IS CHINESE THOUGHT “PHILOSOPHY”?  

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In this short reading, Gene Blocker looks at the inevitably comparative nature of Westerners’ study of non-Western philosophy. As Blocker argues, philosophy is a Western word for a Western discipline that began with the ancient Greeks and that extended over two thousand years into European history. Traditionally, this discipline—as we understand it—has developed a logically rigorous method of argumentation and analysis for exploring very general and value-laden questions. But whenever one culture studies another, Blocker continues, it can only use its own words and concepts to examine “the other.” As a result, cultures tend to perceive other cultures through their own restricted set of assumptions—and thus misperceive them.

In principle, the Chinese could also have investigated Western thought, and in so doing compared it to their own. But the history of European military and economic power since the seventeenth century precluded that. The fact remains that European nations colonized over half the world; thus it was the Europeans who initiated the discussion of how Indian and Chinese thought systems compared with their own Western terms and standards.

Blocker traces the gradual awareness in Europeans of non-European thought. As he explains, the first references to Chinese writings as “philosophy” came at the end of the seventeenth century, although this interpretation was not widely known in Europe for another hundred years. The Chinese awareness of Western philosophy initially emerged a little later, as Chinese intellectuals tried to learn as much as possible of European culture in order to “catch up” with the West economically, militarily, and scientifically. But it was not until the early 1920s that Chinese thinkers recognized sufficient similarities between Western philosophy and their own intellectual traditions to extend their word for “philosophy” to their own work—and then to Indian thought systems as well. Therefore, although Chinese philosophical thought is as old as Western philosophy (both began around the sixth century BCE), it was not until 1920 that there was widespread recognition among Western and Chinese intellectuals that, in addition to Greece, there were two other original centers of world philosophy—namely, India and China.
As you read the selection that follows, ask yourself whether you agree with the author that interpreting Chinese thought as philosophy is inherently problematic. Specifically, what might be the ramifications of trying to understand another culture’s thinking from our own culture’s perspective? What might be gained by using this approach? What might be lost? Do you think it would be more valuable to study the thoughts of Kongzi, Mengzi, Zhuangzi, and other Chinese “philosophers” without attempting to classify them into Western cultural categories such as “morality,” “religion,” “literature,” or “philosophy”? Do you think that this approach is even possible? Explain your responses.

Before we look at Chinese philosophy, we should first ask whether there is any Chinese philosophy—in the same sense with which we speak of Western philosophy. One way to compare cultures is to evaluate their religions, art forms, educational systems, family practices, and governmental institutions. But what about philosophy? Does every culture have a philosophy, however different it may be from other cultures’ philosophies?

It all depends on what we mean by the term. In ordinary English, there is an everyday sense of the word. For example, we might say that every person has his or her own “philosophy of life.” We could say the same about whole societies. Each society or culture has its own idea of itself, its own conception of what is important in life, and its own notions of what the world is like. In this sense, each society has its own philosophy, or worldview. Sociologists and anthropologists study such worldviews when they examine different cultures.

But the word philosophy is also used in a more technical sense to indicate a particular methodology—a specialized way of investigating and organizing ideas about life and the world in general. In this sense, the discipline of philosophy is critical, logical, analytical, and systematic. It is this kind of philosophy that we are referring to when we say that someone is “majoring in philosophy,” or “reading a new book on philosophy.” If we think of philosophy in these terms, then not everyone is a philosopher, nor does every culture necessarily have philosophy. European philosophy, for example, first emerged in Greece around 600 BCE. Before that, the Greeks did not have philosophy in this more technical sense. And if at one point the Greeks had no philosophy or philosophers, it is possible that other societies and cultures...
had no philosophy or philosophers, in the technical sense of these words. Indeed, according to the twentieth-century British philosopher Antony Flew, philosophy is limited to “what appears as the main subject of most of the writings of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Hegel, and other Western philosophers.”

Just as philosophy in this second sense arose in European culture at a particular time and place, it may have emerged in other, non-European cultures as well. If we go by this meaning of the word, some cultures have philosophy and some do not. To determine whether a society has philosophy or has had it sometime in the past, we must look carefully at the writings and institutions of that society.

By studying various cultures’ thought systems, we not only can gain insights into different cultures, but we might also begin to detect a more comprehensive “world philosophy,” in which different thought systems could supplement and enrich one another.

Let’s take a closer look at what we mean by philosophy in its more technical sense. At its core, it is a critical reflection on some very basic questions, life and the world, with the aim of providing logically defensible and systematic answers. It also includes the accumulated history of previous efforts to explore such questions. It is this interpretation of the term we have in mind when we define the philosophy with which we in the West are more familiar. We also have this interpretation in mind when we ask whether other, non-European cultures have philosophy, or have had it in their past. That is, we are exploring not whether different peoples have their own worldviews (because they all do), but whether and how other peoples philosophically critique and systematically organize their worldviews.

Of course, we are Westerners, and this definition of philosophy is inextricably linked with the West’s own worldview. When we compare our philosophy to that of other cultures, we need to take care not to judge those cultures by our own definition of philosophy. The very word philosophy is value-laden. For example, for a Westerner to say that another culture did not develop a philosophy can sound belittling or demeaning. In fact, whenever one group attempts to describe another group, there is always the possibility of cultural bias, or ethnocentrism, in which one culture misunderstands and misjudges the actions of another culture, leading to mistrust and often warfare.

How do we resolve this dilemma? At first, the solution might seem fairly obvious. Because it is unfair—and downright erroneous—to describe other cultures’ thought systems in our terms, why not describe their thought
systems in *their* terms, and from their own point of view? Unfortunately, a little reflection will reveal that this is quite impossible. We can only think and talk and write from within our own cultural framework. A cross-cultural comparison—with all its flaws—is thus unavoidable whenever we try to describe another culture. The concepts (e.g., “philosophy”) might be ours, but the actual beliefs, with all their nuances, are theirs. The best we can do is to try to ensure that the concepts by which we describe others’ beliefs and the concepts by which *they* describe the same beliefs are similar in meaning.

With this challenge in mind, let’s examine more closely what we Westerners mean by “philosophy.” If we are writing or talking about philosophy in English or some other European language, then obviously we are thinking of the European interpretation of philosophy (the narrow, technical sense we defined above). This is not because that is the most “correct” or accurate definition of the word *philosophy* available to us, but simply because it’s all we’ve got! The fact remains that *philosophy* is an English word whose meaning was defined by Western European thought. The word has slightly different spellings in other European languages: *Philosophie*, or *filosofia*, for example, comes from a sixth-century-BCE Greek word coined from *philos*, meaning love (as in “philanthropy”) and *sophy*, meaning wisdom or learning (as in “sophisticated” or “sophomore”). In the West, then, *philosophy* originally meant love of wisdom and learning.

Of course, we’re not the only ones who suffer from the limits of our own terminology. If Indian or Chinese intellectuals had been the first ones to compare world thought systems, talking and writing about Europeans, for example, the same principle would have applied. The Indians and Chinese would have been talking and writing in their own language, using their own words and concepts. And they would be trying as best they could to fit European concepts into that conceptual framework. That is, they would employ their own notions as models and standards, against which they would judge European notions.

However, the nature of world history has precluded this. As it turns out, Western Europeans have colonized huge portions of the globe since the seventeenth century. Thus it has been Europeans who have initiated the discussion of and investigation into other cultures’ philosophy. As a result, it is through the “lens” of Western European concepts that many of us, even today, have viewed non-Western thought systems.

This distorted viewpoint has a rather long history. For example, the first reference to any Chinese writing as “philosophy” came in 1687, in a book...
written in Latin by Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries who wanted to convert the Chinese to Christianity. The Chinese thinker Kongzi (Kung Tzu), latinized for the first time in this book as “Confucius,” was said to be a “philosopher” (as that word appears in Latin, philosophia. Shortly thereafter, Mengzi (Meng Tzu; fourth century BCE), latinized as Mencius, was similarly designated by the Jesuits as a “philosopher.”

As we’ve discussed, any such cross-cultural study creates several difficulties, among them problems with linguistic translation. For example, what is the Chinese word that these Jesuits translated as “philosopher”? In Chinese, Confucius’s and Mencius’s names are pronounced Kongzi (or Kung Tzu) and Mengzi, or Meng Tzu. Of course, these are phonetic spellings in our own alphabet, not in the characters of the Chinese alphabet. The Chinese word zi (or tzu) means something like “master”; thus, Kongzi (Kung Tzu) is “Master Kong” and Mengzi (Meng Tzu) is “Master Meng.” By the first century CE, the Chinese also used the word jia (chia), which literally means “house,” to refer to different schools of thought. Thus there was the ru jia, or ju chia (the Confucianists), the Mo jia (Mo chia) (the Moists, followers of Mo Ti, or Mozi [Mo Tzu]), the dao jia (tao chia) (the Daoist, or Taoist, thinkers), the ming jia (ming chia) (literally “the school of names,” often referred to in English as the Logicians), and so on. English-speaking scholars who can read the texts of these Chinese scholars say that, although the concepts in them are not exactly like anything in the West, they most closely resemble what we call “philosophy.”

How have the Chinese translated the Western term “philosophy”? You might think that they would translate the word as jia (chia), and translate “philosopher” as zi (tzu). But it isn’t as simple as that. At first, the Chinese did not recognize any similarity between European philosophy and their own ancient thought systems. But eventually, as East-West relations grew more complex, the Chinese began to identify words in their language that seemed to capture somewhat corresponding concepts in the English language.

It all started in the 1850s, when Europeans, mainly the British and French, began to exert some influence within China through economic domination. At about the same time, the American commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan (by threat of military superiority) to open its doors to Western trade and influence. Worried about being colonized as India had been and as China seemed on the verge of becoming, the Japanese responded by learning as much as they could about Western science and technology. They set up Western-style universities, at first hiring American and European professors
but gradually training their own Japanese professors. During this period, they had to find a way to translate the names of all the Western sciences—physics, chemistry, engineering, philosophy, zoology, etc.—into their own language.

Because the Japanese script uses about 2,000 Chinese characters (kanji), the Japanese employed these characters to translate the European words for these Western sciences or disciplines. Accordingly, they selected a pair of Chinese characters to mean “philosophy.” Although the Chinese and Japanese pronounced these same words very differently, the Chinese adopted the Japanese convention for translating “philosophy.” Around 1900, both the Japanese and Chinese used the same written words to translate “philosophy.” The Japanese, though, pronounced the word “tetsugaku”; the Chinese, “zhushway.”

A few decades later, the Chinese decided that some of their own traditional writing, as well as some Indian texts, should also be called “zhushway.” By 1923 the Chinese had identified three major philosophical traditions—Chinese, Indian, and Western. To some extent, the Chinese were influenced in this regard by two Western philosophers—the Englishman Bertrand Russell and the American John Dewey—who visited China just after the First World War. Russell and Dewey told Chinese scholars that philosophy was not actually a Western science, because it was speculative (rather than empirical) and normative, or evaluative (rather than factual and objective). Russell and Dewey explained that Western philosophy was more similar to the ancient Chinese thought systems of the Confucianists, Taoists, Moists, etc., than it was to Western sciences like physics and chemistry.

But what exactly do we mean by “speculative,” “rational,” and so on? And which of these qualities must a thought system have to be considered a philosophy? Philosophers continue to debate these questions. Nonetheless, today many philosophers agree that there are three great original centers of philosophy in the world—Greece, India, and China. All three places developed philosophy at approximately the same time (roughly 600 BCE), though, as far as we know, they did so quite independently of one another. Moreover, all three philosophies arose as critical reflections on these regions’ own cultural traditions. From these centers of origin, the thought systems then spread to other cultures. Greek philosophy, for example, was adopted and modified first by the Romans and then by the Arabs, Europeans, North and South Americans, Australians, and so on. Chinese philosophy began to influence the Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese. And Indian phi-
losophy was embraced by the Tibetans, Burmese, Cambodians, and Balinese.

Given this background, how can we study the Chinese (or any non-Western) thought system as objectively as possible, and in a way that acknowledges and respects the perspectives of the other culture? In other words, how can we avoid imposing our own standards on Chinese thinking, and ensure that we see China’s thought system as a unique, legitimate worldview in its own right? This can be difficult—but not impossible. One suggestion is that we should be wary whenever we hear, say, the Chinese scholar Mozi (Mo Ti) being referred to as a “Utilitarian.” The Utilitarians were nineteenth-century British moral and social philosophers with whom Mozi cannot be accurately compared. Similarly, we should be careful about comparing Kongzi (Kung Tzu) to the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant; Gong-sun Lung (Kung-sun Lang) to the ancient Greek thinker Plato; Wang Yangming to the Western Idealists; or Xunzi (Hsun Tzu) to the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and other Social Contractarians. Why? In each case, such comparisons may cause us to exaggerate the similarities between the two thinkers and overlook the differences. In so doing, we risk misunderstanding both Chinese and Western thinkers.