
REDEFINING WESTERN AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHIES AS SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

以灵性转变重新定义西方和中国哲学

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ABSTRACT

In the 80s, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault described Ancient Greek Philosophy as a “way of life”. Using this expression, they wanted to highlight that in Greek Antiquity philosophizing implied a transformation of the person involved in the process. In Athens, indeed, to choose a school of philosophy was first to choose a community and to adopt a number of both intellectual and physical practices. Both historians also show how in each one of the Greek schools, there is a description of the Saint or Sage, Socrates being the unifying figure of these portraits. The purpose of this figure of the Sage was to support students’ ethical effort in self-cultivation.

In recent years, more and more scholars investigating Chinese tradition in the West — Stephen Angle, Carine Defoort, — and also philosophers in China working on their tradition — Cheng Lisheng, Bai Tongdong, — have been using Hadot and Foucault’s expression of “philosophy as a way of life” and their categories to describe Chinese philosophy. In several Chinese Classics, it is possible to identify practices similar to what Hadot calls “spiritual exercises” and a description of the life of the Sage as an incentive for readers-disciples to join a process of self-cultivation.

One moment in Chinese tradition can especially echo an understanding of philosophy as a way of life: Neo-Confucianism as developed by Zhu Xi (1130-1200). For Zhu Xi, to read the Confucian Classics was not first a matter of accumulating knowledge but of transformation of the self. Through analyzing, meditating, and practicing the Classics, the student could let his/her intention be transformed and adjust his/her heart-mind to the heart-mind of the Sages from the past, the transmitters of the cultural tools necessary to becoming fully human.

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In this article, I will focus only on the meaning of "philosophy" and "spirituality", and especially their transformative dimension. I will first summarize Hadot and Foucault's perspectives before recalling how these perspectives have been used to describe Chinese philosophy. I will show that Neo-Confucianism can be conceived as a resource to support spiritual experience according to the sense given by Hadot to this expression.

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Introduction

When it comes to comparing traditions or engaging in multi-cultural dialogue, defining the terms of the exchange is crucial in setting the basis for respectful discussion. Terms such as "philosophy", "spirituality", "religion" may take diverging meanings in different linguistic communities. Already a lot of analysis has been done regarding the term "religion". In the case of "philosophy", defining the word is to join a conversation that has already taken place for centuries. The term "spirituality" remains much more imprecise in inter-disciplinary contexts. In the past decades, new trends have emerged thanks to Hadot and thinkers such as Foucault, Nussbaum, and Sellars. They redefined the notion of spirituality in connection with philosophy. Besides, Sinologists and Chinese scholars have

Philosophy as a Transformation of the 'Self'

Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) witnessed the evolution of philosophy in France in the seventies and took a stand toward the legacy of Descartes' conception of the 'self'. He emphasized the practical dimension of philosophy, as he was eager to offer resources to live a good life. In his book, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre* (2001), Hadot explains that all philosophers have to face the question: "What is philosophy?". For him, philosophy is an experience of transformation that can happen through different modalities: the "oceanic experience", philosophical discourse, and "spiritual exercises".

At the root of Hadot's philosophical journey lies an "oceanic experience" he had during his teenage years. This experience immerses oneself in the perception of reality. It

is becoming conscious of existence, of being in the world. The “self” reaches a higher level of existence (intensification), and at the same time, loses itself in something greater (dilatation). This perspective is based on an anthropological point of view: referring to Plotinus, Hadot distinguishes three levels of the “self”: sensitive (where the “self” behaves as if it was merged with the body), rational (where the “self” becomes aware of itself as a soul and as discursive thinking); and thirdly spiritual, (in which the “self” discovers that ultimately it was always Spirit or Intellect), and thus exceeds the other levels. Neo-Platonism regards the latter as the true “self”. Hadot builds upon this conviction because, for him, any philosophy is always to elevate the “self”, overcome the partial, sensitive, and rational “self”, and reach a universal point of view on things and the world.

This oceanic experience is therefore at the root of the philosophical process and at the same time, one of the ways through which it can be accomplished. It is a non-discursive way of achieving Philosophy, as introduced in *The Symposium*.

For Hadot, a distance always remains between Philosophy (a movement of universalization) and philosophical discourses or texts. In Antiquity, writings were not to give a total image of reality but were a record of the words of a Master who answered his students’ questions. Hence, teachings were always taking place in a relationship between two friends or a Teacher and a student, a process which was supposed to influence the disciple: “*When Plato wrote his dialogues, when Aristotle taught and published his lecture notes, when Epicurus wrote his letters, or even his Treatise on nature, [...] In all cases, the philosopher explained his doctrine, that was very true, but it exposed it in a certain way, a way that aimed to train (in French: ‘former’) more than to inform (in French: ‘informer’)*” (Hadot, 2001: 146). This meaning of philosophy can be noticed

in dialogues where the many detours aim to teach reasoning. It is both a process of assimilation of knowledge and a method of universalizing the point of view.

Therefore, according to Hadot, the final orientation of Philosophy is practical. “Spiritual exercises” are not an appendix to philosophical discourse, but are philosophy because they form the “self”: “*Personally, I would define the spiritual exercise as a voluntary practice, personal, intended to transform the individual, a transformation of the self*”, (Hadot, 2001: 145). Using this expression, “Spiritual exercises”, Hadot does not refer to a religious activity but to a practice related to the individual’s psyche. For Hadot, philosophy is to learn to perceive things in the world in a new way, putting things back in the whole event of the universe. In a nutshell, Philosophy is like riding a bicycle at night: we first need to start the movement of cycling (living, doing Philosophy), and then the light produced by the dynamo illuminates how we are already moving (reflexive dimension of philosophical discourses).

This understanding of philosophy as a transformative experience is not unique to Hadot. Michel Foucault developed a similar understanding in the *Hermeneutique du Sujet* (1982) and Martha Nussbaum in *Therapy of Desire* (1994).

To sum up, for Hadot, experience is at the root of philosophical work. This root opens the possibility for philosophy, a transformation process of the “self”, whether through study and teaching, art’s experience, spiritual exercises, dialogues. All these processes attempt to overcome the partial “self” to reach a more universal “self”. Hadot works mainly with Greek sources. If this experience is to be acknowledged as universal, we must examine how scholars have used it to describe another tradition, such as Chinese philosophy.

Philosophy as a Way of Life and Chinese Tradition

The first use of Hadot's work occurred when philosophers, whether from the West or China, dialogued with the Chinese Tradition.

In 2005, Heiner Roetz referred to Hadot to respond to the different arguments usually used to describe Chinese Tradition as non-philosophical. For Roetz, many elements

comparative studies [...]. Now I have changed my mind a little, finding indisputable analogies between Chinese thought and Greek philosophy. [...] for example, to describe the situation of unconsciousness in which we live, the picture of the frog in the well or of the fly in the bottom of a large barrel, "ignoring the universe in its entirety grandiose" as Zhuangzi said. But I cannot speak as a specialist of Chinese thought" (Hadot, 2001: 228).

“Hadot's thought has been associated with the claim that Philosophy is not only a formal game, or the search for truth(s), but also a means to a spiritual transformation, i.e., a transformation of the spirit. From the perspective of Confucian learning, as synthesized by Zhu Xi, studying and practicing the Classics' texts were both but one movement of self-cultivation.”

of Ancient Greek philosophy described by Hadot suit Early Confucianism. As an effort towards universalization and a process of becoming humane, philosophy must be able to embrace different culturally situated reflections, (Roetz, 1993:6). Scholars who investigate Neo-Confucianism (*songminglixue* 宋明理學) also make the connection. Even if they do not want to force Chinese tradition into pre-existing western categories, according to Angle and Tiwald, Neo-Confucians, like Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) were committed to philosophy in Hadot's sense (Angle & Tiwald, 2017:5).

Besides this first use of Hadot's thought to display a universal potential of Chinese tradition, other scholars use it to create contrast with the *Zhuangzi*, like Jiang Dandan (姜丹丹) (Jian, D., 2010) and Carine Defoort, (Defoort, 2012:475). They cite Hadot's concept of the “transformation of life” to describe Zhuangzi's thoughts. Hadot himself spoke about possible convergences between *Zhuangzi* and Greek Philosophy: “I have long been very reluctant with regard to the

In 2002-2003, a reading group focused on Hadot's book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* was started by Tu Weiming (杜維明) at the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Chung-Yi Cheng (鄭宗義) who was then visiting scholar at Harvard-Yenching Institute got inspired. In his book *Confucianism, Philosophy and the Modern World*, (《儒學、哲學與現代世界》, 2010), he explains: “It is necessary to know that because of the standards of modern Western philosophy, many different modes of philosophizing present in the Western tradition have been cast outside the philosophical field. (Cheng, Chung-Yi, 2010:27, original quotation in Chinese). He later insists that Neo-Confucianism aims to shape life in the sense Hadot uses it, (Cheng, C. Y., 2016:116-117).

Another scholar then in residence at Harvard-Yenching Institute was Peng Guoxiang (彭國翔). In the seventh chapter of his book, *Confucian Tradition, crossing Religion and Humanism* (《儒家傳統：宗教與人文主義之間》, 2007), he cites *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995) to contrast self-cultivation in Ancient

Greek Philosophy with Confucian tradition. Peng Guoxiang wants to demonstrate that Confucian self-cultivation is not only a mere process of spiritual training but implies both body and mind efforts (Peng, 2007:232).

The last example of a scholar who stayed at the Harvard-Yenching Institute is Cheng Lisheng (陳立勝). In his article *On the meaning of quiet-sitting for Confucian self-cultivation*, (《靜坐在儒家修身學中的意義》, 2014), he explains that under the influence of Hadot and Foucault's research, the different aspects of self-cultivation in Confucian learning, including quiet-sitting (*jingzuo* 靜坐) has been topic of much interest.

The third connection is related to Chinese scholars investigating Western tradition who read Hadot for himself and translated his books. Zhang Xian (張憲) in 2012 published a Chinese translation of *Qu'est ce que la philosophie antique* (Hadot, 1995). Jiang Dandan (姜丹丹) did the same with *La philosophie comme manière de vivre* in 2014. Against a focus exclusively on logic, both scholars emphasize the practical dimension of philosophy (Zhang, 2012; Jiang, 2015).

As described above, Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, has been used in different ways: first by scholars who want to show that there is a philosophical dimension in the Chinese tradition (Roetz, Angle and Tiwald), second by scholars who use it to contrast Chinese Tradition whether with Daoism (Defoort, Jiang Dandan) or Neo-Confucianism (Cheng Chung-yi, Peng Guoxiang, Chen Lisheng), and third by scholars who study Western philosophy (Zhang Xian, Jiang Dandan). They all point out that in the Western tradition, philosophy was never only a matter of formal games but included a subjective transformation driven by the action of philosophizing. Finally, most of them are aware of the risk in comparative approaches of forcing one tradition in the categories of another cultural perspective.

I have been mainly mentioning scholars investigating Neo-Confucianism. This is an invitation to go back to Zhu Xi and examine the meaning he was giving to such intellectual effort.

Learning as a Way of Life in Neo-Confucianism

Neo-Confucianism refers to the second phase of development in Confucianism that happened during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Chinese culture was facing a profound social and political change. For the main philosopher of this period, Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), the Confucian Way, as embodied by the Ancient Sages in the Confucian Classics edited by Confucius, needed to be restored. Because of their lack of commitment, those who should have been in charge of transmitting Confucian learning had led the people to give it up. Learning had to change life, and learning also required a change in life: “Cao asked: ‘how is the first meaning?’ (Zhu Xi) said: ‘It is like ‘for the people to be a Junzi is to lie in Benevolence, for the minister to lie in Reverence, for a son to lie in Filial Piety’ this kind of sayings. And to decide to keep on with that; and if it is not like this, you will not succeed. It is also like being at the court, one must devote himself to give positions to superior men, and dismiss vile characters. This is the first meaning”. (Zhu Xi, *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, Scroll 12, paragraph 1, my translation.). The focus on learning was to be put on the cultivation of the “self” and not on literary sophistication (Gardner, 1989:144).

To achieve learning, Zhu Xi developed a strong curriculum. Students had to commit themselves personally to the Confucian Way, which required them to read the texts written by the Sages, and to train themselves to find “the pattern(s)-coherence(s)” (*Li*理) within them (*gewuqiongli* 格物窮理), and then to practice what they had learned. They were also expected

to enter into an attitude of reverence (*jing* 敬): “In the learning effort, it is only necessary to keep reverence, to look for pattern(s) is second” (Zhu Xi, *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, Scroll 9, par. 18, my translation.). For Zhu Xi, the Classics constituted a guide to “the pattern,” and reading the canon was an intellectual exercise as well as moral and even physical exercise (Peng, 2015). At the heart of this method of reading the Classics (*dushufa* 讀書法), was the conviction that the student had “to experience” the book personally: “Only if [the student] made the texts his own would they be truly meaningful to him” (Gardner 1989. 155).

Therefore, to read a book is not just an effort to accumulate knowledge, but first a way to train the will and to exercise the psycho-physical (*qi*, 氣) stuff of oneself. In a nutshell, reading the classics is a spiritual training, a way to learn to behave as a humane person (Zhu Xi, *Classified...*, Scroll 10, par. 5).

In the end, the successive translations of Hadot’s books and the spreading of his understanding of Ancient Greek Philosophy create a point of connection with Chinese tradition. The use of Hadot’s thought has been associated with the claim that Philosophy is not only a formal game, or the search for truth(s), but also a means to a spiritual transformation, i.e., a transformation of the spirit. From the perspective of Confucian learning, as synthesized by Zhu Xi, studying and practicing the Classics’ texts were both but one movement of self-cultivation.

In other terms, the confrontation with “hard objectivity,” whether it is through a master, relationships or classical texts, leads a student to encounter an exteriority, and to be transformed. There was always a creative tension between reflections on logical aspects and existential practices of philosophy in the Western tradition. A similar movement may be found in the Chinese tradition – people more focused on the analysis

of classical texts (*Hanxue* 漢學), and people more interested in the effects of reading the ancient texts on their lives (*Songxue* 宋學).



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