

# Study on the Quest of Philosophical Identity: Definition of Philosophy in Chinese Historical- Philosophical Writings at the Beginning of the 20th Century\*

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**Abstract**—The present article examines a range of attempts to give a definition to the term ‘philosophy’, undertaken in Chinese works on the history of Chinese philosophy in the early 20th century. Focus of the article is on the writings of Xie Wuliang, Hu Shih, Zhong Tai and Feng Youlan. These researchers were pioneers in formulating the first histories of Chinese philosophy, and in their works, they tried to figure out the problem field of philosophy and identify the place and role of the Chinese thought in the global philosophy. Modern understanding of philosophy in China is based on the definitions provided for in these writings.

**Keywords**—philosophy; Chinese philosophy; history of Chinese philosophy; Xie Wuliang; Hu Shih; Zhong Tai; Feng Youlan

## I. INTRODUCTION

The definition of philosophy in the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary looks quite familiar to the Western reader, and at the same time, this definition has an obvious Marxist influence. “Philosophy is a doctrine of the worldview. It is a synthesis and generalization of natural and social knowledge. The main questions of philosophy are “thinking” and “being”, “spirit” and “matter”, etc.” [1]. The word “philosophy”, namely zhexue, appeared in the Chinese language only at the beginning of the 20th century. These two characters (哲学) — zhe (wise, sagacious; wise man, sage), and xue (learning, knowledge) were combined into a new word (Japanese reading of this word - tetsugaku) by a Japanese scholar and educator Nishi Amane in an article Bai Yi Xin Lun (百一新论), published in 1874 [2]. Chinese scholars started to use the term zhexue at the very beginning of the 20th century. In 1901-1903 there appeared a series of works with the word zhexue in the title, although this word referred primarily to Western philosophy [3]. The phrase zhongguozhexue for “Chinese philosophy” was first used by Liu Shipei (刘师培, 1884-1919) in the article “Study of the

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origins of Chinese philosophy” (中国哲学起源考), published in the newspaper “Cultural Heritage Bulletin” (国粹学报) in Shanghai in 1906. In the article in the framework of the traditional Chinese approach, Liu Shipei noted that Chinese philosophy mainly refers to the traditional teachings of the sages and to the canons.

In the early 20th century, from 1916 to 1936, there were published several works on the history of Chinese philosophy. In these writings a serious work on the definition of the concept of philosophy, the development of chronological and problem frameworks of Chinese and world philosophy was carried out.

## II. XIE WULIANG: THE FIRST HISTORY OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

In 1916, there was published the first history of Chinese philosophy written by a Chinese scholar, it was “The History of Chinese Philosophy” by Xie Wuliang (谢无量, 1884-1964).

In the introduction to the work Xie Wuliang paid a lot of attention to explaining what philosophy is. He used the term zhexue, but it is obvious that this term had not yet settled by the time, it was unusual for the reader, so demanded explanation. Xie Wuliang argued that despite the western origin of the term ‘philosophy’— «In ancient books there was no name for philosophy. In the West, there was [a name], in the East it was translated» [4] – philosophy itself had a universal character. In the West and in China philosophy strives for wisdom, moreover, the literal meaning of the western term philosophy is ‘love of wisdom’, similar attitude towards philosophy was in China, too, e.g. «Confucius, the founder of Chinese philosophy, praised the love of learning (好学) and noted that the love of knowledge leads to wisdom» [4].

Giving the definition to philosophy Xie Wuliang wrote: “How did heaven and earth appear? How did all things (万物) come about? How did the man appear? He who knows this is called a wise man. If you do not know, but strive to know the

answers to these questions, this is the beginning of philosophy” [4].

Trying to more accurately outline the problem field of philosophy in China and, at the same time, to demonstrate its similarity to Western philosophy, Xie Wuliang pointed out the division of philosophy and science that had existed since the ancient times. He marked out *daoshu* (道术, the art of Tao) as “philosophy”, and separated it from “science” — *fangshu* (方术, the magical art), pointing that Chuang Tzu accepted this division. “Zhuang Zhou said that the art of Tao (*daoshu*) had become unusable and after that a magical art (*fangshu*) appeared. *Daoshu* have nothing that would not be one, while *fangshu* cleared the various sides of [reality]. *Daoshu* is philosophy, and *fangshu* is science” [4].

Xie Wuliang believed that Confucian Six Classics<sup>1</sup> and the nine schools of thought<sup>2</sup> included all those areas that made up the content of modern Western philosophy, i.e. metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.

Based on this, Xie Wuliang concluded that Chinese thought could be defined as ‘philosophy’, and it corresponded to the Western understanding of philosophy. Philosophy in China originated in ancient times. The origins of philosophical (Xie Wuliang insisted that it was precisely philosophy, not pre-or protophilosophy) knowledge he saw in the ideas of the mythological rulers of ancient China, Fu Xi and Huang-di [4].

Readers perceived the “History of Chinese Philosophy” extremely critically. It was noted that the innovation of this work was only in the title and the definition of the term “philosophy”, while the main content was a retelling of the “Shiji” (史记, “The Records of the Grand Historian”) and other canonical works [5], [6].

### III. HU SHIH: CHINESE PRAGMATIST AND EXPERIMENTER

A completely different approach to understanding philosophy can be seen in the second work on the history of Chinese philosophy, in “The Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy” by Hu Shih (胡适, 1891-1962), published in Shanghai in 1919. Hu Shih was the most devoted of all the Chinese students of John Dewey (1859-1952). After returning to China, he actively promoted pragmatism, participated in organizing Dewey’s visit to China, translated his lectures, and also consistently applied pragmatist methodology in his studies on Chinese philosophy, literature and culture.

“The Outline of the history of Chinese philosophy. Volume 1” was published three years after the publication of “The History of Chinese Philosophy” by Xie Wuliang. Although only the first volume was published, devoted to the

ancient Chinese philosophy before the 3rd century BC, this work immediately overshadowed the previous writing, to the extent that many researchers forgot about the work of Xie Wuliang and referred “The Outline” as to the first history of Chinese philosophy.

There was a great and rapid shift in understanding of philosophy in China in the beginning of 20th century. Hu Shih directly used terms ‘philosophy’ (zhexue, 哲学) and ‘philosophers’ (zhexuejia, 哲学家), without any explanation of the Western origin of this term. Hu Shih understood philosophy as a universal phenomenon, so he didn’t pay attention to the origin of the name, but only to the phenomenon itself. Hu Shih started his research of the history of Chinese philosophy from the definition of the latter. For him, “[a]ny science that explores the most important issues of human life, and in the search of basic solutions reasoning from its origins, is called philosophy” [7]. This definition, on one hand, shows anthropological approach of the traditional Chinese thought (focused on the problems of human life), and on the other hand reflects a pragmatist background of Hu Shih (centered on solving specific problems and based on the idea of division of philosophy and science). In later works Hu Shih made definition of philosophy more precise, he wrote, “[p]hilosophy examines the most important issues of human life, comprehending them from the point of view of significance, and seeks significance that can be to a certain extent universal” [8]. Clarifying the role of philosophy, Hu Shih pays much attention to the ethical component of the philosophical thought. For him, “ordinary people either convince others to do well and not wrong, or encourage good deeds and punish the bad”, while “philosophers, when meeting with similar problems, study what is “good” and “evil”, find out the nature of “good” and “evil” [7].

In “The Outline”, Hu Shih also brought forward a concept of the development of world philosophy. In his opinion, there were four sources of the origin of philosophy, i.e. China, India, Greece and Judea. As a result of historical interaction, Indian philosophy merged with Chinese, giving rise to neo-Confucianism, and Jewish philosophy dissolved into Greek, forming medieval European philosophy. Hu Shih was extremely optimistic about the future formation of a unified world philosophy based on the synthesis of neo-Confucianism and Western philosophy.

### IV. ZHONG TAI: TRADITIONALISTIC APPROACH AND REJECTION OF ANALOGIES WITH THE WEST

In 1929 Zhong Tai published “The History of Chinese Philosophy”. Zhong Tai (钟泰, 1888-1879) studied in Japan at the University of Tokyo. At the time of the publication of “The History of Chinese Philosophy”, he was a professor at the department of Studies of Chinese ancient civilization at the Zhejiang University (Hangzhou, China).

Unlike Xie Wuliang and Hu Shih, Zhong Tai in his work consciously refused to draw any parallels with Western philosophy. He refused to consider Western philosophy as a model for a Chinese one, moreover, he believed that any analogy and, even more, usage of the terms of Western

<sup>1</sup> Six Classics: namely: Book of Songs (诗经), Book of History (尚书), Book of Rites (仪礼), Book of Changes (周易), Spring and Autumn Annals (春秋) and the lost Book of Music (乐经)

<sup>2</sup> Philosophical schools of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (770-220 BC): Confucians (儒家), Daoists (道家), Yin and Yang (阴阳家), Legalists (法家), Logicians (名家), Mohists (墨家), Diplomats (纵横家), Miscellaneous (杂家), and Agriculturalists (农家).

philosophy to describe Chinese philosophy would lead to the distortion of the latter. “Western and Chinese teachings have their own systems. Forcible convergence of the systems leads to the destruction of the systems’ features” [9]. Zhong Tai advocated the independent origin and existence of the systems of Western and Chinese philosophy, so he defended the completely independent character of Chinese philosophy [9].

Before Feng Youlan published in 1931-1934 his “History of Chinese Philosophy”, the work of Zhong Tai was the most complete history of Chinese thought, it covered issues starting from the philosophical views of the Zhou dynasty to the ideas of statesmen and Confucian scholar of the late Qing dynasty Zeng Guofan (曾国藩, 1811-1872).

In Zhong Tai’s writing, the word *zhexue* is used without special explanations of its western origin. Obviously, Zhong Tai was used to this term while studying in Japan and did not perceive it either as a translation of the Western term, or as an analogy with Western philosophy.

According to Zhong Tai, “[f]rom the time of the Zhou dynasty, one can speak of Chinese philosophy as a system”, but he noted that the origin of Chinese philosophy is more ancient, “Confucius praised “Yi-[jing]”, and “Yi-[jing]” originates from the trigrams of Fu Xi; Tzu Si in the “Zhong Yun” talked about following the middle, and this was precisely the reason why Yao transferred power to Shun” [9]. Unlike other authors of the histories of Chinese philosophy, Zhong Tai did not search for similarities with Western philosophy, but tried to mark out a completely unique, specific to Chinese philosophy system of categories, e.g. primordial sky, filial piety, following the middle, Tianxia (All under Heaven), etc. [9].

Many contemporary readers thought that this attitude was regressive. Taking into consideration the spread and influence of the “doubt in antiquity” approach (*yigu*, 疑古) during that period, it is understandable. Today, researchers are returning to an analysis of his concept, appreciating it as an alternative way to strengthen the national identity of Chinese philosophy, although even now a number of researchers of Chinese philosophy criticize Zhong Tai’s position for “trying to return the scientific nature of Chinese philosophy to antiquity” and the “teachings of the canons” [10].

#### V. FENG YOULAN: RESTORATION OF THE ROLE OF CONFUCIANISM IN WESTERN TERMS

“History of Chinese Philosophy” by Feng Youlan (冯友兰, 1895-1990) is the best known book on the history of Chinese philosophy in the West. It was translated into English by Derk Bodde (1909-2003), and Feng Youlan himself wrote in English “The Short History of Chinese Philosophy”.

In the introduction to his research, Feng Youlan pointed out that the word ‘philosophy’ has the Western origin. Feng Youlan thought that the main task of the researcher of Chinese philosophy is to clarify correlation of the ideas of Chinese thinkers and the Western name of philosophy [11]. Feng Youlan intentionally didn’t give the definition to the

term ‘philosophy’, he wrote, “the definitions of ‘philosophy’ of various philosophers differed ... Knowing its content, one can know what philosophy is, and the official definition of the word philosophy is not necessary to be given specifically” [11]. Instead of giving the definition, Feng Youlan provided a framework of Greek philosophy, that is for him physics, ethics, logic, or, in modern terms, a theory of world, a theory of life, and a theory of knowledge [11]. Thus, philosophy is a set of reflections of intellectuals on the queries inside this framework.

According to Feng Youlan, Western philosophy in its basic ideas is similar to *xuanxue* (玄学, learning of the mystery) of the Wei and Jin dynasties, *daoxue* (道学, learning of the truth) of the Song and Ming dynasties and the *yilixue* (义理学, learning of the principles) of the Qing dynasty [11], so Feng Youlan specially noticed that the terms ‘Chinese philosophy’ and ‘Chinese philosophers’ are valid and liable for use. Feng Youlan noted that Chinese and Western philosophies were not equal in all three spheres of philosophical knowledge. Chinese philosophy didn’t pay much attention to a theory of knowledge, while Chinese thinkers were focused on a theory of world and a theory of life (or ethics and metaphysics as it was translated by Bodde in the English publication of the book). Western philosophers developed all parts of philosophy, but Chinese philosophers mainly focused on human problems, and one can find only a few references about cosmological and other issues. Feng Youlan shows that the thoughts of the Chinese thinkers in the sphere of methodology, argumentation and explanation are mediocre comparing to Western and Indian philosophies [11]. Main focus of Chinese thinkers, according to Feng Youlan, was on the search for happiness, and they considered knowledge only as instrument for achieving it. Thus, they were not interested in pure knowledge itself. It was Feng’s explanation of the lack of methodology in Chinese philosophy. Chinese thinkers were trying to answer the question “what is a person” and not “what does a person have”, so they reflected on the moral qualities of a person, and not on his intellectual characteristics. “If a man is a Sage, he remains a Sage, even if he is completely lacking intellectual knowledge; if he is an evil man, he remains evil, but he may have boundless knowledge” [12].

#### VI. CONCLUSION

After 1949, the search for the identity of Chinese philosophical thought within the framework of a universal epistemological model based primarily on the achievements of Western philosophy was continued in Hong Kong and Taiwan by such thinkers as Mou Zongsan (牟宗三, 1909-1995), Tang Junyi (唐君毅, 1909-1978), Xu Fuguan (徐复观, 1903-1982).

In the PRC, following the development of the Marxist thought, there was a Marxist understanding of philosophy, the idea that “two opposite trends were formed, idealistic and materialistic philosophy” [1].

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the People’s Republic of China once again began a discussion about the legitimacy of the term ‘Chinese philosophy’, in which

researchers discussed questions about the formation of a new view of understanding both Chinese philosophy and world philosophy.

All these areas of the development of philosophical thought in China originate from the first histories of Chinese philosophy, elaborated by the Chinese scientists in the early twentieth century. These works laid the foundation for a modern understanding of philosophy in China and possible models for its further development.

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