

# Overshadowed Role of the First “History of Chinese Philosophy” by Xie Wuliang\*

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**Abstract**—In contemporary Chinese language term for philosophy – *zhexue* – appeared only at the beginning of 20th century, but during the first decade of the century became well known and widely used. First special writing in China dedicated to the history of Chinese philosophy was “The History of Chinese Philosophy” by Xie Wuliang. Although later Hu Shih turned to be considered the first scientific historian of Chinese philosophy, the present article reveals the crucial role of the Xie Wuliang’s paper for the development of the contemporary Chinese views on the history of Chinese philosophy.

**Keywords**—Chinese philosophy; history of philosophy; history of Chinese philosophy; Xie Wuliang; Hu Shih

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “Chinese philosophy” appears only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern term *zhexue* (哲学) in the meaning of “philosophy” was first used by the Japanese scientist Nishi Amane (西周, 1829-1897) in the work “Bai Yi Xin Lun” (百一新论), published in 1874<sup>1</sup>. It is not known when exactly the term *zhexue* started to be used in China, but it is assumed that it happened at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [1]. In the first years of 20<sup>th</sup> century appeared a number of works with the word *zhexue* in the title: in 1901 was published Cai Yuanpei’s work (蔡元培, 1868-1940) “General Discussions on Philosophy” (哲学总论); in 1902 in the newspaper “The World of Translation”, founded by Xie Wuliang in collaboration with Ma Yifu (马一浮, 1883-1967) and Ma Junwu (马君武, 1881-1940) were published essays “General Discussions on Philosophy” (哲学泛论, translated from German) and “History of Philosophy” (哲学史, translated from Japanese); in 1903, Wang Guowei (王国维, 1877-1927) published “Refutation of doubts about philosophy” (哲学辨惑).

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<sup>1</sup> This work is based on Nishi Amane’s lecture, which was delivered shortly before the Meiji Restoration. It is supposed to take place in 1867. See: Takayanagi Nobuo. Japan’s “Isolated Father” of Philosophy: Nishi Amane 西周 and His “Tetsugaku 哲学”//Whither Japanese Philosophy? III Reflections through other Eyes (UTCP Booklet 19). 2011, pp. 81-82.

The term “*Zhongguo zhexue*” in the sense of “Chinese philosophy” was first used by philologist and revolutionary activist Liu Shipei (刘师培, 1884-1919) in the article “The study of the origins of Chinese philosophy” (中国哲学起源考), published in the newspaper “Herald of Cultural Heritage” (国粹学报) in 1906, Liu Shipei adhered to the traditional Chinese approach and noted that Chinese philosophy points mainly to the traditional teaching of the sages and the teaching of canons.

Cai Yuanpei, who in 1912 became the Minister of Education of the Republic of China, proposed new directions for education, including the teaching of philosophy. Pioneer in the development of these areas was the Peking University, in 1912 in the Humanities Divisions was founded the philosophy section; in 1914 began the enrollment of students for the first time. In 1915, a branch of Western philosophy was opened, and, as a result, the Peking University became “the only educational institution in China, in which there were supposed to be three branches of philosophy: Chinese, Western and Indian” [2]. Innovative in form, this undertaking remained for a long time completely traditional in its content, the course of philosophy at the Peking University was still subordinated to the dogma of classical Chinese pedagogy—the teaching of philosophy did not go beyond the classical study of ancient canons, the focus of the study was on the history of Chinese thought, the exposition of which began with the legendary times of “the three sovereigns and five emperors” (三皇五帝), and the main content of the courses was a retelling of archaic myths [3]. The Chinese philosopher, historian of philosophy Feng Youlan (冯友兰, 1895-1990) reminisces about the course of Chinese philosophy: “The follower of the school of Lu-Wang taught a course on the history of Chinese philosophy for two years, four hours a week. He began with the perfect-minded emperors Yao and Shun, and by the end of the first semester he had reached Zhou-gong, who lived five centuries before Confucius” [4].

## II. THE FIRST “HISTORY OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY”

In the first half of the twentieth century Chinese scholars created a number of special works on the history of Chinese philosophy. The pioneer in this direction was the literary

critic, historian of philosophy, public figure Xie Wuliang (谢无量, 1884-1964).

He received a good home education, studied with Cai Yuanpei in Nanyang Public School (南洋公学), trained in Japan. During the years of his life, he worked as an editor of a number of newspapers and magazines, taught at the School for Preservation of Antiquity (存古学堂) in Chengdu, in the South-East and Sichuan Universities, and was deputy director of the Central Research Institute of Culture and History [5].

The "History of Chinese Philosophy" (中国哲学史), published in Shanghai in 1916, was the first work in Chinese history, which combined the words "Chinese" and "history of philosophy", as well as the first systematic study of Chinese philosophy using elements of the Western methodology, undertaken by the Chinese scientist.

Xie Wuliang begins his "History of Chinese Philosophy" with a distinction between the spheres of activity of philosophy and science. China historically has no such a division, and all theoretical activity was called xue (学) - doctrine, learning. The first attempt to distinguish philosophy and science in terms of terminology was undertaken in China by the Confucian philosopher Fang Yizhi (方以智, 1611-1671), who suggested using categories from "Xi Ci Zhuan" (系辞传, the Commentary on the Appended Phrases) zhice (质测, measurement of matter) and tongji (通几, penetration into [initial] pulses). This proposal was not supported by Chinese intellectuals, and these notions did not become widespread [6] [7] [8].

Xie Wuliang singled out daoshu (道术, the art of Tao) and fangshu (方术, the magical art). He wrote: "Now there is a division in knowledge. They talk about philosophy and science. In ancient books there was no name for philosophy. In the West, there was [a name], in the East it was translated ... Tao is one. Zhuang Zhou said that the art of Tao (daoshu) had become unusable and after that appeared magical art (fangshu). Daoshu did not have that which would not be one, while the fangshu cleared the various sides of [reality]. Daoshu is a philosophy, and the fangshu is a science. Perfectly ancient antiquities gave all the forces of daoshu and in this they acquired fullness, they were called ru (儒, Confucians). Yang Ziyun said that what binds heaven, earth and man is called ru, what connects heaven and earth, but does not bind a person, is called ji (伎, art, craftsmanship). Ji - is science" [9].

At the same time, Xie Wuliang insisted on the universal character of the phenomenon of philosophy. Confirming the identity of the subject of philosophy in the West and in China, Xie Wuliang noted that the meaning of the word "philosophy" (of Latin origin, in his opinion) is the love of wisdom, just as "Confucius, the founder of Chinese philosophy, claimed the love of learning (好学) and noted that the love of knowledge leads to wisdom" [10]. Thus,

according to Xie Wuliang, the central idea of both Western and Chinese philosophy is the love of wisdom, the desire for it. 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" [11].

According to Xie Wuliang the sphere of philosophical knowledge in the West and in China also coincides. He wrote that contemporary Western scholars distinguish philosophy in three sections: metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, and at the same time the Chinese canonical texts and philosophical schools fully cover all these sections [12].

He traces the history of Chinese philosophy from the legendary rulers of antiquity Fu Xi, Shen-nong, the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun to neo-Confucian and Buddhist philosopher Peng Shaosheng (Peng Chimu, 1740-1796, 彭尺木).

Xie Wuliang, according to traditional Chinese historiography, divided the history of Chinese philosophy into three stages: deep antiquity (上古), average antiquity (中古, from Han to Song) and new time (近世, from Song to Qing).

Xie Wuliang referred the formation of Chinese philosophy to the time of the reign of mythical emperors of antiquity, and he regarded them not as mythological views or pre-philosophy, as do many modern authors [13]. For him, the ideas of perfect antiquity are unquestionable beginnings of proper philosophical knowledge.

Xie Wuliang called Fu Xi, the mythical ruler who reigned, according to tradition, from 2852 to 2788 BC, the founder of philosophy in China. According to Xie Wuliang, Fu Xi gave people a methodology for studying the universe: "To establish a way to study the great law of the cosmos, Fu Xi created eight trigrams" [14]. Thus, "Fu Xi began to establish the basis of ancient and modern philosophy" [15]. In the activity of another mythological ruler - Shen-nong - Xie Wuliang saw the beginnings of the philosophy of human life "because he created great methods of medicine and farming using the over-form principles of things" [16]. According to Xie Wuliang, the mythological sages of antiquity possessed all the fullness of wisdom. "From antiquity to the [reign of dynasties] of Xia and Yin, the rulers were the greatest sages. [Governor] alone was responsible for the world (天下), he alone kept the doctrine under heaven. At that time, philosophy and politics were not separated" [17].

According to the concept of Sima Tan, Xie Wuliang divided the philosophical thought of ancient China into six

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Lunyu - haoxue. See: A.E. Lukyanov. "Chong-yung": Confucian doctrine of the middle. // Confucian treatise "Chong-yung". Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura, 2003. P. 97; A.E. Lukyanov. Ancient Chinese philosophy. Part 1. Formation of Chinese Philosophy. Lecture 4. The concept of philosophy among the ancient Chinese. Moscow: IVD RAN, 2012. P. 51-60. A.E. Lukyanov. "Shi-jing": archetype of Confucian culture and philosophy. // Person and Culture of the East. Researches and Translations. 2014. № 4. P. 109-130.

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2 Reference to "Chong-yung" (The Doctrine of Meaning). According A.E. Lukyanov «"Chong-yung" concretizes the definition of philosophy in

schools: Confucianism (Confucius, Zisi, Mencius and Xun Kuang), Taoism (Lao-tzu, Yang Zhu, Lieh-tzu, Zhuang Zhou), Moism, Legism (Guan Zhong, Shen Buhai, Shang Yang, Shen Dao, Han Fei), school of names (Yin Wen, Hui Shi, Gongsun Long) and eclecticists.

In the section, devoted to the average antiquity, Xie Wuliang used a many-sided approach: first of all, he considered the development of classical philosophical thought in China, paying attention both to the development of Confucianism and Taoism; he also attentively examined attempts to synthesize the ideas of ancient Chinese philosophical schools to create an syncretic ideological system that would be suitable for the management of a centralized empire (thought of Lu Jia, Jia Yi, Liu Xiang). But at the same time, he paid much attention to the development of Buddhist philosophy in China, its influence on traditional Chinese thought (on the harmonious existence of the three teachings, on the indestructibility and destructibility of the spirit) and the struggle against its influence (philosophy of Li Ao and Han Yu).

The main part of the third part of the book (the history of modern philosophy) is devoted to the analysis of neo-Confucian thought: philosophical thought of the Cheng brothers, Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan, Wang Yangming and others. The work ends with a presentation of the philosophical views of Peng Shaosheng, a neo-Confucian philosopher who lived in second half of the 18th century and showed with his life the difficult way of seeking for truth: initially Peng Shaosheng shared the views of the neo-Confucian "doctrine of the principle," then turned to "the doctrine of the heart," and eventually became a believing Buddhist.

Xie Wuliang did not pay attention to Chinese philosophy thought in 19th century and even did not provide readers with a conclusion of the book.

### III. CONCLUSION

"The history of Chinese philosophy" by Xie Wuliang "was quickly overshadowed by Hu Shi's highly successful *Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang* (Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy)" [18]. The book received many critical remarks both from the contemporaries of the author, and current readers and researchers. It was noted that this research was mainly a retelling of the book of the Japanese scientist Takase Takejiro (高瀬武次郎, 1869-1950) "The History of Chinese Philosophy" (Shina tetsugaku shi, 支那哲学史) and, for this reason, has no novelty neither in terms of methodology, nor in specific content [19]. It was noted that the author remained in the frames of traditional views and was entirely in the field of canonology, when the "canons were explained by canons" [20] [21]. Thus, the chapter devoted to ancient Chinese philosophers, begun with the presentation of their life path, which is a lengthy and uncritical citation of "The Historic Records" by Sima Qian. Professor Ge Zhaoguang wrote "this work only had a modern-sounding title and a good deal of roughly assembled materials, but the narrative was not able to establish a new paradigm" [22].

For these reasons, the work of Xie Wuliang is usually only mentioned among the first "histories of Chinese philosophy", recognizing Hu Shi as a pioneer in this field [23] [24] [25]. Nevertheless, it was the first attempt of the Chinese scientist to compile a systematic description of the history of Chinese philosophy. Later in the 20s-30s of the works were more sophisticated, more scientific, but "The history of Chinese philosophy" by Xie Wuliang opened the new epoch of studying Chinese intellectual history and remains the first "history of Chinese philosophy".

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