using Chinese thought to engage Western philosophical questions. Moving beyond disciplinary boundaries, the book connects the future of Chinese philosophy research to the integrative study of intellectual history, proposing a path for its renewal and global contribution.

Keywords

Subjectivity of Chinese Philosophy, Methodology of Philosophy, Sino-Western Philosophical Dialogue, Textual Foundation & Global Perspective

1. Introduction

“Philosophy” as a disciplinary term was introduced to China from Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1912, the Imperial University of Peking (Jingshi Daxuetang) established a philosophy department and introduced the course “History of Chinese Philosophy”, marking the emergence of philosophy as an in-

dependent discipline in China. Subsequently, scholars trained in philosophical thinking, such as Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, and Zhang Dainian, joined the research efforts in Chinese philosophy, gradually systematizing its study. It is noteworthy that the issues of subjectivity and legitimacy in Chinese philosophy have long been topics of scholarly concern. At the beginning of the 21st century, the question of “the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” was raised once again during an academic conference and soon garnered responses from domestic scholars. This issue has also drawn the attention of the book’s author, Peng Guoxiang. By tracing the understanding of “philosophy” in the development of Western philosophy, Peng argues that it is unreasonable to restrict the definition of “philosophy” solely to Western rationalist thinking. Therefore, he contends that becoming entangled in the self-justification trap of “the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” is unnecessary. Instead, Peng emphasizes that what is more important in the study of Chinese philosophy is “establishing the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy”. The exploration of how to establish this subjectivity naturally extends to the discussion of the book’s central theme—the methodology of Chinese philosophy.

This volume is a carefully curated collection of ten essays published by the author since 2003, supplemented by an interview. From the very beginning, the Introduction sets a clear and focused agenda, explicitly identifying the guiding problem that unifies the book as a whole: how the modern interpretation of Chinese philosophy should be undertaken. The introduction also outlines the themes of the individual chapters. Chapter One is an article originally published in 2003, in which the author reflects on the state of Chinese philosophy research at the time (the early 21st century) and looks ahead to its future development. Chapter Two is a book review in which the author uses Chen Lai’s *The Realm of Being and Non-Being: The Spirit of Wang Yangming’s Philosophy* (hereafter referred to as *The Realm of Being and Non-Being*) to illustrate a model for research in Chinese philosophy. In Chapter Three, the author reflects on the methodological approach he proposed for Chinese philosophy, described as “integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks” (援西入中). Chapter Four builds on previous chapters, focusing on the theme of “reviewing the old to understand the new” (温故知新). After summarizing research methods in Chinese philosophy—such as emphasizing cultural interaction between China and the West and prioritizing primary sources—the author presents new reflections on the study of Chinese philosophy. In Chapter Five, he explores the significance of Chinese philosophy within the broader development of world philosophy, particularly its relevance to contemporary Western philosophy and to addressing universal, fundamental questions of human experience. Chapter Six examines Tang Junyi’s view of philosophy, using his work *Introduction to Philosophy* as a case study. In Chapter Seven, the author draws on Tang Junyi’s research on a specific issue in Indian philosophy to illustrate the comparative philosophical methodology he advocates. Chapter Eight analyzes the research methods of Hou Wailu in the study of Chinese intellectual history, emphasizing that “prioritizing original texts” is an indispensable principle

in Chinese philosophical research. Finally, Chapter Nine distinguishes between concepts such as “history of philosophy”, “history of ideas”, and “social history”, while also offering the author’s perspective on the characteristics and future prospects of “Chinese intellectual history”.

In addition to the main text consisting of nine chapters, the author provides an outlook on both current research and the future development of Chinese philosophy in the two appendices at the end of the book. In Appendix 1, the author attempts to outline the state of contemporary Chinese philosophy research, focusing on its development since the 1950s and listing representative scholars and works from the 20th century onward. By compiling this overview of key figures and their contributions in English and including it in the book, the author demonstrates a keen international awareness in academic exchange. Appendix 2 is an interview transcript in which the author recounts his own educational journey, shares the intellectual path he has taken in his research, and summarizes his academic experience. He emphasizes the importance of “Textual foundations, Western philosophical literacy, and A global perspective” in the study of Chinese philosophy. Finally, the author expresses hope that future researchers of Chinese philosophy will remain rooted in its subjectivity while deeply engaging with the traditions of Western philosophy, absorbing their strengths to achieve a continuous renewal—“renewing daily, again daily, ever daily” (苟日新、又日新、日日新)—in the development of Chinese philosophy.

2. Four Key Arguments of the Book

The Methodology of Chinese Philosophy. How to Engage with “Chinese Philosophy”, Peng Guoxiang elaborates on the following four key arguments:

Firstly, Scholars should firmly uphold the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy research. The subjectivity of Chinese philosophy research refers to the autonomous academic paradigm established by Chinese scholars in studying Chinese philosophy, which is grounded in Chinese culture as its foundation, oriented toward Chinese issues, and expressed through Chinese discursive frameworks. Its core objective is to enable Chinese philosophy to “speak for itself” and contribute to the philosophical wisdom of all humanity. The author points out (p24) that when scholars discuss the “legitimacy” of Chinese philosophy, they often consciously or unconsciously adopt a Western “conception of philosophy” as a frame of reference. This mode of thinking tends to confine them within the modern Western philosophical tradition dominated by rationalism. In reality, however, Western scholars themselves hold diverse understandings of “philosophy”. Some interpret it as a “way of life” centered on “spiritual practice”, while others view the essence of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophical tradition as a form of “therapy of desire” (Nussbaum, 1994). These differing interpretations reflect humanity’s varied modes of understanding the world. As a crystallization of diverse cultures, philosophy should not be constrained within a single research paradigm, and thus the “legitimacy” of Chinese philosophy should not be framed as a prob-

lem. Therefore, rather than remaining entangled in abstract reflections on the “legitimacy” of Chinese philosophy, it is more crucial to establish its subjectivity, grounded in concrete and rigorous research, to fully develop Chinese philosophy as a discipline. Scholars engaged in Chinese philosophy must ensure a solid foundation in textual scholarship, grasp the inherent problematics and conceptual structures of Chinese philosophy.

Secondly, “Textual foundations, Western philosophical literacy, and A global perspective” (In chapter 2) are three essential competencies in the study of Chinese philosophy. Among the qualities required for researching Chinese philosophy, the author repeatedly emphasizes the importance of these three elements. First, the accumulation of textual knowledge is the prerequisite for any research; without the support of classical works, scholarship lacks a solid basis, and the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy would be undermined. Second, building upon this textual foundation, a grasp of Western philosophy can broaden the scope of Chinese philosophical inquiry and refine its methodologies. For example, the introduction of Western logical-analytical methods has provided new tools and perspectives for Chinese philosophy, enabling scholars to analyze and argue philosophical concepts and propositions with greater clarity and rigor, thereby promoting the standardization and scientization of Chinese philosophical research. Third, the author believes that a global perspective encourages scholars to pay attention to both the differences and commonalities between cultures, thereby facilitating cultural exchange. As the contemporary New Confucian representative Tu Weiming also states: “We are now living in a world of multiple modernities—a world that includes not only the modernity and globalization represented by the West but also those represented by China, India, and Africa. Therefore, we need to understand and learn from other civilizations, not to abandon our own roots and particularities, but to expand them to encompass all of humanity. Only through such inclusiveness can we gradually develop a truly meaningful humanistic spirit recognized by all.” (Du et al., 2018: pp. 5-16)

Thirdly, from the discussions in Chapters Two, Five, Six, and Seven, it can be seen that the author believes that the research of scholars such as Tang Junyi, Hou Wailu, and Chen Lai embodies important methodologies for the study of Chinese philosophy. The future development of Chinese philosophy—especially its engagement with the integration of Chinese and Western traditions—cannot be separated from sustained research on representative figures since the twentieth century, including Feng Youlan, Tang Junyi, and Mou Zongsan. As a leading figure of modern New Confucianism, Tang Junyi offered a profound discussion of the meaning of “philosophy”, arguing that philosophical inquiry should be connected with diverse forms of wisdom. In his view, philosophy encompasses not only metaphysics and cosmology in Western philosophy and theories of *dharmalakṣaṇa* in Indian philosophy, but also disciplines such as ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history. On the basis of this broad conception of philosophy, Tang Junyi articulated a justification for the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy. By reflecting

on the paradigms and methods advocated by Hou Wailu, the author expresses his own considerations regarding certain principles and methodologies in the study of the history of Chinese philosophy. In terms of research methodology, Hou Wailu's emphasis on the careful examination of original sources continues to offer valuable reference for contemporary scholars of Chinese philosophical history. In addition, the author holds that Chen Lai's *The Realm of Being and Non-Being* is grounded in rigorous philological scholarship and, from an international perspective, conducts meticulous and in-depth conceptual analysis through the engagement with theoretical resources from Western philosophy.

Finally, the study of the history of Chinese philosophy not only concerns philosophical problems in China and the trajectory of Chinese philosophical development, but also involves the broader issue of "Chinese intellectual history" (In Chapter 9, from the author's perspective, intellectual history refers to the self-conscious responses that individuals articulate to their particular circumstances. "Circumstances" here denotes the social and cultural matrix in which they are situated, and "individuals" does not refer to popular or collective consciousness, but rather to those thinkers who display a high degree of self-awareness and sustained, probing reflection). Scholars may simultaneously engage in two or even multiple academic approaches, and disciplines such as philosophy and history can be pursued in conjunction. By integrating the "articulation of viewpoints" characteristic of philosophy with the "historical context" emphasized in historiography, the author extends the discussion to reflections on intellectual history. He proposes that "Chinese intellectual history" can achieve both "thought" and "history". In the author's view, intellectual history is a disciplinary perspective that maintains close connections—and even areas of overlap—with fields such as the history of philosophy, the history of ideas, cultural history, and social history, while at the same time possessing its own clearly defined objects of inquiry and thus forming a distinctive approach in its own right. As an academic discipline, intellectual history can broadly absorb the strengths of diverse forms of disciplinary training; whether religious, ethical, or philosophical, all can serve as resources and driving forces for its development. This eclectic and integrative mode of intellectual history holds promise for advancing research in the humanities in China.

3. Three Distinctive Features of the Book

Viewed as a whole, the book exhibits three major research characteristics.

First, the author adheres to a comparative perspective of "integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks" (援西入中) and "incorporating Chinese thought into Western discourse" (援中入西), emphasizing the interaction between Chinese and Western cultures in the study of Chinese philosophy. Since its establishment as a modern academic discipline, "Chinese philosophy" has inevitably existed in a dialogical relationship with Western philosophy. It can be said that the development of modern "Chinese philosophy" began as a form of comparative study between Chinese and Western philosophies. Influenced by Western

philosophy, modern Chinese philosophers gradually recognized the significance of methodology in their research on the history of philosophy (Gao, 2021: p. 170). An important approach in the interpretation of Chinese philosophy involves drawing on conceptual resources from Western philosophy to reconstruct Chinese philosophy—a model described by the author as “integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks”. For instance, when Feng Youlan constructed his New Neo-Confucianism system, he employed Aristotle’s concept of “material cause” to elucidate traditional Chinese philosophical notions such as “li” (principle) and “qi” (vital force). Conversely, “incorporating Chinese thought into Western discourse” corresponds to “integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks” and represents the author’s perspective on the positive significance of traditional Chinese intellectual resources for Western philosophy. While “integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks” takes Chinese philosophy as the primary subject and absorbs the strengths of Western philosophical thought, “incorporating Chinese thought into Western discourse” attempts to use Chinese discourse to address universal human questions raised by Western philosophy. Whether through “incorporating Chinese thought into Western discourse” or “integrating Western thought into Chinese frameworks”, the author aims to promote mutual learning and exchange between different cultures under the premise that philosophies worldwide exist within an interconnected and co-constitutive context, thereby achieving a state of cultural harmony where “each appreciates its own beauty and shares in the beauty of others”.

Second, the author emphasizes that the study of the history of philosophy is not merely a simple chronological arrangement of ideas, but must be guided by a strong problem-consciousness. Drawing on Tang Junyi’s scholarship, the author highlights the centrality of problem-consciousness in the study of Chinese philosophy. Tang Junyi’s use of primary and secondary sources in his research on Indian philosophy demonstrates that his approach did not follow the internal historical lineages or schools of Indian philosophy. Rather, guided by philosophical problems, he classified various strands of traditional Indian thought under distinct philosophical issues such as theories of names, theories of the human way, and theories of value, while simultaneously comparing Indian philosophy with corresponding ideas in Chinese and Western philosophy. This interpretive approach—deeply engaging with the three major philosophical traditions of China, the West, and India—encourages philosophical inquiry to draw upon diverse intellectual resources. Compared with Western philosophy’s emphasis on logic, Chinese philosophy’s longstanding concern with issues such as the relationship between Heaven and humanity (tian-ren) and questions of human nature and destiny (xing-ming) reveals its distinctive characteristics. In the history of philosophy, problem-consciousness often crystallizes into propositions, terms, categories (or even systems of categories), and modes of thinking, eventually forming particular paradigms. Throughout different historical periods, numerous concepts, propositions, and categories have emerged—for example, dao, qi, yin-yang, the five phases, and har-

mony in the pre-Qin period; spirit and form and emptiness and fullness in the Han dynasty; Heaven, ren (benevolence), and cheng (sincerity) in Confucianism; and being and non-being in Daoism. In recent years, a number of representative works grounded in the internal problematics of Chinese philosophy have appeared. For instance, Chen Lai's *Ren Ontology* redefines Western values such as freedom, equality, and justice on the premise of the cultural subjectivity of Chinese civilization, advancing philosophical propositions such as "ren as the unifying principle of the four virtues" and "taking ren as substance and harmony as function". In doing so, Chen seeks to address contemporary value issues in China and beyond, philosophically revealing the value orientation of Chinese culture in its encounter with the modern world (Yang & Zhao, 2015: pp. 29-35).

Third, the author approaches methodological issues in Chinese philosophy with the attitude of "reviewing the old to understand the new" (温故知新). On the one hand, Professor Peng Guoxiang systematically summarizes the research methods of Chinese philosophy by tracing its developmental trajectory since modern times. On the other hand, by drawing on contemporary exemplary studies, such as the scholarly practice of Professor Chen Lai, he elucidates in depth the three critical competencies: a solid foundation in classical texts, proficiency in Western thought, and a global perspective. At the same time, he consistently emphasizes reflection on and refinement of his own academic ideas. By revisiting his research insights from the past two decades, he continually renews his understanding of the approaches to studying Chinese philosophy, demonstrating a dynamic unity between methodological awareness and scholarly vitality. Looking back at history is significant. Li Weiwu contends that twentieth-century China saw the rise of several intellectual currents, including the rural reconstruction movement, currents in educational philosophy, and modern Buddhist thought. Combining philosophical and non-philosophical elements, these currents reveal the vitality of China's intellectual life in the twentieth century also provide themes for the development of philosophy in the 21st century (Li, 2004: pp. 95-103).

4. Conclusion

In summary, in the book *Methodology of Chinese Philosophy: How to Study "Chinese Philosophy"*, author Peng Guoxiang begins by responding to doubts about the "legitimacy of Chinese philosophy", traces the course of Chinese philosophical research since the 20th century, and summarizes its methodologies. Beyond illustrating the necessary research perspectives for Chinese philosophy through macro-level lenses such as Sino-Western philosophical interactions, the author emphasizes the importance of textual mastery in concrete research, dedicating detailed sections to its manifestation in the works of scholars such as Tang Junyi and Chen Lai. Simultaneously, by treating the writings of predecessors as exemplars, the author not only learns from them but also carries forward the sense of mission inherent in Chinese philosophical research. Furthermore, the book concludes by expanding the discussion from methodological explorations in Chi-

nese philosophy to prospects for “intellectual history”. This perspective, which transcends disciplinary boundaries and emphasizes the resonance between philosophy, culture, and society, reveals greater possibilities for the future development of Chinese philosophy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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