

The History of Chinese Philosophy in New Education in China in the Early 20th Century

Valery Kiselev^{1,a}

¹Department of History of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St., Moscow, 117198, Russia

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Abstract: Over the centuries, China has developed its own system of knowledge and values. In the mid-19th century, this system faced a serious challenge as a result of a clash with the Western civilization. In order to survive, China needed to borrow the Western knowledge, to change the education system and even to transform its basic worldview. The article discusses the importance of the formation of the history of Chinese philosophy for the transformation of the views and values of the Chinese society in the early 20th century.

1. Introduction

Clash with the Western countries in the middle of the 19th century during the Opium Wars clearly demonstrated the inability of the state, based on Chinese traditional views, to compete with the modern Western civilization. Many thinkers and public figures raised the question of the need for fundamental transformations of society and the state. The verity of traditional views was not questioned, but doubts arose about the need to study the Western sciences. Some officials commenced translating the Western books into Chinese, they began to collect and analyze information on the state and social structure of the Western countries. One of the first encyclopedic works that introduced knowledge about the Western countries to the Chinese readers were “Gazetteer of Four Continents” (四洲志) by the Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu (林则徐, 1785-1850) and “Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms” (海国图志) by the Chinese scholar Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794-1856). The proposal to turn to the experience of the Western countries, the experience of foreigners, or as they used to say “barbaric” experience, were quite radical. But at first, the innovations themselves did not extend to the fundamental principles of tradition, but were limited only to borrowings in the field of engineering and technology. Later the Chinese intellectuals began to reason transformations in the field of politics and law. But for the implementation of the borrowings, the issue of updating and reorganizing the education system was of crucial significance.

2. New Education and Philosophy

Chinese thinkers and public figures of the late 19th and early 20th centuries received traditional Chinese education, therefore, in search of ways out of the spiritual crisis, they turned primarily to classical problems. Traditional education was based on the study of classical texts, with priority given to Confucian texts. A thorough study of these texts was required, aimed primarily at memorizing them and studying the comments on them. In academic researches, social activities, other fields, not novelty and independence were valued in the first place, but, on the contrary, reliance on tradition and the interpretation of classical texts. Such an approach ensured the stability of social life and ideological continuity, but did not give the opportunity for development according to the Western model and, accordingly, did not make it possible to compete successfully with the Western countries in the struggle for territories and spheres of influence.

The borrowing of the Western knowledge, the creation of the first educational institutions in which the foundations of the Western sciences were studied, was the beginning of the process of

systemic transformations both in the educational system in China and in social views. These transformations gradually affected traditional worldview. Studying the philosophical ideas of the West became a vital necessity. As a result of active, but often unsystematic translation activity, translations of Western philosophical texts from Plato to Nietzsche poured into China in a stormy stream. Simultaneously with the creation of the modern term 'zhexue (哲学) for 'philosophy' and the widespread dissemination of the Western philosophical teachings, a completely obvious patriotic desire arose to show the existence of an original Chinese philosophy. At the beginning of the 20th century, this was a critical task for many Chinese intellectuals. At the same time, it was important to show that Chinese thought is a real philosophy in the Western sense, that it meets all the criteria obligatory for philosophy and can be considered to be equal with Western philosophy. On the one hand, the reason for this was the desire to prove the political and cultural viability of Chinese civilization. As a result of the Opium Wars, the Western countries proved their military and technical superiority. China adopted a policy of borrowing the Western knowledge. Nevertheless, Chinese intellectuals sought to join the modern civilization stream, being not a copy of the Western civilization, but a strong and independent China. Accordingly, it was necessary to prove that all the achievements and features of the Western civilization are not something new and unusual for China, including philosophy, which, despite the absence of a special term in the Chinese language, nevertheless existed in China from ancient times, played the same role as in the West, raised the same questions and gave similar answers.

Thus, simultaneously with a change in the educational system and the borrowing of the Western academic disciplines, the system of basic worldview concepts of the Chinese tradition was being transformed into a new scientific discipline - philosophy. In order to prove its viability and consolidate traditional views as a system of universal philosophical categories, another scientific discipline was formed - the history of Chinese philosophy.

3. The Formation of the History of Chinese Philosophy

The Chinese thought has more than two and a half thousand years of history. Lao Tzu and Confucius, who are considered to be the first Chinese philosophers, lived in the 6-5 centuries BC. Some modern scholars attribute the emergence of Chinese philosophy to the earlier period, to the time of the reign of the Shang-Yin dynasty (1600—1027 BC) [See: 1]. But the formation of the history of Chinese philosophy as a special discipline began in China only in the first quarter of the 20th century. Only at this time, the Chinese scholars began to formulate the concepts of the history of Chinese philosophy, which met the Western criteria of science and built a single line of development of Chinese thought precisely as philosophy. This had a huge impact on the further development of Chinese philosophy in the twentieth century, determined the perception of Chinese philosophy in the West, and caused debates about the "legitimacy" of the term "Chinese philosophy", that emerged in China almost a hundred years after the creation of "history of Chinese philosophy".

An indisputable sign that allows us to talk about the emergence of a new scientific discipline is creation of the general descriptions of the discipline and its history, and its inclusion in the structure of courses taught at educational institutions.

The flagship of educational development in China was Peking University. With the support of the Minister of Education of the Republic of China, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940), new trajectories of education were developed at Peking University, one of which was philosophy. The philosophy department was founded in 1912, the first student admission was announced in 1914. The department of western philosophy was opened in 1915, and Peking University became "the only educational institution in China to include three departments of philosophy: Chinese, Western and Indian" [2]. Innovative in form, this undertaking remained completely traditional in content for a long time. The philosophy course at Peking University was still subordinate to the dogmas of classical Chinese pedagogy, i.e. the teaching of philosophy did not go beyond the classical study of ancient canons, the history of Chinese thought was at the center of the study, the exposition of

which began from the legendary times of ‘three Sovereigns and five emperors’ (*san huang wu di*, 三皇五帝), and the main content of the courses was the retelling of the myths relevant to pre-Zhou epoch [3]. The Chinese philosopher, historian of philosophy Feng Yulan (冯友兰, 1895-1990) recalls the course of Chinese philosophy at Peking University: “A follower of the Lu-Wang school taught us a course on the history of Chinese philosophy for two years, four hours a week. He began with the wise emperors Yao and Shun, and by the end of the first semester he reached Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong), who lived five centuries before Confucius” [3].

The pioneers of the new scientific discipline represented different approaches to understanding Chinese philosophy. Xie Wuliang (谢无量, 1884-1964) defined Chinese philosophy using the Western one as a model but remained generally within the framework of Confucius canon studies. Hu Shih (胡适, 1891-1962) and Feng Youlan (冯友兰, 1895-1990) developed their own historical and philosophical concepts using the Western methodology and wrote the history of Chinese philosophy according to the pattern of the history of Western philosophy. Their theories were popular in the West but led to the question whether ‘Chinese philosophy’ is a real phenomenon or just an artificial construction assembled according to the patterns of Western philosophy. Zhong Tai (钟泰, 1888–1979) believed that the Western approach distorts the ideas of Chinese philosophy and offered a presentation of the history of Chinese thought through traditional Chinese categories. Zhong Tai's work has been ignored for a long time because of its strong traditional character, but now it is treated as an original solution of the dialogue of East and West. Li Shicen (李石岑, 1892–1934) and Fan Shoukang (范寿康, 1896-1983) built their exposition of the history of Chinese thought on basis of Marxist ideas about the historical and philosophical process. Modern understanding of Chinese philosophy in the West as well as in China was formed on basis of these works, however the question remains whether Chinese philosophy was a well-organized system of thought with a clear logic of development or was just being presented as such.

4. What Kind of History of Philosophy

The creators of the first concepts of the history of Chinese philosophy had different cultural and educational bases, they held different views on social development, but all of them strongly believed in the future of China. Accordingly, in their works they sought to show both the uniqueness of Chinese thought and its universality as one of the equivalent branches of the world philosophy.

In the very first works, for example, “The History of Chinese Philosophy” by Xie Wuliang, there is a reference to the foreign origin of the term ‘zhexue’ for ‘philosophy’, subsequent works use this term without special explanation. For all authors of the first histories of Chinese philosophy – Xie Wuliang, Hu Shih, Zhong Tai, Feng Youlan – philosophy was presented as a universal teaching, equally suitable for both the West and the East. All these researchers explicitly or implicitly noted that all those sections that could be found in Western philosophy equally existed in Chinese philosophy, both philosophies were facing similar challenges and gave similar answers.

Different points of view were expressed regarding the source of Chinese philosophy. Xie Wuliang sought to demonstrate the existence of philosophical views in ancient times, i.e. during the mythological rulers of Fu Xi and Huang-di [4]. Hu Shih, relying on the methodology of pragmatic philosophy, especially on the ideas of his teacher John Dewey, divided the Age of poets and the Age of philosophers. The Book of Songs was the beginning of doubting the myth and the fertile ground for Chinese philosophy. Hu Shih considered Lao Tzu and Confucius to be the first Chinese philosophers, calling the previous ideas of the “Book of Songs” and the “Book of Changes” to be a preparatory stage. The era of philosophy began only with Lao Tzu and Confucius [5]. Zhong Tai believed that Chinese philosophy was formed as a system by the Zhou era, although philosophical ideas were of much earlier origin. Zhong Tai's viewed the development of Chinese thought in the pre-Zhou era as pre-philosophy or protophilosophy [6]. In the question of the origin of Chinese philosophy, Feng Youlan noted the importance of a large number of factors that had influenced the

formation of philosophy in China and determined its features. In particular, Feng Youlan revealed the great importance of such factors as geographical and economic conditions, attitude to nature and the family system. Philosophy, in his opinion, is a universal teaching, but it has national characteristics rooted in various conditions of existence of different nations. Feng Youlan explained the difference in philosophical views of the ancient Greeks and the ancient Chinese, for example, by stating that the Greeks represented the sea power, and the Chinese represented to continental one, the Greeks were mainly merchants, and the Chinese were mainly peasants. According to Feng Youlan, the perception of a constant and variable, concrete and abstract depended on these basic conditions, and, as a result, ultimately determined not only the development of philosophy, but also the differences in development of science in the East and in the West [2].

From the point of view of the education system, the issue of research methodology is important. Xie Wuliang and Zhong Tai carried out their philosophical research within the framework of the Chinese tradition. Hu Shih and Feng Yulan, as students of the American philosopher John Dewey, paid great attention to methodology. In addition, they were well acquainted with modern Western methods of humanitarian research. They sought to strengthen the position of Chinese philosophy, to protect it from attacks from the West, using Western tools. In the 20th century, the works of Hu Shih and Feng Youlan were highly valued in Chinese and Western science, as they more closely met the criteria of Western rationality. At the beginning of the 21st century, as part of discussions about the status of Chinese philosophy, Chinese academics began to reopened the works of Xie Wuliang and Zhong Tai, noting the traditionalist approach used by the authors as an undoubted plus of these works. At the same time, criticism of the use of Western theoretical tools began (as Hu Shih and Feng Youlan did). Critics noted that this approach necessarily affects the subject of the research, resulting in not an objective presentation of Chinese thought, but in its interpretation within the framework of a Western worldview.

5. Conclusion

The history of Chinese philosophy became an important part of the educational system both in China and in the West. Through the prism of the history of Chinese philosophy, people of the West appreciate not only Ancient China, but also the worldview of modern Chinese and even features of the economic, social and political situation in modern China.

In the modern world, the statements of Lao Tzu and Confucius are known in the West nearly as well as in China. In various interdisciplinary studies on the dialogue of civilizations, Chinese philosophy is considered to be a model of education equivalent to the Western one, but with a number of advantages. The concepts of Chinese philosophy are used in the East and in the West to find solutions to the global problems of modern education, environmental sustainability, and business.

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