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The Coloniality of Western Philosophy: Chinese Philosophy as Viewed in France

by Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre

Abstract

Chinese philosophy is little known in France and is not generally recognised by twenty-first century French philosophers as a philosophy. They often regard its contributions as wisdom, thought or spirituality. But when we study it in detail, we are clearly faced with a philosophy. Why then is Chinese philosophy isolated from philosophy in France? Is it perhaps only the Western world that has the right and ability to think? Does not China also think? This paper attempts to understand this state of affairs by seeking clues that might explain why the notion that Chinese philosophy is not philosophy remains prevalent in France today. This issue may be understood if we place it in the context of the relationship between the West and the others, and therefore in a colonialist, orientalist and eurocentrist perspective. It is possibly because the world remains caught in a persistent intellectual coloniality and an entrenched eurocentrism of thought, such that the West does not recognise the philosophies of 'others'. The West still occupies the epistemological centre of the world and constitutes a unique reference point of knowledge. Finally, some solutions could be sought in order to decentralise philosophy, by opening up possibilities for the diversification and localisation of knowledge and 'provincializing' the West in philosophy.

Introduction

Chinese philosophy is little known in France and is not officially recognised by twenty-first century French philosophers as a philosophy. A philosophy is here understood to be a critical and rational activity, made possible with the emergence of the *logos* (or 'reason', 'thought', 'discourse' and 'study') in ancient Greece, which aims to discover the truth through questioning, the use of rationality, and the creation of concepts, and which became a discipline developed and institutionalised in the West (Lalande, 1999: 774;

Godin, 2004: 742, 979). French philosophers regard Chinese philosophy less as alternative reasoning and more as wisdom, thought or spirituality. Within France, Chinese philosophy is often called 'Chinese thought' (see, for example, Jullien, 1998; Cheng, 1997; Granet, 2002), and only 'Chinese philosophy' by a small number of authors (Billeter, 2002; Kaltenmark, 1994). The French philosopher François Jullien employs China as the 'other' in order to provoke thought within Western philosophy. He strongly differentiates the Chinese wise man and the Greek philosopher (Jullien, 1998). He argues that "when somebody tells me that 'Chinese thought is not a philosophy' I answer that 'it is true, Chinese thought could develop itself in that sense, but it has not made this choice'" (Jullien, 2004: 91). Alain Badiou praises François Jullien for providing structures to Chinese thought, because when he read Chinese thought without preparation and conceptual work, he dismissed it as 'small talk', as did Hegel many years earlier (Badiou, 2007: 140).

However, when studied in detail, Chinese philosophy does deserve to be included in the category 'philosophy' – understood to mean an activity of thinking which tries to understand and to explain the world and human existence, and which is common to humankind; a philosophy which is open enough to not exclude anything that might help in this endeavour. This does mean that Chinese philosophy lacks the European imperative of rationality, and that Chinese philosophers deploy forms such as poetry and metaphor which are not intrinsic to European philosophy. However, such differences do not need to be seen as disqualifications. Chinese philosophy contains texts which demonstrate an act of thinking, an attempt to explain the world and humankind as well as reflections on the organisation of society. For instance, *Zhuangzi*, written by the Taoist philosopher of the same name in the 4th century BC, contains reflections on death, the political organisation of society, and happiness. The *Zhuangzi* also shows reflections that could be considered as 'naturalist'.[1]

Why, then, is Chinese philosophy isolated from philosophy in France? Is it perhaps only the Western world that has the right and the ability to think? Does China *not* think? This idea that Chinese philosophy is not a philosophy was first linked to the introduction of Chinese culture and philosophy in France in the 16th century by the Jesuit missionaries. Philosophers of the Enlightenment read and relayed the content of the *Edifying and Curious Letters of some Missioners, of the Society of Jesus, from Foreign Missions* to the next generations of philosophers, and so on from there to later philosophers. But these descriptions are skewed. Jesuits were in contact with just one 'social class' of the Chinese population, namely, the Mandarins. They also had to justify their missions to Rome and present China in a positive light. However, at that time, Chinese philosophy was

considered as a philosophy by philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire. But in the 19th century, through the rise of Orientalism and scientific racism, the old admiration for China transformed into contempt, as described by Hegel. Hegel argued that China, representing the beginning of the abstraction and the childhood age of the Spirit, has no philosophy (Hegel, 1964: 16; 1965: 287).

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), the theorist Edward W. Said (1935-2003) describes 'Orientalism' as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. Orientalism is depicted as the Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient as well as the constitutive discourse of the West on the Orient. The Orient is the object of the discourse's message and its authors are the Orientalists. From the 16th century onwards, generations of philosophers had built an imaginary of Chinese philosophy which is still observable in academic discourse today.[2] The status of Chinese philosophy in France has been studied in the journal *Extrême Orient – Extrême Occident*, with the special issue "Y a-t-il une philosophie Chinoise?" [Is there a Chinese philosophy?]. In this issue, the authors noted that Chinese philosophy is not considered as a philosophy. Most articles try to resolve this problem of the existence of Chinese philosophy, but in general the problem is studied within the Western categories of philosophy, and Chinese philosophy is analysed through a Western lens. This makes the problem appear insoluble (see Cheng, 2005). Jean-Francois Billeter has also tried to explicate Chinese philosophy through translations of original texts which contrast with traditional representations of Chinese philosophy as mysticism. This mysticism maintains the myth of the radical otherness of China (see Billeter, 2002; 2006).

John J. Clarke, scholar of the history of ideas, has also contributed to the study of how the West received 'Oriental' philosophies. He aims to highlight the narrowness of Eurocentric intellectual historiography by evoking key moments of the encounter between the two 'sides' of the world, and by examining the intellectual relations between West and East (see Clarke, 1997). Anne Cheng wondered in her inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, 'Does China think'? Cheng stressed that the main issue has always been to 'think China', but she also asked if China is even allowed to think and think for itself (see Cheng, 2009). Finally, Carine Defoort and Rein Raud discussed this subject in a journal entitled *Philosophy East and West*. Defoort studied the problem of the existence of Chinese philosophy and extracted four possible positions, while Rein Raud reproached Defoort for failing to get to the bottom of the problem, namely, Eurocentrism (see Defoort, 2001; 2006; and Raud, 2006).

This paper aims to understand the contention – 'Chinese philosophy

is not a philosophy' – through a colonialist, orientalist and Eurocentrist reading. Eurocentrism is understood here as a kind of ethnocentrism and as an ideology (conscious or unconscious) to focus on, and take as its lead, European concerns, culture and values, at the expense of those of other cultures.[3] As such, a key question is the following: Is it because the world remains in a persistent intellectual coloniality and an entrenched Eurocentrism of thought that the West does not recognise philosophies of the others?

The Centrality of Western Philosophy

The centrality of the West in its perception of knowledge can be studied in order to understand why the West represents other philosophies as 'non-philosophies'. Concepts of 'West' and 'East', or 'Occident' and 'Orient', are cultural, geographic and politically instituted concepts. As Said argued, the ideas of 'Orient' and 'Occident' have "a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence" (2003: 5). Orientalism produces imaginative geographies and the West has constructed itself in comparison to the Orient (Gregory, 2004: 4). Uta Janssens has also argued that the West defined and still defines itself in contrast to the East, "with the result that the two concepts are dependent upon a series of opposing values" (2007: 223). The border between West and East has, thus, been invented and reproduced over time.

The discourse of Orientalism created a series of binary oppositions and pairs, and Occident and Orient are an important example of this. In this construction and representation of the world, the West seems to represent the strong and superior centre of the world with the rest serving as its peripheries. This idea of the West as a centre can be found in the field of history as argued by Naoki Sakai, specialist of Japanese intellectual history. For him, "history seemed to be an eternal process of unification and centralization with Europe at the centre. Hence, we designed the history simply as a process of Europeanization" (Sakai, 2001: 91). This phenomenon of the appropriation of the world by the West has its origin in the expansion of European religion developed by the Jesuits and exported through colonisation. This expansion can be observed today in the phenomenon of globalisation. Globalisation is the global extension of cultural, political and economic exchanges. This phenomenon has primarily been a process of unequal exchange and absolute domination with the Occident/West and the Global North at its centre transferring their culture to the Third World, the South and the Orient/East (Bessis, 2001: 27-28).

According to Sophie Bessis (2001: 7), Western supremacy is not only present in personal feelings, but also appears to structure society through

discourse and intellectual spheres. These assertions can be understood through the idea that Orientalism is a discourse constructed through stereotypes, images and representations. The West interprets, depicts and speaks *for* the Orient. In this sense, the West produces a categorised discourse (Said, 2003: 129; 56). Said, through the works of Michel Foucault (1966; 1975), has identified Orientalism as a discourse that helps to understand the Western systematic discipline that allowed Western culture to manage and to produce the Orient (Said, 2003: 3). This context can help us understand why, generally speaking, Western philosophy is considered as the only philosophy, *'the'* philosophy among French academics. The other philosophies do not matter because they are folk wisdom, confined to orbiting around the centre as peripheries, neglected and inferior, never able to reach the privileged higher status of Western philosophy. Thus, philosophy is the property of the West. This situation is fixed by an imagined origin which 'took root' in Ancient Greece, and then in Europe more widely. This ability to think and philosophise is denied to others. Western philosophy is seen as the matrix of thought, and every thought which diverges from it is not acceptable because it jeopardises the West's central and dominant position.

It seems that behind this question of the ability of the others to think, there are remnants of a colonialist thought and a persistent Orientalism. This is the case for the questioning of the existence of Chinese philosophy by Western philosophers, questioning which is linked to entrenched forms of intellectual colonialism. It might appear that with decolonisation in the second half of the 20th century these notions of colonial influence and domination by the West on the world have disappeared. But this is not the case. For sociologist Anibal Quijano, the most powerful myth of the 21st century consists in the idea that "the elimination of the colonial administrations is equal to the decolonization of the world" (Grosfoguel, 2006: 60-61). Indeed, the 'post' of 'postcolonialism' indicates that "coloniality continues under new forms; and post-Occidentalism indicates that Occidentalism continues to be reproduced under new forms" (Mignolo, 2000: 30).

According to Quijano, the concept of 'coloniality of power' is "a system constituted by multiple and heterogeneous forms of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial hierarchies and systems of global domination and exploitation" (Quijano, 1993; 2000; in Grosfoguel, 2006: 57). From this perspective, coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin. Coloniality is the "continuity of the domination and of the forms of exploitation which follow the disappearance of colonial administrations produced by hegemonic structures and cultures of the capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2006: 61).

It seems that coloniality is beyond colonialism and constitutes a set of values which structures an ideology born with the modern/colonial world in the 16th century (with the encounter of America by Christopher Columbus and other explorers). This is a principle and a control strategy which goes beyond simple economic exploitation. Coloniality institutes Eurocentrism which becomes a source of religious, ethnic and (especially) epistemic discriminations. It implies the coloniser's behaviour as well as the comportment of the colonised.

Coloniality is therefore not only economic but also intellectual. According to the geographer Philippe Pelletier, Western expansion has not only been "economic and political but also cultural and intellectual" (2006: 85-86). The foundations of knowledge were found (and are still found) in Western civilisation and in its multiple and complex possibilities, as long as the conceptualisation (of the right and of the left) remains within the framework of language and modernity (Fals-Borda, 1971; in Mignolo, 2001: 59-60) As Mignolo explains:

> From the 16th to the 21th centuries, the colonial difference has been the mechanism which has undervalued the non-western knowledge. The double epistemic conscience of the 'how to be an African philosopher' (Eze) or 'an Indian historian' (Chakrabarty) is still relevant today. The monotypic episteme of modernity is facing the pluritopic episteme of coloniality [. . .] This is an episteme of borders, of the edge of the thought, announced from the perspective of the coloniality (2001: 57)

Intellectual coloniality is illustrated by, for instance, the export of Western concepts and disciplines to Asia at the end of the 19th century. This knowledge is exported via the expansion of the epistemic and philosophical Western concepts as much as by the classification of the social sciences and humanities. This global expansion of "the social sciences implies that intellectual coloniality remains in place, even if this colonization is caused by good intentions, made by people of the left and supports decolonization" (Mignolo, 2001: 60).

China and the Academic Disciplines in France

The humanities, which are built using Western categories, organise the relationship between the world and knowledge through an interplay of subjective techniques and practices. Naoki Sakai and Osamu Nishitani have described a classification which organises the world of knowledge and humanities. This is the distinction between *humanitas*, as subject of knowledge, and *anthropos*, as object of knowledge (Solomon and Habib, 2005:

94).[4] In light of this, China has been represented by the West as a concept or an object of study. Chinese philosophy in France suffers from its construction as an object of study, rendering it always inferior to French philosophical offerings. Chinese philosophy is used as an argument, a case that the Western philosopher uses in order to improve his or her system.[5]

Chinese philosophy is also used by some French philosophers in helping to understand silences in Western thought.[6] In the preface to the French edition of Said's *Orientalism*, Tzvetan Todorov wrote that domination could be expressed by this concept. If you say to somebody "'I have the truth about you' it is informing the nature of my knowledge but it is also a relationship in which 'I' dominate and the other is dominated" (Said, 2003: 8). In his relation with China, the Western philosopher is in a position of domination because he 'has the truth' about the other because he judges and gives (or denies) the 'philosophy' label. This use of categories in order to distinguish between 'philosophy' and 'Chinese philosophy' illustrates an argument employed by the sociologist Christine Delphy. According to her, to classify is to hierarchise. The power of language and of the discourse is to name something or someone, and then create a reality, a group, and in particular to distinguish 'us' and the 'others' (see Sharp, 2009: 18).

Classification of the philosophies hierarchises them because these two operations are linked and function simultaneously (Delphy, 2008: 40). This notion of domination can be characterised by discourse because the master is the one who is speaking, he speaks for the other and of the other. Language participates in the West's intellectual hegemonic construction of 'others'. Orientalism has been described as knowledge on the Orient but also as power. As Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, power implies knowledge and both are constituted together: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1975: 27). Foucault thought that language is a function of power. Thus, power circulates in the context of representation. There is a connection between differences, power and representations. It is an exercise of the symbolic power through representational practices. The stereotypes created by language are a key point in symbolic violence. Power is not only to constrain but it is also to produce (Hall, 1997: 261). In the case of Chinese philosophy, this power allows for the production of new objects of knowledge (such as the Orient), and new forms of knowledge (such as Orientalism).

The other key point which could help to explain why Chinese philosophy is not seen as a philosophy in France is the universalisation of Western knowledge. One of the central claims of Western philosophy is its universalist vocation, a pretention to the universal which is the characteristic of Europe, according to Jürgen Habermas (2008). As Kenta Ohji and

Mickhael Xifaras underline, the German philosopher has argued, without any contradiction and without using the metaphysical conception of the universal, that pretention to the universal is a characteristic of the West and the criterion of valid norms for everywhere and any time (Ohji and Xifaras, 1999: 42).

Universalism is also the mask of ethnocentrism. In this vein, Todorov has argued that the universal hid the will of European ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism (1989: 510). In that sense, it is not possible to recognise an origin for philosophy other than Greece, nor a philosophy (Chinese philosophy, for example) other than Western philosophy. Enrique Dussel proposes that the origin of this universalist belief can be found in Descartes who initiated the 'ego-politic' of knowledge. Descartes placed European man at the level of God inasmuch as he thought the foundation of knowledge was the 'first and indubitable principle'. Dussel argues that *ego cogito* was preceded by *ego conquistus*, 'I conquer therefore I am' (1977; in Grosfoguel, 2006: 53). Europe has created 'the universal' but has limited its areas of application. This is a process of exclusion. Nowadays, the creators of this notion of the universal have not renounced their right to apply it. They continue to classify what is inside and outside the universal.

The consequence of the universalisation of knowledge is that thoughts are not situated. Thus, the West assumes the paternity of thoughts. Walter Mignolo quotes Enrique Dussel who speaks about the lack of situated thought, which for him shows "the vagueness of the European modern capitalist universal" (Mignolo, 2001: 60). The concealment of the localisation of the subject's enunciation implies a hierarchy of knowledge. After appropriating the origin of bright ideas for knowledge, Europe was able to claim intellectual authority and establish the 'others' as inferior. This situation has logically permitted its domination over the others, and the possibility to colonise them in order to 'educate' and give them superior knowledge; the latter of which may arise from the others themselves. As a consequence, this lack of localisation of the subject feeds the universalist myth. Indeed, by not declaring who is at the origin of an idea or discovery, the West appropriates this idea and at the same time erases the origin of the idea or discovery. This is what happened historically in printing technology. Gutenberg in Germany is said to be the inventor of printing because in 1440 he had the idea to use movable lead characters to print. But according to Joseph Needham and Etiemble, this technique was already used for centuries in China.[7]

> By the erasure of the localisation of the subject in the power and epistemic relationship, Western philosophy and science managed to produce a universalist myth which covers, or rather

> hides the epistemic localisation in power relationships from which the subject speaks (Grosfoguel, 2006: 53)

Thus, the West takes on the 'good role' by colonising the others in order to provide them with science and civilisation, and this constitutes a reason to extend its intellectual and spatial territory. The West believes in its civilising mission as well as in its economic interests. In the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, all the European political movements argued that humanity was led by an order, a scale, and that the top of this hierarchy was occupied by the West. Sophie Bessis conceives of this idea as the "serious mission of civilizing that the white man undertakes, and which then can be used as an excuse for all its enterprises" (2001: 43).

Clues for a Decentralisation and a Decolonisation of Western Philosophy

Solutions proposed by post-colonial theories can help to de-centralise and de-colonise French philosophy. First, it is possible to counteract the idea that the West is the only one to hold knowledge and so has the power to dominate the others. A solution could be to practise a relativism regarding cultures and knowledge in the world. The categories of the Western disciplines are founded upon Western criteria which have been instituted by specific definitions. Many French philosophers refuse China and others the ability to philosophise, because recognising these 'other' philosophies might decentre Western philosophy. According to Mignolo,

> It is crucial [. . .] to rethink the articulations in the production and distribution of knowledge, and the role of the Humanities, the Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences in the corporate university under which we are living and working. [. . .] [I]t implies going beyond national literatures and looking at the larger picture in the structure of colonial power, language and the interstate system (2000: 14)

The second solution could be to invert the process of comparison between the centre and the periphery which feeds intellectual coloniality and Orientalism. This comparison could be illustrated by the grammatical construction 'they are like us', where the word 'they' means the 'others', and the word 'us' means the West. It could therefore be a solution to practice a post-colonial language as Naoki Sakai has argued. According to Sakai, this declaration – 'they are like us' – refers to the "conviction of the annihilation of the other", which in its "otherness, is probably the mission of the monist history" (2001: 93). The alternative could be the expression, 'we are like

them', but in this expression the centrality of the West is no longer ensured.

A third solution for restoring the wholes shattered by the universalist discourse of Western philosophy could be to take into account the geopolitics of knowledge. A way to practice this idea would be to highlight the spatiality of epistemology and to thoroughly historicise it. That is to say, one has to seek where and when an idea has been thought. This exercise will consequently de-centralise Western thought. It will highlight several epistemological foci worldwide, with none appearing superior to any other. According to Mignolo, "epistemology is not a-historic. It is not anymore a linear history which goes from Greece to the production of Western contemporary knowledge. Epistemology must be spatialised, historicised by playing the colonial difference" (2001: 61). Thus, a solution could be to put the West in perspective and not to place it in the centre but as a region among others.

Such ideas echo Dispesh Chakrabarty's proposal to provincialise Europe, particularly in the field of history (see Chakrabarty, 2000). This solution would be to think of every culture, every civilisation, as a result of exchanges between, and contacts and bonds with, others. Whether such a universalist humanism can be counterbalanced by respect for epistemological diversity remains to be seen.

Conclusion

These 'clues' have helped us to better understand these issues by considering to what extent China 'thinks', or if it is only the Western world that has the right and the ability to think. The issue of the existence of other philosophies, such as Chinese philosophy, may be explained with a colonialist, orientalist and Eurocentrist perspective. The main reason being that philosophy, understood as Western philosophy, is centralised because the West is seen as the centre of world knowledge. Western philosophy is marked by Eurocentrism and by coloniality of thought. Western philosophy considers itself as dominant, and this idea gives it the asserted right to colonise and civilise others. The 'others' think of themselves in comparison to the West, and the hierarchy of knowledge implies that Chinese philosophy is seen as a peripheral and unable to reach the centre represented by Western philosophy. The universalism of Western philosophy is reinforced by centralism and intellectual coloniality, as well as the lack of temporal and spatial situation of the thoughts in the world. The relativism of cultures and knowledge, as well as the spacialisation and historicisation of knowledge, could help to decentre Western philosophy. A modification of the way to construct comparisons between forms of knowledge could also help to break the schema of 'centre and peripheries' that is so often identified. These clues

could help French scholars to correct their "cultural myopia" (Clarke, 1997: 114) and allow for the practice of a new way of thinking about the world and the many philosophies within it.

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Endnotes

[1] See Zhuangzi (1980: 254).

[2] The concept of '*imaginaire*' or 'imaginary' is borrowed from Cornélius Castoriadis and means 'invention' (see Castoriadis, 1975).

[3] On these notions of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism, see Todorov (1989).

[4] See Sakai and Nishitani (1999).

[5] For instance, Montesquieu in the 18th century used China to improve his political system (see Montesquieu, 1951).

[6] François Jullien, a French philosopher, uses Chinese philosophy in order to understand the 'unthought-of' in Western thought (see Jullien and Marchaisse, 2000: 189).

[7] See Needham (1954) and Etiemble (1988).

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