

European Science and Intercultural Dialogues

With Non-European Cultures: The Case of Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract:

As with any other type of inquiry, intercultural research is ultimately about descriptions and interpretations of reality, that is, of natural and social actualities. However, the confrontation and understanding of so-called “foreign cultures” has always been associated with problems of different languages, traditions, histories and socializations. Interpretations of various aspects, factors and elements of “non-European” cultures are always connected with the geographical, political and economic position of the interpreting subject as well as the object of interpretation. This article attempts to draw attention to the Eurocentric traps that are products of our own cultural socialization and can often lead us down a blind alley of misunderstanding and misinterpretation in dialogues with “foreign cultures”.

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1. Negation of Colonial Approaches

The historical development, political-economic conditions, and internal structure of the understanding and interpretations of non-European cultures were thoroughly described by Edward W. Said in his major work from 1978, *Orientalism*. Said's critique of Orientalism as a scientific discipline that establishes and conditions the colonialist discourse of studying cultures that are not the product of European tradition is at the same time a critique of the relation of violence that is evident in the classical relationship of knowledge and authority. Similar to the feminist critique of Western methodological processes, it is also directed against the method of understanding and communicating within the structure of the active (Western) cognitive subject and passive (non-Western) cognitive object. Western discourses about “the East” use methodological criteria based on prevailing economic and political authority (Said 1995: 49-73). Within this framework, any confrontation always becomes an interpretation based on the value system substantively defined by the ideology of material (civilizational) progress and in terms of method by European formal logic (Cui 2005: 17). If we are to consciously move away from colonial

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approaches when confronting so-called “foreign cultures”, it is good to ask why we still engage in the study of foreign cultures (or any form of research for that matter) in the first place. The driving force, despite all the insights into the problematic nature of science, its political function and mechanisms, and the general questionability of its social applications, could simply be curiosity in the sense of the desire for new discoveries.

Although curiosity, as the final driving force of inquiry, is unequivocal in this sense—since we all know that curiosity is a fine quality—it is nevertheless good to ask ourselves also in what way we are to satisfy it. For it is precisely in the way we satisfy curiosity, or more elegantly, precisely in the cognitive method, that some traps may be concealed which can, without us knowing, automatically lead us to the point where we realize we have entered the back door of the house we resolutely left by the front door. Ergo, if we do not ask about the methods and the nature and social function of these methods at the very beginning of the confrontation, if we stick to curiosity as the explicit, subjective, apolitical motive of the desire to understand, sooner or later we will find ourselves in the labyrinth of colonial discourses dictated by criteria of domination and rule. No encounter with any subject of research can remain a subjective and personal matter, certainly not when it is an encounter with so-called foreign cultures, and even less so when this encounter takes place within the framework of science and its methods. Every scientific discipline is therefore always political, not only because it can exist because of the state budget, but mainly because all of its findings have a certain applicative function within society. This is even more reliable for those findings or scientific discoveries that carry an explicitly non-political message. In this sense, every scientist is responsible for the results of their research: if they do not interpret them politically themselves, they will be interpreted by those who are able to leverage the research in the interests of the ruling authorities. Truly new discoveries can therefore only be political in the sense that they challenge existing reality and, above all, the common way of understanding that reality.

2. Categories – Culturally Conditioned Tools for the Analysis of Reality

We always approach different cultures or different social realities through the processes of categorization. This is not just an analysis of reality, which even allows for standardized denomination, i.e. the definition of concepts of individual segments of the society we are dealing with. A very simple and explicit example of problems we may have in defining categories within individual human societies is the structure of kinship relations and their denominations. For example, in the European tradition we are accustomed to establishing the category of parenthood primarily as a category of a biological relationship. In the community of cultures whose social foundations are based on different economic and political structures, this kind of categorization

may prove to be incorrect. When Han-Chinese ethnologists studied the social structure of the traditionally gender-egalitarian Mosuo tribe in the southern province of Yunnan, they worked based on a common biological categorization. When asked how many children she had, one informant answered ten. It was only the translator, who was biculturally socialized and thus had insight into both structures of categorization at her disposal (those that came from the researcher as well as those that were common in the community that was the object of the research), who prevented the registration of false data and explained that the informant interviewed was, in a biological sense, the mother of only one of these ten children: all the other children were biological children of her sisters. However, because this was a community in which all the children of a clan grew up collectively and in which the adult members of the clan raised them together, biological motherhood was not central to an understanding of shared relationships as a category of social parenthood.

Another aspect relevant to our processes of categorizing sibling relations, for example, is the designation of these relations between absolute gender. That is, if we proceed to study social communities in which the more common criterion of categorization is relative gender, we will soon find ourselves in the grip of misunderstandings that can lead to false results. For example, let us take the words “brother” and “sister” and travel to the island of Ontong-Java and view the local familial system there through the lens of this relationship. We will ask the correspondent what he calls his sister. He will say that he calls his sister *ave* while he calls his brother *kainga*. So, according to the categorical system we are used to, we will write that *ave* means sister and *kainga* means brother in the language being examined. However, the matter would be complicated if we want to validate this information further because if we ask his sister what she calls her brother, she will respond with: *ave* while she would call her sister *kainga* (Lee 1984: 170). Similar problems arise when examining traditional clan communities whose ideological basis is a strict gerontocratic hierarchy, as reflected for example in Confucianism. This is because the traditional Chinese family system forms a structure based on the distribution of labour and power on the basis of gender and age hierarchy, the foundation of which is, for example, the immediate family. Therefore, Sinologists know from the beginning of their professional socialization that they have to deal with different terms for the relative age relationship of siblings within such family relationships in Chinese society (*jiejie* 姐姐= older sister, *meimei* 妹妹=younger sister, *gege* 哥哥= older brother, *didi* 弟弟= younger brother). Terms that would denote relationships between siblings without defining their interpersonal age relations do not exist in China. All three cases mentioned above show us that when we study differently structured social communities, we are in fact dealing with the same reality as in our own cultures: here and there, it is the same family relationships. What is different, and what could lead us to false assumptions (and thus to incorrect discoveries), are the criteria of categorization of the same reality. The latter, in fact, are always tied to the specifics of traditional economic, political and ideational

structures that determine the existence and function of the social reality in question. This self-contained socio-cultural context influences not only the level of denomination of individual categories that form the basis of the analysed unit, which helps us proceed with the research, but also the processes of research and ultimately its interpretations, as we will see in the next chapter.

3. Interpretation of Reality

The interpretation of research results always represents their key part, the so-called applicative result. Just as we cannot escape its communicability in everyday language, we cannot avoid interpretations in science. Interpretations are an essential part of the methodology and at the same time the part that expresses the responsibility as well as the free will of the research subject. While all other factors (except the selection of data, which to some extent already belongs to the realm of interpretation), such as information, categories, and processes of their organization), are more or less mechanistic, that is, expressed in a strictly formal system of signs, the interpretation of these factors (information, categories and processes) is about their qualitative transfer into the realm of natural language. The transfer of information or its “value” from the system of formal signs to the system of natural language is problematic enough in itself, since the former is a system of defined values, while the latter is a system that also includes moral and ideological implications. As an explicit indicator of value (or meaning) differences that can arise from a simple “translation” of a given sentence from a formal to a natural language, let us consider the following example:

$$\neg p \square q \square \neg p \square q$$

If we express the ‘p’ variable with the sentence “is against us” and the ‘q’ variable with the sentence “is with us”, we could “translate” the upper formalized terms on either side of the equivalence into natural language with the sentence “He/she who is not with us is against us” or “He/she who is not against us is with us”. Although both have the same actual value in the system of formal signs, the moral implications (and substantive messages with it) which are shown in the translation of both terms into the natural language to be not only in-equivalent, but also contradictory.

Cross-cultural research in particular shows very clearly the influence of different socio-cultural contexts on the interpretations of the processes of thinking, where such paradoxicality of transferring a formalized system into natural language is truly reflected. Research that takes into account the differences of historical and ideational developments in different linguistic-cultural circles concludes that the validity of certain basic formal-logical processes, which at first sight seem to be self-evident, is not universal in nature, but depends on a specific traditional background of an individual social reality. As an example of sociocultural conditioning of interpretation we can cite some results of the study of the influence of culture on thought processes, carried out by the research team of Russian psychologist Lurie in 1931-1932 in

remote regions of Central Asia and Uzbekistan. The research was based on the thesis of Wygotsky, who argued that the complexity of intellectual processes depends on the conditions of social life and the practical activity of causational deduction, which in the framework of the European tradition is often understood as a general rule of something we might call “natural” or “universal thought”. These are simple deductions arising from two or more hypotheses of the following type:

H1: When it rains, roads are wet

H2: It rains

K: The roads are wet

One of the typical problem questions used by Lurie's team in its comparative cultural research had the same structure:

H1: All bears are white in the high north.

H2: NovajaZemlja is in the far north.

K: What colour are bears in NovajaZemlja?

Most informants of the illiterate farming population –except for those young people who were literate and answered, as expected, that the bears there were white–responded despite the formal logical relation of both hypotheses, that they could not know what colour the bears in NovajaZemlja were, since they had never been there. The researchers should thus ask this question to more competent people, i.e. the inhabitants of NovajaZemlja. Of course, the research interpretation of such findings may vary. If we assume the a priori universality of the validity of causal deduction, we can interpret their answers as an indicator of the inferiority of their cognitive abilities. However, our interpretation will be able to reveal the questionability of such processes of causal deduction if we also know the relevance of direct experience for survival in an agrarian society of Uzbekistan (Scribner 1984: 313).

Logical processes are crucial in any society in the sense of analyzing and organizing information, since logical confusion could lead to social confusion. However, the formal method of these processes varies based on the specific needs of different social realities.

The remarkable Evans-Richard book on the Zande tribe of describes a society with the noticeable peculiarity that no Zande ever does anything important without first asking the oracle for advice. The process of such divination is done by inserting a small dose of poison into the beak of a chicken while asking a question that requires a

positive or negative answer, i.e. “yes or no”. The life or death of the chicken represents the answer. Furthermore, for the Zande the cause of every human misfortune is witchcraft, and wizards are people whose ill will is always the cause of a misfortune. The way to recognize a wizard is, of course, with the use of an oracle (Bloor 1984: 157)

Being a wizard is not merely a matter of natural disposition. It is also a matter of physical predisposition to a certain “magical substance” found in the stomach of every wizard. Every wizard passes this substance on to his sons, and every witch to her daughters. This substance can be identified through a post-mortem examination conducted by the Zande when trying to prove the validity of witchcraft charges on a deceased individual. According to the processes of logical deduction, it should be perfectly clear that it is enough to find one wizard to know that his entire lineage is also made up of wizards. Evans-Pichard writes the following about this:

Since the Zande clan is made up of a group of male relatives, it is logical for us to conclude that if it is clear that someone is a wizard, all the other members of his clan are wizards as well. Although the Zande understand the meaning of this objection, they do not recognize the validity of the resulting conclusion, for if they did, they would entangle their entire representative world of witchcraft into paradoxicality... The Zande do not understand contradictions as we do because, unlike us, this subject does not interest them theoretically, and because situations in which their belief in witchcraft is particularly evident do not compel such a perception. (cp. *Ibid.*: 156)

Thus, research has shown that the members of the Zande tribe institutionalized a certain “logical fallacy” because one of their most important social institutions would otherwise be threatened, consequently threatening the tribe’s own survival. In other words, the existence of this “logical fallacy” is of existential significance for the Zande tribe if they do not wish to risk social unrest and the consequent need to radically change their way of life (*ibid.*: 158).

However, such institutionalization of logical fallacies is not only common to so-called “traditional” or “natural” societies; similar mechanisms can also be found in contemporary European societies, if we try to look at them through the lens of “objectively” distanced research.

Try to imagine an anthropologist studying certain elements of contemporary Western society in this way, using the standard cross-cultural research methodology. This foreign anthropologist will ask us a question during the course of the study in the form of a causal conclusion (mentioned above) and will want to know if the following conclusion is true:

H1: A murderer is one who kills people on purpose.

H2: Bomber pilots kill people on purpose.

K: Therefore, bomber pilots are murderers.

Although we understand both the hypotheses and the process of causal conclusion many among us would not accept the validity of the conclusion that logically follows, arguing that the foreign researcher simply did not understand what the word murderer means. They will say that she does not recognize the difference between the two cases. Perhaps they will explain: Murder is an act of individual will, while bomber pilots are following orders from the state, which could also sanction them. So we can ascribe a special position to the military. Now we can imagine the anthropologist reading from her diary that she saw men waving their fists in the direction of the bombers in the sky and shouting: "Murderers!"

The answer to this objection, then, might be that there is some sort of analogy between murder and killing in a war, and that the similarities outweigh the differences in the mentality of the victims. We might add that people should not be expected to act according to logic when so challenged, and that what she experienced during the bombing is a perfectly understandable deviation from the guidelines of strictly rational behaviour. The anthropologist would not back down, however, and would continue her questioning using the example of drivers who kill people in traffic accidents. She would undoubtedly be fascinated by the structure of differentiated interpretations that have developed in our culture in relation to concepts such as accident, murder, coincidence, responsibility, error, and intention. If this imaginary anthropologist were to interpret the results of her research using the methods common to Western cultural disciplines in the study of non-European cultures, she would almost have to conclude that members of our culture "understand logical arguments but seek to avoid them by means of an ad hoc developed and almost imperceptible labyrinth of metaphysical differentiation. Thus, there is no practical interest in the validity of processes of logical deduction. Informants have clearly shown that they prefer their metaphysical jungle, since otherwise their whole institution of social sanctioning would be endangered"(ibid.: 163).

The sceptical anthropologist is not necessarily correct, however, and much could be said about the Evans-Richard interpretations of the Zande institutions of witchcraft. After all, judgments that do not recognize the inference that bomber pilots are murderers do not stem from a desire to protect our core institutions from the pressures of logical conclusions. The opposite interpretation is more plausible: we simply adapt our informal mentality to the fact that we generally accept the activities of bomber pilots and murdering drivers. But, to avoid the excessive burden of such

meaning-driven issues, let us examine some simpler questions that are (at least at first glance) entirely formal in nature.

4. Methodology of Chinese Philosophy: Problems of Confrontation and Understanding

First, we will return to the fundamental problem of perception, understanding, and communication by also examining what the “voices of the affected” think of the issue, i.e. some classical and contemporary theories of “non-European” origin. As a Sinologist, I will of course focus mainly on Chinese sources.

Chinese philosophy was developed on the basis of ontological, epistemological, and metaphysical paradigms that differ from those of Western theoretical discourses. However, as we have seen, philosophical concepts and categories cannot be easily transferred from one socio-cultural context to another, and therefore it is often difficult to understand Chinese philosophy through the lens of traditional Western thought. The exclusive use of Western methods can thus lead to serious misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Chinese discourses. Hence, it is important to exercise caution so as not to diminish the richness and depth of Chinese thought or turn it into a weak version of Western philosophical thought.

In recent years, numerous books and articles have appeared in the Chinese-speaking world dealing with the issues of applying Western scientific methodology to the study of topics related to a specific Chinese tradition. One of the most prominent contemporary theorists in this field, Feng Yaoming from Hong Kong, assumes in his book *The Problem of Methodology in Chinese Philosophy* a certain degree of incommensurability of the methodological systems of the Western and East-Asian traditions. He believes that this tradition is connected with the incommensurability of premise networks, which are supposedly the result of the fact that certain concepts cannot be transferred from one socio-cultural context to another. All this logically leads to the inability of comparing different methodological systems, which are not limited to theories or methodological systems of different traditions, but also within only one tradition form a completely common phenomenon. In essence, this is the same problem pointed out by a number of Western theorists (Kuhn, Quin, Lakatos, Feyerabend, etc.), and Feng Yaoming points to the famous case of the relationship between the theories of Newton and Einstein:

Newtonian mechanics and the mechanics of the theory of relativity, for example, represent two different premises networks (paradigms). Although both can be expressed in English, and although both contain many of the same words, we still cannot claim that both theories describe the same thing. This is because the meaning of these same words changes within different premise networks (paradigms)

(zhuanhua= literally: to slip and change). Therefore, we cannot use certain terms from one of the premise networks (paradigm) to describe the terms from the other. (Feng 1989: 291-2)

According to Feng Yaoming, this is a matter of so-called conceptual relativism. He uses the example of the pan in connection with different traditions:

We all know that the Chinese usually use pans with flat bottoms for frying food, while in Europe flat-bottomed pans predominate. Both can be used to fry the same types of food. The food fried in both pans may have the same characteristics in some cases, while they may differ greatly in others. For example, eggs can be fried in both pans. This is a feature that is common to both pans. However, the functions, possibilities and limitations of both pans are also different. These differences affect the different consistency, color, shape and taste of eggs fried in pans with spherical or flat bottoms. (Ibid: 299)

Pans with flat bottoms represent different frames of reference or different systems of theory. Just as the result of frying the same substance in different pans differs in shape, consistency, colour, and taste, different frames of reference lead to different descriptions and explanations of the same objective reality. Different possibilities and limitations in the concrete functionality of both types of pans express different peculiarities of the different frames of reference, i.e. their specific shortcomings and advantages.

Feng Yaoming clearly states that “every frame of reference is based on subjective constructs” (ibid:290), admitting that the description or explanation of reality is never identical to reality, but the “free play” (using a football championship as a metaphorical example) between them supposedly allows for greater application/applicability, which allows for a more complex and objective communication of objective reality. Since the author clearly assumes the existence of an objective reality that is independent of political, socio-cultural factors, he does not need to address the issues of value criteria that condition the selection of the more “appropriate” frames of reference. Therefore, he advocates the use of analytical hypotheses in the study of the issues of translation or certain conceptual transfers tied to frames of reference of different socio-cultural contexts, which supposedly greatly facilitates, if not completely eliminates, such problems (ibid.: 302). As a logician trained in the West, he also stresses the superiority of applying methods of logical analysis when studying objects of non-European socio-cultural traditions:

Be warned: the analytic method or the logical position is not limited to any particular culture, tradition, or national boundary. It can be applied anywhere. (Ibid.:303)

Although he never explicitly states that the “analytic method” or “logic” describes a specific system of European formal logic, he advocates the use of interpretations such as those developed in recent decades in specific Western discourses based on the analysis of language (ibid.: 311 - 325).

But the question whether we can truly apply the logical and analytical method to all sources of Chinese philosophy, still remains open.

5. Conclusion

The concept of language as one of the main means of understanding, its actual scope and function raises issues among linguists as well as philosophers and anthropologists. They mostly agree that language is (not necessarily only, but also) the result of ideologies. If one desires to establish a real understanding between two subjects (not just communication), these ideologies must be separated from the (actual, i.e. total) communicated content. In all likelihood, they would also agree on the assumption that language as such can (not necessarily) mediate the possibility of understanding (at least).

The predisposition of our culturally conditioned findings in this context, as well as those supposedly supra-cultural ones, can only be the openness of being. Our knowledge of the Other, of our fellow-men human beings, or living beings in general, is thus closely connected with the openness of our existence and the openness of our hearts and minds. Only on such a basis can we also become capable of genuine self-reflection; in other words, only on such a basis can we come to know ourselves.

In order to attain such genuine knowledge, we must first embrace differences, for they do not separate us but, on the contrary, unite us in a multifaceted world of our constant interdependence. No human being is an island. And perhaps one of the central principles we can learn from Chinese philosophy is the principle of our mutual interdependence: in our attempt to know and understand each other, we meet to differ, and we differ to meet.

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