

The Rediscovery of Chinese Thought as “Philosophy” in the Japanese Meiji Period

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Introduction

In this paper, I elucidate the relationship between Chinese thought and philosophy in the Meiji era. In Japan, Chinese thought provided the basis for understanding Western philosophy. In many cases, Japanese scholars used Confucian terms to translate Western philosophical terms. They relied on Chinese thought to understand Western metaphysics rather than using borrowed terms. In fact, the Dictionary of Philosophy, published in 1881, makes reference to many Chinese classics. In the course of studying Western philosophy, Japanese scholars rediscovered Chinese thought as “philosophy” and were able to apply this semantic transformation to Japanese thought as well. Thus Chinese thought contributed to the formation of modern Japanese philosophy.

In view of the above circumstances, in the following I will elucidate the relationship between Chinese thought and “philosophy.” In section 1, I discuss the influence of Chinese thought on the translation of Western philosophical terms with reference to some examples. In section 2, I discuss how Japanese philosophers in the Meiji period rediscovered Chinese thought as philosophy.

1. The influence of Chinese thought on the translation of Western philosophical terms

When Japanese scholars in the late Edo period and early Meiji period encountered Western philosophy, they faced the difficult problem of how to translate new concepts that they had never seen. This meant not only substituting Japanese words for Western philosophical terminology, but also understanding the relationship between the meanings of the various terms. Japanese scholars had to comprehend the contexts and rules in which the terms were used and had meaning. The clue to understanding the terms was Chinese thought.

Chinese scholars sometimes used Confucian terms to translate Western philosophical terms. For example, “metaphysics” was translated in Japanese as *keijijōgaku* 形而上学, which was adopted from the *Yijing* 易经 [Classic of Changes]. In the first Japanese dictionary of philosophy, published in 1881, metaphysics is explained as follows:

See “Xici zhuan” 繫辭伝 [Commentary on the Appended Phrases] in *Yijing*: “What is above form is called Dao; what is below form is called tool.” (按、易繫辭、形而上者、謂之道、形而下者、謂之器)¹

In the same way, *senten* 先天 for “a priori” and *kōten* 後天 for “a posteriori” were taken from the *Yijing*, *en’ekihō* 演繹法 for “deduction” was taken from the *Zhōngyōng* 中庸 [Doctrine of the Mean], *rinrigaku* 倫理学 for “ethics” was taken from the *Lǐjì* 礼記 [Book of Rites] and *Jīnsī lù* 近思錄 [Reflections on Things at Hand], *hanchū* (範疇) for “category” was taken from the *Shūjīng* 書經 [Book of Documents], and so on.

The use of Chinese classical terms involved much more than just borrowing terms. Japanese scholars needed

Chinese thought to understand Western philosophy, rather than trying to adopt and apply a set of foreign terms. Basing themselves on the history of Chinese thought, they tried to understand foreign theories. We can see how this worked by considering the example of “evolution.”

Shinka 進化 is the standard translation for “evolution” today, but in the first *Japanese Dictionary of Philosophy*, published in 1881, “evolution” was translated as *kajun* 化醇 with the following note:

See “Xici zhuan” in *Yijing*: “There is an intermingling of the genial influences of heaven and earth, and transformation in its various forms abundantly proceeds.” (按、易經、繫辭、天地絪縕、萬物化醇)²

This translation indicates that the early understanding of evolution was based on the cosmology of the *Yijing*. Let us therefore elucidate three scholars’ understanding of evolution.

On evolution, Inoue Enryō, who was one of the most important pioneers in Japanese modern philosophy and is well known as the founder of Toyo University and a reformer of Buddhism, wrote in *Essentials of Philosophy*,³ “When evolution reaches its saturation point, regression begins, and when regression reaches its saturation point, evolution begins.”⁴ He explained this in another book as follows: In the beginning, the universe was at a very high temperature and filled with chaotic gases. The gases gradually solidified as they cooled, and then the solidified gases aggregated into stars and planets. This was the evolution of the universe. And when in the distant future the sun burns out and the earth comes to an end, there will be no room for evolution. The stars and planets will collide and all things in the universe will be reduced to ashes and return to the original state which is filled with chaotic gases. Thus the universe evolves over and over again.⁵ Inoue conceived of a circular cosmology in which the universe repeats patterns of progression and regression. Based on such a cosmology, he criticized Charles Darwin for overlooking the aspect of regression.⁶ He also criticized Herbert Spencer for failing to recognize the cycle of progression and regression.⁷

The cycle of progression and regression was not Inoue’s own original idea. In 1889, the Buddhist philosopher Kiyozawa Manshi wrote, “As two sides of the same coin, evolution accompanies regression. All phenomena cannot incline toward one side. In all phenomena, where there is a positive, there is a negative; where there is a departure, there is a return; and where there is progression, there is regression.”⁸ Kiyozawa thus thought that the whole universe was in equilibrium. As an example of this, he cited the way animals consume oxygen and produce carbon dioxide, and plants give off oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide. In this way, the universe maintains a balance. Hence one part of the universe evolves while another regresses.⁹ He remarked, “Paired with the theory of regression, the theory of evolution can explain all phenomena.”¹⁰

In 1884, the Christian thinker Uemura Masahisa said, “Progression and regression are the two main directions of societies.”¹¹ Referring to Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles*, Uemura argued that societies should evolve, and on the basis of John William Draper’s *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe* he also argued that they should regress.¹² Uemura thought that both Spencer and Gibbon were correct, but that each only had one side of the story.¹³

These three scholars held in common the notion that evolution alone is not sufficient and regression must also be considered. Because they had different backgrounds in Buddhism and Christianity, this idea originated from neither Buddhism nor Christianity. As is shown in the *Japanese Dictionary of Philosophy*, it derives from the cosmology of the *Yijing*, that is, Yin 陰 and Yang 陽 (“Dark and Light”). *Yin* and *Yang* suggests harmony between opposites, interdependence between opposites, and the cycle of opposites, such as dark and light, positive and negative, night and day, and heaven and earth. Inoue Enryō and his contemporaries applied *Yin* and *Yang* to evolutionary theory and came up with the harmony and cycle of progression and regression.

Just as the Western notion of “evolution” was interpreted under the influence of Chinese thought, so were many other Western ideas similarly interpreted. Japanese scholars understood novel Western philosophical concepts with

the help of Chinese classics. They also rediscovered Chinese thought as “philosophy” through the acceptance of Western philosophy. This is the subject of the next section.

2. The rediscovery of Chinese thought as philosophy

When philosophy was introduced to Japan, Japanese scholars studied books on the history of philosophy written by Alfred Fouillée,¹⁴ Friedrich Ueberweg,¹⁵ and so on. These books included sections on “Oriental philosophy.” Although most of the authors regarded Oriental philosophy as a naïve precursor to Greek philosophy, they gave the name “philosophy” to Chinese thought. Through the acceptance of Western philosophy and its designation of Chinese thought as “philosophy,” Japanese scholars realized that their traditions were worth calling philosophy as well. So, according to the *Catalogue of the Departments of Law, Science, and Literature at the University of Tokyo in 1882*, “Philosophy is divided into two parts, that is, Western and Oriental.”¹⁶ Oriental Philosophy was introduced into the official curricula of philosophy courses at the University of Tokyo. The *Catalogue* continues: “Japanese philosophy derives from Chinese philosophy.”¹⁷ By rooting Japanese traditions in Oriental philosophy, especially in Chinese philosophy, Japanese scholars introduced the notion of Japanese philosophy. Let us examine three major scholars who were instrumental in this shift.

a) The case of Inoue Tetsujirō

Inoue Tetsujirō is considered one of the most important persons in the formation of Japanese philosophy. He is well known as a nationalist thinker who advocated the superiority of state power over individual rights. His theory of a “national morality” (*kokumin dōtoku* 国民道德) has been widely discussed. But he was also instrumental in rooting Japanese philosophy in Oriental philosophy. One of his earliest works, *Rinri shinsetsu* 倫理新説 [A New Theory of Ethics], has “Analects of Chinese Philosophers” (“Gakutei sōgo” 學庭叢語) as an appendix. Tetsujirō gave lecture courses on Chinese and Eastern philosophies. His research bore fruit when he published three volumes on Japanese Confucian Schools. *Nihon Yōmei gakuha no tetsugaku* 日本陽明学派之哲学 [The Philosophy of the Japanese Wang Yangming School] (1900) and *Nihon Shushi gakuha no tetsugaku* 日本朱子学派之哲学 [The Philosophy of the Japanese Zhu Xi School] (1906) deal with Japan’s versions of traditions we now call Neo-Confucianism. *Nihon kogakuha no tetsugaku* 日本古学派之哲学 [The Philosophy of the Japanese Ancient Learning School] (1902) focuses on thinkers like Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai, who returned to the original texts of Confucius and Mencius and rigorously analyzed the meaning of their main concepts.

In the foreword to *The Philosophy of the Japanese Wang Yangming School*, Inoue explains that his motive was to confront individualistic ethics and utilitarianism and their negative effect on national morality.¹⁸ He wrote in the preface, “Our national morality is a universal virtue of mind. It is the quintessence of morality in the Oriental. (.....) I hope this book will help to promote the essence of the Japanese virtue of mind to the world.”¹⁹ This motive suggests his understanding of Japanese philosophy. He regarded the ethics of the Wang Yangming school as the equal of Western ethics and believed that Oriental traditions were as philosophical as Western traditions.

As John C. Maraldo has pointed out, there are two distinctive features of Inoue Tetsujirō’s endeavour. First, he analyzed traditional Oriental concepts according to the categories and terminology of Western philosophy.²⁰ For example, he wrote of the doctrine of Nakae Tōju that “In regard to cosmology, Tōju has a monistic world view. It definitely has an idealistic tendency.”²¹ In this way, he attempted to show that both Eastern thinkers and Western thinkers had shared philosophical problems and based themselves on a similar theoretical framework.

Second, he presented Oriental traditions as part of the history of philosophy.²² He classified Confucians genealogically and introduced their biographies, works, and doctrines. By historical and genealogical means, he demonstrated that Oriental traditions truly belonged to the history of philosophy. For example, in *The Philosophy of*

the Japanese Wang Yangming School he placed Confucians in chronological order, e.g., Nakae Tōju and the Tōju school, Kumazawa Banzan, Kitajima Setsuzan, and so on. Inoue Tetsujirō tried to show that this lineage formed part of the history of philosophy just as Western philosophy did. It included both the transmission of doctrines and confrontation with predecessors. He regarded such movement as the history of philosophy. He connected the Oriental traditions and ancient Oriental philosophy that historians of philosophy had described and showed that Oriental traditions had developed from ancient Oriental philosophy. Thus, Inoue Tetsujirō redefined Oriental traditions as philosophy through the acceptance and application of Western philosophy.

b) The case of Inoue Enryō

Inoue Enryō is an important person who contributed to the establishment of departments of Chinese philosophy in academia.²³ The Tetsugakukan 哲学館, the university founded by him, had a course in Chinese philosophy, and his book *Essentials of Philosophy* addressed Chinese philosophy as well as Indian and Western philosophy. Inoue wrote a brief history of Chinese philosophy, compared it with the history of Western philosophy, and emphasized points of commonality between the two in an attempt to prove that Chinese thought deserved to be regarded as philosophy.²⁴ He pointed out similarities between Xun Kuang and John Locke, Confucius and Socrates, Mencius and Thomas Reid, and so on.²⁵

Despite these noted similarities, on the surface, Enryō did not seem to think highly of Chinese philosophy. He wrote: “Many Chinese thinkers base themselves on guessing or supposition and their logic is not sufficiently coherent. These are the reason that they are inferior to Western thinkers.”²⁶ However, upon careful examination, we find that he used Chinese philosophical terms as important bases of his arguments. For example, he explained his “theory of unified essence between matter and mind” by quoting the *Yijing*: “Therefore in the *Yi* there is the *Tàijí* 太極 (Great Pole), which produced the two elementary Forms. Those two Forms produced the four emblematic Symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams.”²⁷ Here, Enryō tried to explain that one ultimate Reality differentiates into various Existences based on the theory of *Tàijí*. In another place where Enryō argues about the relationship between one ultimate Reality and individuals, he again uses the theory of *Tàijí*: “In the *Tàijítú shuō* 太極圖說, from the synthetic viewpoint the whole of all existence is *Tàijí*, while from the analytic viewpoint each thing possesses *Tàijí*.”²⁸ On the basis of the *Tàijítú shuō*, Enryō considered one ultimate Reality as that which constitutes the unity of all existences and is at the same time immanent in each individual thing.

Although he criticized Chinese philosophy as lacking depth, he needed it to legitimize his own theory. In developing his own philosophy, Inoue Enryō rediscovered Chinese thought as philosophy, and Chinese philosophy provided the grounding for his arguments.

c) The case of Miyake Setsurei

Miyake Setsurei is known as a nationalist who criticized the overzealous westernizing of Meiji Japan and published the journal *Japanese*. He is also known for having never belonged to any university or public institution. In *Tetsugaku kenteki* 哲学涓滴 [*Philosophical Trifles*], published in 1889, he emphasized the vast difference between Oriental philosophy and Western philosophy and criticized Oriental philosophy. He wrote, “Scholars who study Oriental philosophy have never provided any theoretical justification and have stopped short at commenting on particular ideas and terms of old masters.”²⁹

At the same time, he hoped to establish a new philosophy that synthesized Oriental and Western philosophy. In his *Philosophical Trifles*, Miyake divided philosophy into three categories: Chinese philosophy as sentiment (*jō* 情), Indian philosophy as will (*i* 意), and Western philosophy as reason (*chi* 智).³⁰ According to Miyake, the study of “reason” culminated in Hegel, after which Eduard von Hartmann introduced Indian “will” to Western “reason.” Hartmann synthesized Hegel’s “reason” and Schopenhauer’s “will.” Furthermore, Miyake contended, it would be

necessary to introduce Chinese “sentiment” in order to build a new philosophy.³¹

Although Miyake harshly criticized the state of Chinese philosophy, he pointed to Chinese philosophy as a crucial element for establishing a new philosophy. By studying Western philosophy, he was able to compare Oriental philosophy with Western philosophy and obtain a critical perspective on his own traditions. His criticism thus led him to rediscover Chinese philosophy as a conclusive philosophical moment in the history of Japanese philosophy.

Conclusion

In the above we have discussed the relationship between Chinese thought and Western philosophy in Meiji Japan. We elucidated the influence of Chinese thought on the translation of Western philosophical terms into Japanese. The translators used Chinese classical terms and notions in order to understand Western ideas, as in the example of evolution in connection with regression as understood through the cosmology of the *Yijing*.

Japanese scholars rediscovered Chinese thought as philosophy through the acceptance of Western philosophy. The books they read on the history of philosophy included sections on “Oriental philosophy.” Inoue Tetsujirō tried to analyze Confucians according to categories of Western philosophy and described the Eastern tradition genealogically as a history of thought. Through these endeavours, he presented Eastern traditions as deserving to be called philosophy. Inoue Enryō, despite expressing a low opinion of Chinese philosophy, used Chinese classics to legitimize his arguments. Miyake Setsurei criticized Oriental philosophy through the lens of Western philosophy. At the same time, he regarded Chinese philosophy as crucial for establishing a new philosophy. Thus these three scholars found value in Oriental philosophy through their study of Western philosophy and rediscovered Japanese thought as philosophy.

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1 Wadagaki Kenzō et al. (eds.), *Tetsugaku jii* 哲学字彙, p. 54.

2 Ibid., p. 32.

- 3 *Essentials of Philosophy* was the first book presenting an outline of philosophy that was written in Japan other than translations or adaptations of Western works.
- 4 Inoue Enryō, *Tetsugaku yōryō* 哲学要領, p. 211.
- 5 Inoue Enryō, *Tetsugaku shin'an* 哲学新案, pp. 291–292.
- 6 “Darwin knew only progression and ignored regression” (ibid., p. 297).
- 7 “Spencer advocated progression and regression, but he did not discuss that the cycle of progression and regression is a fundamental law of the universe” (ibid.).
- 8 Kiyozawa Manshi, “Bukkyō to shinkaron” 仏教と進化論, p. 307.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., p. 308.
- 11 Uemura Masahisa, *Shinri ippan* 真理一斑, p. 143.
- 12 Ibid., p. 142.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 142–143.
- 14 Alfred Fouillée’s *Histoire de la philosophie* was translated by Nakae Chōmin in 1886.
- 15 Inoue Enryō copied from *A History of Philosophy: From Thales to the Present Time*, written by Friedrich Ueberweg, in his script (cf. Rainer Schulzer, “A Study of Inoue Enryō’s Script,” p. 278).
- 16 Departments of Law, Science, and Literature at the University of Tokyo (eds.), *Tōkyō Daigaku Hōribun sangakubu ichiran* 東京大学法理文三学部一覧, p. 113.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Inoue Tetsujirō, *Nihon Yōmei gakuha no tetsugaku* 日本陽明学派之哲学, pp. 3–4.
- 19 Ibid., p. 6.
- 20 Cf. John C. Maraldo, “Nihon no kindai shoki ni okeru sei-yō tetsugaku no sesshu” 日本の近代初期における西洋哲学の摂取, p. 205.
- 21 Inoue Tetsujirō, op. cit., p. 45. In this passage he used Japanese philosophical terms with their German equivalents, as in “*ichigenteki sekaikan* 一元的世界観 *monistische Weltanschauung*” and “*yuishinteki* 唯心的 *idealistisch*.”
- 22 Cf. John C. Maraldo, op. cit., p. 204.
- 23 Cf. Satō Masayuki, “Inoue Enryō shisō ni okeru Chūgoku tetsugaku no ichi” 井上円了思想における中国哲学の位置.
- 24 Inoue Enryō, op. cit., pp. 96–99.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 97–98.
- 26 Ibid., p. 98.
- 27 Ibid., p. 203.
- 28 Ibid., p. 208.
- 29 Miyake Setsurei, *Tetsugaku kenteki* 哲学涓滴, pp. 30–31.
- 30 Ibid., p. 34.
- 31 Ibid., p. 291.