

Assimilation and Dissimilation in Japanese and Chinese Philosophy

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As far as Japan and China are concerned, the term “philosophy” with its Greek origins is a concept imported from the West. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Japan and China have undergone reception, confrontation, and the making of their own philosophies. Taking these three stages into consideration, this article attempts to suggest that both Japan and China have simultaneously employed assimilation and dissimilation methods to assimilate their respective and other intellectual traditions with those of the Western world, and at the same time to dissimilate the above traditions, so as to make their own unique philosophical systems derived from those they have become assimilated with. This does not mean that assimilation is the prerequisite for dissimilation, or that dissimilation is the consequence of assimilation. Rather, the two are interrelated, that is, dissimilation is embedded in assimilation, and vice versa. In other words, not only are the two approaches inseparable, they also intercept each other.

My concern is, however, how these two approaches have been undertaken in Japanese and Chinese philosophical movements, and what philosophical potential both traditions contribute to philosophy itself. Philosophically it is believed that the two traditions have an intimate rela-

tionship. Alongside the very broad and in-depth comparative studies of “Western-Japanese” and “Western-Chinese” philosophical interchanges, the Japanese-Chinese connection should not be overlooked, particularly with their respective convictions throughout the last century for making “unique” philosophies in contrast to the Western philosophical canon.

ASSIMILATION AND DISSIMILATION:
TWO INEVITABLE STEPS FOR THE EAST?

John Maraldo has given a very profound analysis concerning the identity of Japanese philosophy, stating that its uniqueness is embedded in the “trans-lation” of Western philosophy through the transformation and addition of Japanese culture:

The trans-lation of “Western” philosophy into Japan obviously helped bring out a transformation of Japanese culture often called “westernization” or “modernization.” This trans-lation, moreover, also entails the transformation of philosophy by the addition of Japan perspectives, and these perspectives apply to the reading of traditional texts and of texts yet to be traditionalized. (MARALDO 1995, 239)

By defining the term “trans-lation” as “both an inter-lingual and an intra-lingual transmission,” Maraldo argues that it not only denotes “the transference of texts from one natural language to another, but also the transformation of textually embedded problems, methods, and terminologies both across and within natural languages.” My position is that such trans-lation in fact entails two aspects, namely assimilation and dissimilation, that enable “the transformation of philosophy by the addition of Japanese perspectives, and these perspectives apply to the reading of traditional texts and of text yet to be traditionalized” (227).

It is believed that the addition of Japanese perspectives is not merely the Japanese topping on a Western philosophical cake, but that they also embody the questions of what, why, and how there must be Japanese perspectives in Western philosophy. Taking the transformation of cuisine as an example, it is not an unusual phenomenon for a foreign cuisine to undergo a degree of modification from its original taste in order to be

accepted by its prospective customers. Such modifications, however, are not simply a smear of Japanese *wasabi* atop a New York cheesecake. To boost its popularity and increase profit margins, the cake should embrace both “New York” and “Japanese” flavors that help retain or even increase the number of New York cheesecake lovers as well as entice prospective new customers, including Japanese.

Of course, there are dissimilarities involved in comparing cuisine and philosophy, as the latter basically aims to establish a kind of universal logic toward a particular argument instead of profit increment, but the modification embedded in the addition somewhat entails the two notions I highlight in this essay: assimilation and dissimilation. Without assimilating the original taste of New York cheesecake while adding Japanese *wasabi*, people, especially New York cheesecake lovers, may not accept the “transformed” New York cheesecake.

In other words, applying this to philosophy, we see that in the course of the importation of the concept of philosophy into Japan, the “addition” that Maraldo suggests does not simply add something new to existing texts, but embodies the trans-lation of texts through assimilation with its respective culture or traditions. It is quite obvious that it is hard for Japanese to understand what philosophy means exactly by transcribing it literally into the Japanese syllabary ヒロソビ or into glyphs as 斐鹵蘇比 as we see in Nishi Amane’s 『開題門』, where his later translations of philosophy as 希哲学 are given in the postscript; or in 『性理論』 (1861) by Tsuda Mamichi 津田真道; or again as 希賢学 and 窮理学 in 『百学連環』, in which they embrace the assimilation of Confucian ideas that Japanese are more familiar with, especially with its national learning (国学) throughout the Edo period.

What is more, the trans-lation of Western philosophy through the addition of Japanese perspectives is not confined to the assimilation of Confucian ideas, but also entails the dissimilation of Western philosophy with Japanese perspectives. Similarly, although the New York cheesecake with *wasabi* may still be considered a New York cheesecake, it no longer has the “original” flavor; it has been dissimilated. Applying this to the importation of Western philosophy to Japan, on the one hand, Western philosophy undergoes modification through the assimilation of Japanese perspectives; and on the other, it undergoes modifications through dis-

similating it with Japanese perspectives that alter so-called Western philosophy.

Of course, questions concerning what the terms “Western” and “Japanese” mean should not be overlooked. It seems quite clear, however, that the trans-lation suggested by Maraldo is not merely an addition, but rather embodies assimilation and dissimilation, in which they are the two indispensable and inseparable steps for philosophy to be imported to Japan. More importantly, the imported concept of philosophy that undergoes assimilation and dissimilation may generate a new understanding of philosophy, which is somewhat exported to the West as well as to other “markets.” Hence, I do have reservations about the two-story building (二階建) theory proposed by Karl Löwith (ŌHASHI 1992, 152–3) that two different layers of philosophy remain, Western and Japanese, while Western culture infiltrates Japan.

Following the theory of trans-lation given by Maraldo, I would like to argue that one may find Japanese architectural or interior influence on the Western floor and vice versa, so that it would be quite difficult to distinguish the two distinctive floors, as Löwith posited. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in the course of receiving Western philosophy, there is significant potential for assimilation and dissimilation in contemporary Japanese philosophy, so that philosophy does not remain “Western,” but also includes a “Japanese” perspective.

This is also the case in China. Philosophy is an imported concept that has been acquired through assimilation and dissimilation. By borrowing the *kanji* translation 哲学 (Jp. *tetsugaku*; 哲学 in simplified Chinese, pronounced *zhèxué* in Mandarin; 哲學 in traditional Chinese characters, pronounced *jíthok* in Cantonese), it carries a similar connotation as suggested by Nishi in his *Encyclopedia* (『百学連環』KITANO 1997, 20) that philosophy refers to the science of all sciences. Recently, however, there have been a number of etymological studies¹ on the term *zhèxué* (or *jíthok*) that highlight some of the disparities between Western philosophy in a Chinese context. One example is Zhou Hai-chun 周海春, who states:

1. See, for example, ZHOU 2008 and KWAN 2008.

The word *zhe* 哲 embraces transcendental orientation (超越論的傾向) and the orientation of experiencing the world with humans as the centre (從人的中心體驗世界), whereas *xue* 學 carries the meaning of awakening (覺悟)... The combination of *zhe* and *xue* demonstrates precisely a method and a goal, in which *zhe* stresses a goal and an ideal, and *xue* emphasizes a method. (ZHOU 2008, 45)

Unlike Zhou, Kwan Tze-wan 關子尹 does not specify the differences between Western and Chinese philosophy, suggesting only that the ideas that Western philosophy highlights such as “judgment” in English or to be more precise, *urteilen* in German, can also be found in the word 哲, which is used in some ancient Chinese works (KWAN 2008, 13), and means “situation” (9). However, Kwan argues that philosophy should not merely be a conceptual game on paper or a kind of study (學問), and that even when it is considered to be a kind of study, it should be a study of life (生命的學問). In other words, philosophy, with its Greek origins, is not confined to the meaning of love of wisdom in the case of China, but also in line with its transcendental orientation or judgment of a situation, it embodies humanity at its centre.

Defining philosophy as the study of life is very common among some contemporary Confucians. Mou Zong-san 牟宗三 (1909–1995) and Tang Jun-yi 唐君毅 (1909–1978), for example, did not merely emphasize “life” as being a central concern for philosophy, but went on to claim that it is the very center of philosophy itself, thus displacing the knowledge (知識) that Western philosophy generally places at the center. This does not mean that Chinese philosophy discounts knowledge. Chinese philosophy, however, does place importance on life instead of the objectivity of the knowledge emphasized by Western philosophy. Accordingly, we may arrive at a preliminary conclusion that philosophy in China also undergoes assimilation and dissimilation, in which the former refers to the assimilation of the distinctive Chinese concerns of life while philosophizing, whereas the latter may exemplify a kind of dissimilation with Western philosophy that values the objectivity of knowledge, as compared with the heavy attention of subjectivity denoted by the concept of life that Chinese philosophy emphasizes.

ASSIMILATION AND DISSIMILATION:
THE CONFUCIAN, BUDDHIST, AND TAOIST WAYS

It is not unusual to employ the assimilation method whenever we encounter something new or different to our own understanding or traditions. Take Japanese *ramen*, for example. If we had to introduce it to someone who had never heard of it or had no experience of eating *ramen*, we would have to find a “similar” object or food to illustrate that *ramen* are noodles. In so doing, we are using one of the methods, assimilation, for doing the “trans-lation.” Here I will attempt to demonstrate that assimilation is not confined to a kind of imitation, that is, employing terminologies and ideas with which we are familiar without distortion, but is rather an inevitable step for receiving “foreign” elements, believing that there is philosophical potential in methods of assimilation and dissimilation that can contribute to both to Japanese and Chinese philosophical traditions.

As was briefly mentioned above, “philosophy” is a term translated into *katakana* phonetically and into *kanji* by Nishi Amane. The *kanji* translations, including 希哲学 and 哲学, in fact carry Confucian and Buddhist flavors. For the former, as Kitano Hiroyuki points out, Nishi considered philosophy as the study of the nature and theory of the West (西洋之性理之学), in which “nature and theory” (性 and 理) are concepts of Chinese philosophy, in particular the tradition of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung-Ming Dynasty (KITANO 1997, 8). Ōhashi Ryōsuke also indicates that there is a Confucian flavor to Nishi’s translations of the term “philosophy,” but added that, “in contrast to the examination of the ‘function of mind and nature’ (心性の用) of Confucianism in the East, the philosophy of the West postulates ‘the substance of soul’ (靈魂の体)” (ŌHASHI 1992). Unveiling such differences, not only does it demonstrate an undertaking of the assimilation method by employing Confucian elements, it also denotes the dissimilation method of highlighting the “unique” understanding of philosophy in the East, particularly as seen through Confucian eyes. In so saying, it somewhat supports my position here that both assimilation and dissimilation are involved in receiving philosophy from the West as well as in the intercept of the two methods.

Aside from the Confucian approach to assimilation and dissimilation,

Buddhism serves as another significant channel. Ōhashi points out that the term “consciousness” was translated into 意識 and 独知 by Nishi, and that both in fact originate in Buddhism. The former is derived from the Yogācāra tradition, and the latter is borrowed from the ideas of substance (体), function (用) and appearance (相). Besides these, the translation of sociology as 人間学 in fact entails an equivalent meaning of 人の世 with the Buddhist idea of 人間 (ŌHASHI 1992, 43). Although Ōhashi admits that there are limitations to translating (Western) philosophical terms into Confucian and Buddhist terminologies, he gives a comparatively positive conclusion to the method of assimilation:

The translation of the philosophical terminology of Nishi signifies an aspect of a multi-layered process of the Confucian and Buddhist cultures of Asia with a European modernity that is rooted in Greek philosophy and Christianity. (47)

Clearly a very detailed examination of the extent to which the assimilation of Confucian and Buddhist ideas helped Asians understand what (Western) philosophy is about is required. It would seem that assimilation is an inevitable step for receiving (Western) philosophy, at least in the case of Nishi. However, we should not overlook the point that Nishi's translation does not merely denote the inevitability of assimilation; it also highlights the importance of dissimilation. By assimilating Western philosophical terminologies with Confucian and Buddhist concepts, there are unquestionably differences and incommensurable elements.

The concepts of 性 and 理, 体 and 用, and 意識, for instance, have contextual meanings embedded in their respective traditions, which may induce dissimilation of what (Western) philosophy and its philosophical concepts refer to. This is not only a kind of dissimilation of terminologies, but also relates to the connotation, meaning, or even definition of philosophy.

As mentioned above, Mou Zong-san argued that philosophy, and Chinese philosophy in particular, be considered the study of life rather than simply knowledge, as Western philosophy is wont to do. Although Mou did not intend to disregard the epistemological aspect of Chinese philosophy, as the word “study” (學問) itself carries the meaning of knowledge or at least the inquiry into knowledge, Mou emphasizes that the

focus of Chinese philosophy should be life (生命), and that it is different to the knowledge-based approach that Western philosophy generally upholds.² In other words, it is not only the Japanese, but also the Chinese that undergo assimilation and dissimilation while receiving Western philosophy.

By highlighting the fact that Chinese philosophy focuses on “life” instead of “knowledge,” Mou attempts to dissimilate it with Western philosophy, while simultaneously employing the assimilation method of following the Western philosophical path of inquiry into “study”—the theoretical exploration and explanation of “life.” Similar to Nishida Kitarō, when Mou defines philosophy as the study of life, he is not simply considering life as one of the subjects of philosophy. Rather, he is speaking of philosophy itself, thus elucidating the point at which assimilation and dissimilation intercept rather than merely prioritize one or the other.

Assimilation is not a “new” method used to face “foreign” ideas, nor has it held a monopoly in the contemporary period since the nineteenth century. When Buddhism was introduced into China by India, many Buddhist concepts were assimilated with Confucianism and Daoism. As Ng Yu-kwan 吳汝鈞 points out, Buddhist “emptiness” (空) was analogized with the Daoist *wu* (無), a concept comparatively well-known among Chinese. Ng believes that assimilated Buddhism (格義佛教) conveyed very profound values that not only enabled people who were not very familiar with Buddhism to understand the doctrines more easily, but also helped spread Buddhism throughout China. Ng, of course, also acknowledges that there are weaknesses and limitations with assimilated Buddhism, in that Buddhism may have lost its original appearance (本來面目) by being Confucianized (儒家化) and Daoistized (道家化) (NG 1995, 9–10).

Such criticism unquestionably relates to a kind of hermeneutic question, that is, what is meant by “original appearance” and how can it be attained? Alongside the critical reservations we may have, I am inclined

2. Aside from the works listed in the bibliography, there are in fact thirty-three volumes of the writings of Mou. See 『牟宗三先生全集』 (Taipei: Lianhebaosinwenhua-jijinhui, 2003).

to opine that assimilation again proves to be an inevitable step for receiving “foreign” ideas. Even though Buddhism may have lost its “original appearance,” it seems to have been an effective or even unavoidable step in the introduction of Buddhism to China. Whenever we learn a foreign language, we “trans-late” it into a language we are familiar with. In other words, without such “trans-lation” or “assimilation,” not only is it untrue to our “normal” or “natural” behavior, it also means that the so-called “original appearance” is lost. The term “original appearance” in fact implies that there is something we can term “unoriginal,” something that is somehow embedded in the course of assimilation. Without undergoing the process of assimilation that induces an “unoriginal appearance,” how could one speak of a loss of the “original appearance”?

Besides, the hindrance of the “original appearance” induced by assimilation opens up a variety of interpretations and understandings of what Buddhism is, regardless of its Confucianized or Daoistized forms, as it signifies that Buddhism can be (mis)interpreted, expressed, and understood through other intellectual angles. In so doing, it somewhat enriches the potential of Buddhism by embracing its various forms of potential interpretations. Furthermore, the loss of the “original appearance” indicates that we are dissimilating what “true” Buddhism is, meaning that dissimulation in fact goes hand in hand with assimilation, and vice versa. The two approaches are in fact interdependent and intercept each other.

PHILOSOPHICAL POTENTIAL THROUGH ASSIMILATION AND DISSIMILATION

Granted that assimilation and dissimulation enrich the potential of Buddhism, we may apply the same logic to philosophy itself. Whether or not there is an “original appearance” of philosophy remains doubtful. Even if we may argue that the Western mode of philosophy loses some of its original appearance by assimilating and dissimilating it with Confucian and Buddhist terminologies and related concepts, it does enrich the understanding and the underlying potential of philosophy. Philosophy can also be expressed by different intellectual traditions with regard to

their terminologies and concepts. As Fujita Masakatsu points out, philosophy can be considered as:

the quest of a universal axiom... [This] does not mean that it is freed of the restriction of language that is being used. Our thinking is embedded in our culture and tradition. (FUJITA 2000, 4)

In other words, this liberation makes it clear that philosophy is not confined to a particular language, nation, or tradition, and its various manifestations can also be found in other forms, including Confucianism and Buddhism. Apropos of this, Ōhashi remarks:

Philosophy is perceived in a Confucian and Buddhist way. Is it even possible to speak of reception without the ability to see? When a text can be found that is being transmitted to a later generation, then the later generation should look at it through the eyes of the earlier generation. Even when a kind of hermeneutics occurs, we cannot extinguish the original vision itself... Although it is negative in the sense that the eye of subjectivity sustains twists of interpretation, it is positive in the sense that a creative transformation takes place through the stimulus of the text. In each case, there is a pair of “creative” eyes. (ŌHASHI 1992, 49)

According to Ōhashi, “creative philosophical thought starts with Nishida Kitarō” (ŌHASHI 1992, 50) and took a creative turn with his introduction of the idea of *basho* or “place” (see ŌHASHI 1995). Maraldo shares with Ōhashi the view that Nishida’s logic of *basho* is “a new logic based in part upon the Asian Buddhist concept... [that] implies a questioning of the universal validity of the logic imported from the West” (MARALDO 1995, 232).

It is not our concern here to examine whether or not Nishida’s philosophy is creative, and if so, just how creative it is; or again, or whether it succeeds at steering *basho* towards philosophy, Ōhashi’s comment on receiving philosophy through Confucian and Buddhist eyes demonstrates that there is a perceptual perspective entailed in reading the texts, which supports the point being made here with regard to assimilation and dissimilation. The philosophical potential revealed by assimilation and dissimilation toward philosophy does not merely enrich the understanding

of philosophy itself; it also leads to “creative,” “new,” or “unique” systems of philosophy. Ueda Shizuteru 上田閑照 comments:

On the one hand, Nishida follows the path of tradition in the East and continues studying the philosophy of the West as philosophy. On the other, he construes a new theory of the world from the bottom in between (*aida* 間)... [for] opening up a world-like world (世界の世界). (UEDA 2008, 3–4)

The phrase “world-like world” requires detailed examination, in particular regarding the relationship between the individual and the communal. By going back to the example of *ramen*, we may find that *ramen* that is cooked by different people in different places tastes different. Still, we cannot avoid employing assimilation and dissimulation to introduce it to those who have no concept of it or any experience of eating it. The same may be said of opening up the “world-like world” by seeking a common ground between East and West, as well as in and within the East (for instance, Japan and China). On the one hand, assimilation and dissimulation help us understand those “foreign” concepts, and on the other, they disclose the varieties of what *ramen* could be through assimilating and dissimulating with a different set of eyes.

By emphasizing the potential of assimilation and dissimulation in contemporary Japanese and Chinese philosophical currents, I do not mean to overlook questions of feasibility or limitation. How could assimilation and dissimulation be possible if philosophy as an imported concept were completely “new” to Japanese and Chinese before arriving in Japan and China in the mid-nineteenth century? By assimilating *ramen* with the word “noodles,” for instance, it seems that we do have a certain understanding of what *ramen* means, or even the implication that there are “similarities” between *ramen* and noodles. Where does our understanding of *ramen* as a kind of noodles come from, and how can we assimilate *ramen* with noodles? The former may be considered to be an epistemological or an ontological question, whereas the latter may be categorized as a hermeneutic question.

It is not my intention to touch on the issue of hermeneutics in this short essay, but by examining the hermeneutic question, I am inclined to say it may help provide some hints for taking up the epistemological

and ontological questions entailed. In the context of his theory of translation, Maraldo suggests:

Philosophy is recognizable as an idiom by and large because it is formed by a tradition of certain texts and reactions to those texts... The reading process that sustains them can be regarded as a process of translation. It is an active and transformative process that includes deletion and distortion as well as ‘faithful’ rendering. (MARALDO 1995, 233)

In other words, it is the “texts” that induce translation and the texts that form the basis for translation. The epistemological or ontological base of translation are the texts where the hermeneutic activity takes place. Neither Nishi Amane nor other scholars in Japan and China who attempted to “translate” philosophy through assimilation and dissimilation aimed to build up its “original” meaning or have a better understanding of this meaning in the way Schleiermacher suggested, and one merely assimilates and dissimilates the imported concept of philosophy from the West in line with their respective horizons as Heideggerian hermeneutics postulates. Differences induced by different understandings further elevate the importance of the texts, insofar as various understandings are derived from the texts. At the same time, the differences indicate that there is an open or endless horizon of meaning. This is indeed where the potential of the assimilation and dissimilation of contemporary Japanese and Chinese philosophical currents lies.

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