

III. Philosophemes in Chinese Philosophy

The History of Chinese Philosophy as Philosophy

Professor Francisco Naishtat tells me that “metaphilosophy” means “on philosophy.” It is not a “over philosophy” or “after philosophy.” If so, “metaphilosophy” is nothing other than a self-reflexive activity. However, it is not a pure and inner self-reflexivity, but one with reference to an exterior and para-philosophical something. We can find this system of self-reflexive thinking more clearly and severely in a non-Western context. That’s why I am going to give you an example of this “metaphilosophical” system in Chinese Philosophy. In this regard, I am touching on a problem of “history” for philosophy.

1. China, Philosophy, and History

What would history be for philosophy? This question is especially important for Asia, where philosophy was transplanted in the modern period.

To begin with, when Asia confronted modern Western philosophy, philosophy was simultaneously a universal form of scholarship and a form of scholarship unique to the modern West. Therefore, although philosophy attracted Asian modernists because it represented the universality of modernity, philosophy also encouraged people in various parts of Asia to “discover” philosophy in these regions. Consequently, from the time of its inception, Asian philosophy was somewhat philosophical and un-philosophical at the same time in comparison to modern Western philosophy.

Hence on the one hand, in order to establish philosophy in Asia, Asian philosophy had to transcend the particularity of Western philosophy and be relatively universal, but on the other hand, to be *Asian* philosophy it had to have a particularity different from that of the West. Amidst this tension of the forced reception of philosophy the following concrete response emerged: Asian philosophers mobilized, both openly and secretly, a discovered “particularity” in order to overcome Western philosophy, and through the use of terms such as “thought” or “intellectual trends,” they put philosophy in brackets.

So, how was “Chinese philosophy” established in China? At this point, one should not overlook that Chinese philosophy first emerged as the “history of Chinese philosophy.” However, this was not a chronicle of philosophy in China. The focus of inquiry was the philosophy of the history of Chinese philosophy. If one narrates from the conclusion, the goal is to find a genealogy of historical consciousness as philosophy in the history of thinking in China.

However, this formulation gives rise to a complex and difficult problem. This is because historical consciousness as philosophy is an extremely modern activity and by breaking with previous historical consciousness and a vision of the world that was built on this previous historical consciousness, philosophy as historical consciousness connects to a type of universality (based on transplantation and translation). But later at a theoretical level, philosophy as historical consciousness profoundly resurrects “tradition,” by secreting something national. In sum, philosophy in China was simultaneously registered as the history of Chinese philosophy in universal philosophy and was established through nationalization.

2. The First Chinese Philosopher: Laozi

Hu Shi (1891–1962) published *An Outline of a History of Chinese Philosophy* in 1919. This was the first real history of Chinese philosophy and the first practice of philosophy in China.

Hu Shi placed Laozi, not Confucius at the origin of “the history of Chinese philosophy.” On this point, Hu Shi was continuously exposed

to criticism. This is because at the time, even if Laozi's existence was recognized, he was understood as a person or a work later than Confucius. However, Hu Shi defended his theory till the end because this was a key aspect of his understanding of Chinese philosophy and his understanding of the history of Chinese philosophy.

According to Hu Shi, Laozi was "Laozi the revolutionary." Laozi's philosophy was a "reaction," and a revolution against a previous period of darkness, chaos and unequal distribution of wealth, namely, the "period of the previous poets." The central significance of this philosophy lay in the "politics of non-action" (*wuwei*). This was a theory of laissez-faire which implied that if the government did not interfere with people's activities (especially economic activities), everything would be well governed.

That said, why Laozi? The most important reason is that Hu Shi wanted to find a tradition in China that was different from and older than the long-standing Confucianism which had lost its vitality. If he found "the revolutionary Laozi" as a thinker predating Confucius, and this Laozi could be a new model for modern China, then one could contend that the possibility of destroying the long tradition of Confucianism, which emerged later, was at the origins of Chinese philosophy. This prospect made revolution possible once again today.

3. *Shaking the Image of Laozi (I)*

That said, Hu Shi did not have a clear image of Laozi from the beginning. Let us look at his essay "An Evolutionary Theory of the Pre-Qin Masters" (January 1917). This is an ambitious essay in which he attempts to read evolutionary theory in all of the ancient Chinese thinkers. In this context, he discusses Laozi's "small country with few people" in the following way (*Laozi*, Chapter 80).

Laozi's theories of a "small country with few people, the simplicity of the uncarved block and getting rid of sages and forsaking wisdom" look at "deterioration" as "evolution" and this is a great disaster. Later, Confucius or Xunzi tried vehemently to extricate thought from this

difficulty, but could not completely arrest the malevolent influence of Laozi's theory. This is Laozi's defect. (Hu 1991, 576)

One can understand a "small country with few people" as a type of utopian thought and here Hu Shi criticizes such a tendency. In the first place, this essay has a twofold evaluation of Laozi. On the one hand, he recognizes that Laozi rejected volitional heaven and affirmed that "things spontaneously go their own way." On the other hand, he states that Laozi returned to a superstitious vision of heaven. In short, although Laozi separated the "way of heaven" and the "way of man," he again saw them as one and did not sufficiently recognize human agency. A "small country with few people" is an example of such a failure to recognize. To this extent, Laozi is quite far from being a revolutionary.

Against this, in the above-mentioned text, Confucius is more progressive than Laozi. Confucius continued Laozi's legacy while weakening his "malevolent influence." In this essay, even if one looks at his discussion of Confucius, Hu praises Confucius' theory of evolution. That is, Confucius' evolutionary theory expresses the vision of change in the *Book of Changes*. He discusses evolution as change "from the simple to the complex" and change "from the barbaric period to higher complex cultures." Because this was the foundation of Confucius' philosophy of history, it was not an "atavistic" theory that claims that we should return to the ancient past which was the best. It was a theory of "having a penchant for the old," which implied that one must know the old in order to know the present. So Hu Shi praises "having a penchant for the old" as "what is now called 'the historical method' (*lishi de fangfa*)."

Besides, the "historical method" that he takes the trouble to mention is that of his teacher, John Dewey, specifically Dewey's "genetic method." Dewey also confronted the basic paradigm developed by Darwin and, on the basis of accepting this theory, he advocated a genealogical "genetic method," as a pragmatic methodology. This theory attempted to rid evolutionary theory of teleological directionality. However, Hu Shi, like Darwin and Dewey, could not avoid bringing teleology through the back door by interpreting evolution as progress. I will not dwell on the details, but here Hu Shi applies the most philosophical

method at that time (as a critique of ancient philosophy) to Confucius and gave Confucius a more philosophical place than Laozi.

4. Shaking the Image of Laozi (II)

However, on the other hand, Hu Shi gradually promotes Laozi. In what would be the basic model of *An Outline of a History of Chinese Philosophy, A History of Pre-Qin Logic* (April, 1917), he makes the following point.

Laozi's thought is destructive and nihilistic, but there is something in his philosophy that goes beyond the smashing of idols and nihilism. So perhaps this something provided a base for the establishment of a constructive system of later philosophers, especially Confucius. Among these constructive elements, one can first mention Laozi's ideas of time and change. (786)

In Hu Shi's view, *Laozi* is not limited to destruction and nihilism; there is an element that transcends these aspects. Confucius discovered this. Laozi places the "nameless" or a simple, unsullied condition at the origin. He believed that this original condition changes and becomes the "named" or a complex culture, but he rejected the results of change and advocated returning to the original situation. Against this, Confucius went beyond this simple destruction, continued Laozi's intention, implemented a reconstructed "rectification of names" and advocated an evolution from the simple to the complex. Here, we may think that Chinese philosophy was established from the two origins of Confucius and Laozi.

This interpretation is different from the one mentioned earlier in *The Evolutionary Theory of the Pre-Qin Masters*. Moreover, along with this, he becomes relatively positive with respect to a "small country with few people."

Because he held this vision of an ideal country, Laozi vehemently attacked the existing social and political order. (784)

In short, he moves from negating a “small country with few people” as an *a-topos* (ου-τοπος: non-place), namely as something that does not recognize human artifice to affirming it as a *u-topos* (ευ-τοπος: a felicitous place), namely as an ideal village/ideal society.

5. *Historical Consciousness as Philosophy*

In addition, according to *An Outline of a History of Chinese Philosophy*, Laozi’s place is even higher, and he becomes an origin of philosophy equal to or even superior to Confucius. That is, Laozi becomes “Laozi the revolutionary” and Confucius is counted among the conservatives. Moreover, he praises a “small country with few people.” Hu Shi states that this is a “return to a utopia in which people have no knowledge and no desire and throughout their lives they do not run into one another.” This is the first time he uses the term “utopia” (*wutuobang*).

Well, after this, Hu Shi refines the two origins, Laozi and Confucius. Let us look at the lecture, “The Route of Chinese Philosophy,” which he gave in 1921 two years after publishing *An Outline of a History of Chinese Philosophy*. In this text, based on the idea that Chinese philosophy developed along the two extremes of the revolutionary Laozi and the conservative Confucius, he defined Laozi’s thought as “philosophy” in the following manner:

One can say that in regards to Chinese philosophy, with Laozi and Confucius the character couplet for philosophy (*zhexue*) came into our hands. It is not that there was no thought before Laozi, but that there was no systematic-genealogical (*xitong*) thought. (520)

Philosophy is “systematic-genealogical” thought. Here systematic-genealogical thought means that it is both systematic and genealogical. Laozi’s thought is philosophy because it was aware of history as system and genealogy and it is a “systematic-genealogical thought” which has a systematicity. Moreover, this systematic-genealogical thought is continued as an “internal route.” Just like “a type of method, a philosophical method, what they call ‘logic’ in foreign languages,” the “internal

route” is a history of *logos*. Laozi developed historical consciousness as philosophy and this was continued not as an outer but an inner logos. In this case, Chinese philosophy as the history of Chinese philosophy becomes philosophy pure and simple.

This image of the history of Chinese philosophy as philosophy returns in Hu Shi’s other discussions. Hu Shi reads the Qing dynasty thinker Dai Zhen, whom he considers as a philosopher against Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, as “marrying philosophy and history” (1997). Moreover, even with respect to Hu Shi’s own philosophy, which is taken as “the Chinese renaissance,” he emphasizes that there is “an awareness of a historical mission” (Hu 1998a, 1630).

6. Feng Youlan A History of Chinese Philosophy

If that is the case, what was the understanding of the history of Chinese philosophy during this period? Let us look Hu Shi’s rival, Feng Youlan (1895–1990) and his understanding of the history of Chinese philosophy. Unlike Hu Shi’s *An Outline of a History of Chinese Philosophy*, which stops at narrating ancient Chinese philosophy, Feng Youlan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*, (Volume 1, 1931, Volume 1 and 2, 1934) is a great general history, and even today holds a place as a reference work.

In this text, Feng Youlan defines philosophy as developing an argument, building a system, and the philosopher adding his personal insights. Moreover, philosophy is the crystallization of the spirit of an epoch. He claims that because periods develop, it is possible to write a history of philosophy. This definition is both similar and different from Hu Shi’s definition. That is, for Feng Youlan, historical consciousness as philosophy is not merely forward-looking because philosophy belongs to a period which is always already presupposed.

From Feng Youlan’s point of view, philosophy in China emerges with Confucius. This is because it is precisely Confucius who for the first time wrote in an individual mode and developed systematic thought. But Feng Youlan did not intend to call this an argument. After this, when Hu Shi criticized Feng Youlan’s theory about the peri-

od of Laozi, he focused on the above comment about Confucius. That is, Feng Youlan claimed that “before Confucius there were no independent writers” (Feng 1985, 23) and therefore because the *Laozi* was the work of an independent scholar, it was after Confucius. But one could say that this was a circular argument that assumed that Laozi post-dated Confucius. Moreover, one could probably assert that there were independent authors before Confucius. This was Hu Shi’s criticism.

Actually, the main reason that Feng Youlan places Confucius at the origin was that Confucius resembled Socrates. Feng states that the evidence for this resemblance was that Confucius lectured to students in a mode separate from the practice of production and he did not write. Moreover, he contends that Confucius’ works also contributed to a philosophical orthodoxy. Besides this, in order to develop an orthodoxy one needs good disciples and Confucius had Mencius, whom one could compare to Plato and Xunzi, whom one could compare to Aristotle. In this way, Feng transposes the grand narrative of the origin of Western philosophy in Greece to a different place, namely China.

7. The Civilization of Barbarians

So what was his theory of Laozi? Feng Youlan claims that Laozi embodies the “spirit of the people of the state of Chu” (167). That is, as a new nation, the people of Chu did not have a high level of culture. They were not constrained by the culture of the state of Zhou and could resist the traditional socio-political system of the time. Thus Laozi negated the idea of a volitional heaven which Confucius had yet followed as the legacy and established a metaphysical principle of principles, the “way” (*dao*). This was an attitude of making philosophy metaphysical. Feng Youlan uses Laozi’s spirit of negation to make philosophy more philosophical. In other words, here we do not have Hu Shi’s aporia which consisted in attempting to see philosophy in Laozi and Confucius and not being able to escape from the traps of “historical awareness” and of the intensity of a revolution that rebuilds through negation. In short, Feng Youlan aimed to write “another history of Western philosophy” in China.

That said, Feng Youlan is not simple. Let us examine this by traversing his interpretation of a “small country with few people.” The following excerpt is from the end of his discussion of Laozi.

A small country with few people is the ideal society described in the *Laozi*. This is not merely the barbaric condition of primitive society. This is a condition in which the civilization contains the barbaric. It is not the case that there were no boats or carts; they had them but they just did not ride them. It is not that they did not have weapons; they did not use them even if they had them. In primitive society it could probably not be the case that “they enjoyed their food and had great clothes.” To use a phrase from the *Laozi*, “great civilization appears barbaric.” The civilization of the barbaric is the civilization that continues for the longest time. (182)

Feng Youlan criticized Hu Shi for taking the Laozi’s “small country with a few people” as a “primitive society” based on the assumption of an evolution from barbarism to civilization. Feng notes that the movement from barbarism to civilization is not one of simple evolution. Even when civilization is realized, barbarism is preserved and it is precisely this “civilization of barbarism” that contains vitality and continues eternally.

Here we perhaps have the question of whether the Western civilization that we see developing before us is not a “civilization of barbarism.” Unlike the West, China degenerated because it was too civilized.

He adds the following note to the passage cited above.

If a nation only preserved civilization and gets rid of barbarism, this adumbrates decline. The Chinese have an extraordinary literary talent. They respected detail in regards to the weight of clothes to an unbelievable degree. But this was only civilization without barbarism. If the Chinese nation degenerates, it is because it was too civilized. (182)

Could Feng Youlan’s history of Chinese philosophy really bring barbarism back to China? Alternatively, is it just that one must insert

barbarism to attain a “civilization of barbarism?”

Conclusion

Through the work of Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, we have seen the modern attempt to establish a history of Chinese philosophy as philosophy. If we borrow Hu Shi’s turn of phrase, we can say it is only with Hu Shi and Feng Youlan that Chinese philosophy becomes the “history of Chinese philosophy as philosophy.” Can one construct Chinese philosophy in a different way by examining these two extremes? This would not be to make an internal history one’s own through a self-aware historical consciousness and it would not be to write another history of Western philosophy. The above question confronts Chinese philosophy at the present juncture.

And if we try to think about “metaphilosophy” in a radical way, we had better invent a new possibility of “history” in philosophy. Then, “metaphilosophy” appears as a historico-philosophical consciousness of otherness that keeps interrogating the “re-appropriation” of philosophy in a specified history.

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