

GENERATIVITIES: WESTERN PHILOSOPHY, CHINESE PAINTING, AND THE *YIJING*

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Das Vergangene ist nicht tot; es ist nicht einmal vergangen.
Wir trennen es von uns ab und stellen uns fremd.

Christa Wolf¹

Western philosophy has been defined through the exclusion of non-Western forms of thought as non-philosophical. In this paper, I place the notion of what is “properly” philosophy into question by contrasting the essence/appearance paradigm governing Western metaphysics and its deconstructive critics with the more fluid, dynamic, and participatory forms of encountering and performatively enacting the world that are articulated in Chinese thinking and made apparent in Chinese painting. In this hermeneutical contrast, Western and Chinese thinking themselves are interpreted as co-relational rather than as discrete, mutually indifferent or ethnocentrically nativist traditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the historical definition of philosophy among Western philosophers from Hegel to his anti-historical critics Levinas, Derrida, and Rorty, non-Western peoples have many intellectual practices but in a crucial sense they lack “philosophy.” This absence meant for Hegel the want of a non-pictorial and abstract, cognitive, conceptual thinking; for later thinkers such as Levinas, Derrida, and Rorty—following a line of thinking in Heidegger that the “other beginning” can only arise in confrontation with the first Greek beginning—it concerns the question of a Greek origin that they seek to question and decenter that nevertheless remains the source of all that can be properly called philosophy.

Even the pluralizing of this origin in marking the difference between Athens and Jerusalem, by distinguishing Greek rationality and Jewish prophetic justice, deepens the privilege. Levinas could accordingly remark in an interview: “I always say—but under my breath—that the Bible and the Greeks present the only serious issues in human life; everything else is dancing.”² Levinas and Hegel come to an

¹ C. Wolf: *Kindheitsmuster*. Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand 1979, p. 11.

² E. Levinas / J. Robbins: *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001, p. 149.

agreement that what is not properly philosophy, or in Levinas's case the Jewish other of philosophy, remains mere sensuousness and lacks the seriousness of the concept. The problematic character of metaphysics remains an exclusively philosophical and thus Western concern for the deconstructive critics of the Western philosophical tradition such as Derrida and Rorty whose challenges to the Western canon continue to privilege it.³

The issue here cannot only be one of transference, inheritance, and lineage, as Arabic and Islamic philosophy deeply relies on and is indebted to the heritage of Plato and Aristotle. Nonetheless, beyond the unphilosophical assertion of the ethnic and racial origins of philosophy,—one might examine the question “philosophically” by inquiring into what intellectual forms would differentiate Western and non-Western thought. The answer, particularly in the context of the contrast between Western philosophy and Chinese thinking, often appeals to (1) the distinction between reality and appearance and (2) the—not unrelated—priority of the logical as the assertion of a form independent of all content. The formalism of reason ascends beyond all sensuousness and materiality just as reality purportedly transcends the flowing change and inconstancy of appearance and phenomenon.

2. A CHINESE PAINTING

In a recent work, T. Minh-Ha Trinh describes the practices of traditional Chinese painting and how they, “rather than seeking resemblance with nature’s outward appearance (*xing* 形), involve the movement of its becomingness.”⁴ To take one example, for the poet and painter Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), “paintings, in their language of brush, form and symbol, should inscribe the ever-changing processes of nature.”⁵ Wang Wei’s flow of the brush in painting a landscape situated between earth and sky, in which the painter is inevitably a participant, echoes the shifting lines of the Yijing 易經 (*Classic of Changes*) and the interpreter’s integral participation in the generative process of meaning-formation.⁶

3 I discuss these issues in further detail in E. S. Nelson: “The Yijing and Philosophy: From Leibniz to Derrida”. In: *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38:3, September 2011, pp. 377–396. Levinas and Derrida’s Eurocentric vision is extended in R. Gasché: *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009, and P. Nemo: *What Is the West?* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2006.

4 T. Minh-Ha Trinh: *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*. London: Routledge 2011, p. 69.

5 *Ibid.*; Mai-mai Sze / Gai Wang, *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting*. London: Routledge & K. Paul 1957, p. 40.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 69.



Picture One: An Example of Wang Wei style. Wang Shimin (王時敏, 1592–1680), After Wang Wei's "Clearing of Rivers and Mountains after Snow" (仿王維江山雪霽). Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 133.7 x 60 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.⁷

In this work of ink and color on paper, the painter does not aim at imitatively copying the real and producing “the appearance of reality” as if there could be a reproductive or representational correspondence between the seeing and the seen. Chinese painting does not occur according to the Platonic conception of ideas. Nor does it improperly create a semblance or shadow of the real, a reification of the invisible in the visible, which Levinas depicts—redoubling despite himself the ontological distinction of appearance and essence in a religious-ethical language—as idolatry in his essay “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948).⁸ Levinas adopts a language that denigrates “appearance” as seductive semblance, as he further warns us of “the charm of sorcery, the appearance in the very heart of the real, the dissolution of reality.”⁹ The Luciferian play of appearances is a deceptive shadowing of reality that does not recognize itself as deception and precludes the ethical obligation that can only be revealed in the transcendence of the face-to-face encounter.¹⁰

The experience of the natural world in Wang Shimin’s painting, which is experientially enacted in creative response to his world and the traditions of response that orient it, is not a mere “landscape” for the detached seer. It does not seek to reproduce “the real” and thus denigrate it in idolatry. The Chinese painter does not create like God *ex nihilo* nor recreate what is already predetermined by that creation risking betraying its glory and height. It is neither “Greek” nor “Jewish”—to the extent that these categories can be represented as respectively Platonic and Levinasian—in the sense of detached rational contemplation or a confrontation with the paganism of finite sensuous nature for the sake of ethical infinity.¹¹ Instead, the Chinese painter in this case co-mediate and co-creates a world.

The painter participates in the very generativities of natural processes by enacting them for her or himself. This is not participation in the sense of an irrational absorption in the phenomena without reflection or criticism. This participation encompasses reflection, sensibility, and affectivity in being responsive from out of and toward one’s enviring world and in the creative generative co-formation of self and world.

7 Description and image from: <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-wang-shimin-clearing-after-snow.php> [accessed 1 May 2013].

8 E. Lévinas: *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff 1987, pp. 1–13.

9 Id.: *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990, p. 143.

10 Id.: *Otherwise Than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers 1991, p. 123.

11 I discuss the issue of nature in Levinas further in “Levinas and Adorno: Can there be an Ethics of Nature?” In: *Faces of Nature: Levinasian Ethics and Environmental Philosophy*, ed. by W. Edelglass / J. Hatley / C. Diehm, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2012, pp. 109–133.

3. THE LOGIC OF APPEARANCE AND REALITY IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THE *YIJING*

Contemporary proponents of the genuineness of non-Western varieties of philosophy have noted the key role of the distinction between essential reality and shadowy appearance in debates over their possibility. In the case of Chinese thought, Roger Ames has noted that the prevalent traditional “East Asian world view [does] not begin from the dualistic ‘two-world’ reality/appearance distinction familiar in classical Greek metaphysics.”¹² Ames is correct to maintain that early Chinese thinking does not involve the otherworldly transcendence typical of the Greco-Judaic-Christian tradition. Nor does early Chinese thought, however, begin in the monistic immanence of a speculative totality that is likewise characteristic of Western philosophy and critiqued by advocates such as Kierkegaard and Levinas of a singularity that escapes the universal.

Chinese philosophical thought, particularly the thinking informed by early Daoism and the Confucian reception of the *Yijing*, is an affective and reflective response to the natural, social, and individual world. Through individual and social sensibility and dialogical exchange, the world is revealed as immanent yet transformative (internally self-generating and dynamically changing in movement), individual yet contextual (each particular is itself in relation to each other particular being itself).¹³

One of the primary paradigms for Chinese cultural and intellectual traditions is a work that began as divination and became a guide to the natural world and cosmos, the *Yijing*. The *Yijing* was, according to the ancient sages, inspired by the processes of nature themselves and imitates them not as a semblance reflecting a fixed predetermined reality but as changing configurations and symbols that participate in the flowing transformative processes of nature. The ancient sages, it is said, “were able to survey all phenomena under heaven and, considering their forms and appearances, ‘symbolized’ (*xiang* 像) things and their proper attributes. These were called ‘symbols’ (*xiang*).”¹⁴ The word *xiang* here can mean: configuration, figure, image, or symbol.¹⁵

According to the contemporary Chinese philosopher Chung-ying Cheng, Chinese thought—beginning with the *Yijing*—does not require a bifurcated division between reality and appearance. Rather, Chinese thought holds that reality simply

12 R. Ames: “East Asian Philosophy”. In: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Vol. 7, ed. by E. Craig, London: Routledge 1998, p. 193.

13 I explore this tendency in early Daoism in relation to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. In: E. S. Nelson: “Kant and China: Aesthetics, Race, and Nature”. In: *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (2011–4), pp. 509–525.

14 R. F. Campany: “Xunzi and Durkheim as Theorists of Ritual Practice”. In: *Discourse and Practice*, ed. by F. Reynolds / D. Tracy, Albany: State University of New York Press 1992, p. 206.

15 *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. by F. Pregadio, London: Routledge 2005, Vol. 1, p. 1086.

consists in “the incessant and constant change of all things.”¹⁶ It does not abstract and reify a form separated from the dynamic logic of the plural relations of particulars for which the *Yijing* presents multiple—at least sixty four—interpretive models. This onto-hermeneutics, as Cheng designates the logic of the *Yijing*-tradition, is a temporal one. Cheng maintains that the difference between Western and Chinese philosophy reflects two distinct experiences of time: “In separating reality from appearance . . . the ancient Greeks sought the immutable and unmoved as the essence of the real and the objective. In contrast, the ancient Chinese from the very beginning recognized and accepted change and transformation as irreducible attributes of the world.”¹⁷

Do the Chinese then have no sense of the distinction between semblance and reality? Does Chinese thought entail drifting along in a “floating world” of phenomena without form and measure? Of course not; the manifold shifting patterns of reality and multiple hermeneutical paradigms of the *Yijing* allow for the recognition of deception and of the tension and difference between external semblance and internal truth, as in the Mandarin saying *biǎo lǐ bù yī* 表里不一. Accordingly, to mention one example, hexagram 23, Bo 剝 (splitting apart or peeling), of the *Yijing* speaks of separating the essential from the apparent. This differentiation of appearance and reality is, however, only one moment of the generative movement of things that is traced and indicated through the models of the *Yijing*. This moment is recognized alongside other moments. Therefore, it cannot establish an unchanging constant essence underlying changing appearances. To this extent, truth and knowledge do not require the reification of this bifurcation provided that they can be distinguished when appropriate.

Furthermore, the word *xíng* 形 that is often translated as “appearance,” also means shape, form, figure, and body. In this context, *xíng* should be understood not merely as a becoming visible or the semblance of the real, as an idol or shadow of reality, but as the material manifestation that is reality itself. We can note here once again the variance between the visible as an arena for a detached and independent observer, who seeks to neutrally contemplate and recreate a pregiven reality in art or in ideas, and the visible as an interactive field for an involved and moved participant in the flows and forces of reality.

The qualitative experientially-rooted participant perspective becomes visible in Chinese art and philosophy. Yet just as Chinese art can exist in distinction from Greek art, in a resonating non-identity without exclusion or assimilation, Chinese philosophy can be—to think with and against Heidegger—an “other beginning”

16 Chung-ying Cheng: “Onto-Hermeneutical Vision and Analytic Discourse: Interpretation and Reconstruction in Chinese Philosophy”. In: *Two Roads to Wisdom?: Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions*, ed. by Bo Mou, Chicago: Open Court 2001, p. 94.

17 Id.: “The Origins of Chinese Philosophy”. In: *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. by B. Carr / I. Mahalingam, London: Routledge 1997, p. 452.

in confrontation with its “first” Greek beginning.¹⁸ In the formation of the relation between the two beginnings, there is room for both boundless reversal and a transversal. Based on the correlational transformational thinking of the *Yijing*, there can be no absolute difference between philosophy and non-philosophy or one between West and East.

4. CONCLUSION

In his commentary on the *Yijing*, Wang Bi 王弼 remarked:

The language twists and turns but hits the mark. (Change and transformation lack any consistency, so no definite paradigms can be made for them. This is why the text says: “The language twists and turns but hits the mark”).¹⁹

There is no discernible underlying constancy that could serve as the basis of one definitive paradigm or model of the myriad things. Thoughts and words must twist and turn in how they encounter the myriad things and in that moment respond opportunely and appropriately, as the myriad things themselves twist and turn. Timing, the moments when words and things encounter each other and hit the mark in the midst of their transformations, is more specific to reality than its reification through the projection of a fixed and static form or essence. Reality is encountered and experienced in and as change. The multiple “appearances” of the real call for the ongoing co-relation of multiple orientating perspectives and models, as seen in the forms and images of the *Yijing* and their numerous variations and combinations.

In the philosophy of Wang Bi, these moments can be traced from their incipience to their occurrence. The *Yijing* then cannot be described as providing isolated metaphysical truths or basic constitutive elements of a hidden essential reality behind this apparent empirical reality. There are not two distinct worlds, nor one unchanging monistic world order. A world-nexus of myriad differences in relation is indicated in the dialectical generative logic of the *Yijing*. In the co-relational approach to transformational reality, the numerous models and examples indicated in the *Yijing* are opportunities for self-reflection and self-cultivation. The *Yijing* is

18 On Heidegger’s first and other beginning and early Chinese thinking, see my articles: “Responding to Heaven and Earth: Daoism, Heidegger and Ecology”. In: *Environmental Philosophy* Vol. 1 (2004–2), pp. 65–74; “Heidegger, Misch, and the Origins of Philosophy”. In: *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39, Supplemental Issue, 2012.

19 Wang Bi / R. J. Lynn: *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press 2004, p. 87.

in a sense formally indicative of the concrete empirical multiplicities that are encountered and engaged in one manner or another.

The Tang dynasty poet and philosopher Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–84) accordingly commented that: “The ideal terrain of poetry rises beyond and without images”; and “The *Yijing* comes from something beyond appearance, beyond image.”²⁰ We have seen in this paper how the non-duality of reality and appearance can become evident though the broader context of reality that immanently generates itself from within. Yet doesn’t this leave us tied to the pictorial not purely conceptual thinking that Hegel and Derrida associate with the Chinese language? It is important to note that the painter, the poet, and the interpreter of the *Yijing* do not prioritize the ocularcentric image that seduces and absorbs pure seeing nor merely rely on the pictorial traces of reality.

The disclosive event of truth is deeply personal as well as cosmological in this Chinese context. It exceeds the pictorial conceptualization of reality, as there is inevitably the spoken word and what is indicated through image and sound in Chinese languages. The classical Chinese language is not a snapshot or intuition of the real as both its critics and naïve acolytes from Hegel to Ezra Pound have contended. It is a hermeneutics tracing and articulating the mediations of sound, image, materiality, and energy. It does not only passively follow the flow of things and their dictation; it can responsively and co-generatively participate in the becoming, change, and flow of the world itself.

20 Translations from Xiaodong Bai: *The Tang Concept of Yijing and the Tang Regulated Verse* (dissertation).