

Introduction: Exploring the human in traditional China

Loreta Poškaitė

Vilnius University

The papers of this issue were first presented at the international interdisciplinary seminar in sinology, Human in the Sciences of Traditional and Contemporary China, which was held on 4–5 October 2007 at the Vilnius University Centre of Oriental Studies. The original intention of the organizers of the seminar was to gather for the first time in Lithuania sinologists from various countries, East and West, for discussion about various aspects and perspectives of human beings as they were investigated in the sciences of traditional and contemporary China.

Of course, the most problematic term in the title was *science*, especially having in mind its different understanding in Chinese and Western cultures. Our decision was to follow the broadest definition of this term, as suggested by Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, namely, to use it ‘as a conventional placeholder’ that covers the studies of things and their changes, the human body, and variety of living beings and intends to indicate ‘the aims of the investigation and its subject matter’ rather than the degree of the investigation.¹ This understanding was further deepened and discussed by Prof. Henry Rosemont, Jr. in his keynote talk on Nathan Sivin and the understanding of Chinese sciences in sinology, which was presented for a round-table discussion on the eve of the seminar.

Moreover, most participants, as it seems from the topics and content of their presentations, shared an understanding of the Chinese term for science—*xue*—in a very similar way as Sivin and Lloyd described it, that is ‘as much a moral as an intellectual enterprise’, aiming ‘not just to learn facts or develop cognitive skills but to shape one’s life’, thus having as its goal to become a sage through the way of self-cultivation.² Then, there is no wonder that many papers focused on the parameters of the human

¹ Geoffrey Lloyd, Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word. Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

and his ways to the sagehood in Confucianism, which presented the clearest and most detailed project of self-cultivation with definite ends and ideals.

However, not all papers from the seminar were included in this issue (for objective and subjective reasons), and a few articles by the sinologists who intended to participate in seminar but could not come were included. As a result, we have a collection of articles that deal with the understanding of the human body, personal capacities, self-cultivation, and creativity in quite different contexts and from various perspectives—historical, philosophical, political, and literary—to name just a few. They tend to answer questions such as how the end of philosophy, the condition of human existence, and the nature of thinking was understood in traditional China; how Classical Confucians treated the death of a human in relation to life and what the motives were for its specific understanding; in which ways the human body was made a symbol to explain the meaningful functioning of political organization in traditional China; how human talent was treated in pre-imperial and early imperial Chinese texts and what the motives for its political applicability were; how the relationship between human personality and landscape was treated in Chinese classical landscape painting and poetry; why and how travel records for gardens were made the historical testimonies of the private life of officials; and in which ways moral self-cultivation was given an ontological basis in Zhu Xi's Neoconfucianism.

Some of the questions and problems raised in the articles are already familiar to sinologists, whereas others deal with aspects of human life and texts that were not discussed extensively in Western sinology. Moreover, as the papers reveal, the specific understanding of the human condition and ways of self-realization in traditional China was quite different from Western philosophical and artistic views. Those differences and contrasts between Chinese and Western views are explored intentionally or touched on in passing here by many authors, especially by Geir Sigurdsson, Henry Rosemont and Chun-chieh Huang.

Geir Sigurdsson's paper deals with the Confucian-phenomenological dialogue, investigating some noteworthy parallels between the Confucian and phenomenological (in particular Heideggerian) traditions. His comparative analysis discusses three Western ideas important to phenomenology, namely, 1) the Husserlian idea of philosophy or, indeed, phenomenology as a 'perpetual beginning', which is quite congenial to Chinese approaches, both Daoist and Confucian, which present the world as being in continuous flux; 2) the understanding of thinking as thinking inclusive of the Other (as notable in both Heidegger and Gadamer), which has a striking resemblance to the early Confucian outlook on the process of learning, based on the Chinese perception of the mode of existence as a self-making process and preventing the definition of a self by reference to itself only; and 3) the notion of *Selbstbesinnung* as meditative or

contemplative thinking directed toward oneself, meaning to be mindful of oneself, to arrive at self-understanding.

According to the author, Western phenomenological and Chinese (first of all Confucian) thinkers seem to share a common philosophical project or task, and even formulate strikingly similar thoughts on the human condition, existence, and being. An important element that separates them, however, is that the Western phenomenological endeavour has a stronger disposition toward 'mystical' conclusions by recourse to introspection and location of (presumably) eternal 'truth' in the subject as a pivotal point for experiencing the world and one's own place in it. Contrary to that, the historical and social dimensions of Confucian philosophy exclude the possibility of such eternalization and internalization, instead summarising its program of self-cultivation as a means to 'establish themselves by establishing others and promote themselves by promoting others', which consists in one's continuously enhanced ability to induce others to contribute to harmonious communal living. Sigurdsson argues that their contrary tendencies to understand the relationship between sagehood or, indeed, philosophy and human reality lead them onto vastly different paths and concludes with the argument that Western thinkers have much to gain by more serious exploration of the Confucian preference for wisdom acquired through historically informed identities and everyday communal human living.

In his article on the understanding of death in Classical Confucianism, Henry Rosemont emphasizes that our thinking about death and dying is influenced in general by our conceptions of life and living as a human being and, more particularly, by the definition of ourselves within these general concepts. One of the most important of his claims is that for Confucius and his pre-Han followers, human life is *not* viewed as a purely personal series of stages beginning with birth and ending at death, but rather as a personal continuum with roots going back well before birth and extending well beyond physical death, thus understanding oneself as living in the ancestors and living on in succeeding generations. This thesis is further confirmed by an examination of the use of the main Chinese words for *body* in Classical Confucian texts, after which Rosemont comes to the conclusion that death does not have the ring of finality that it has in the West, because no Chinese term for *body* has either the denotation or connotation of a solely physical chunk of matter, capable of being destroyed utterly. Thus, there are no sharp breaks between life and death, only transitions that run in both directions and imply the co-existence of life in death and death in life. Such a view allowed Confucius not to focus his attention on death alone, but rather to think about how death is related to the living.

In his article on the relationship between the human body and politics in Ancient China, Chun-chieh Huang aims to explain the peculiarities of the understanding of

political organization through the human body in ancient China. His investigation is based on the premise that Chinese political thought is concerned with the 'political body' which is revealed here through the comparative analysis of Chinese and Western (Platonic and Hobbsian) visions of the state. According to the author, for Chinese (Confucian) thinkers political rule is not something transcendent, administering over the ruled populace from outside, but rather a kind of internal governance that is inherent to the nature of the body itself. Huang argues that for the classical Confucians the human body was the basis and pattern for the explanation of the functions of politics, as both the human and the political body are cast in a highly symbolic body, making it the norm and model for our sociopolitical understanding and behaviour. The comparison of the Chinese vision of the political body with that of Thomas Hobbes leads the author to conclude that classical Chinese thinkers derived social cohesion from the comparison with the life of the human body and its organic interrelationships, thus basing their political thoughts on the idea of the organic oneness of the human body and interpreting political solidarity in terms of bodily organic interdependence. However, as Huang observes, the concrete history of China rendered a Hegelian 'cunning of history' to the Chinese theory of body politic, thus making the Confucian argumentations of the political body into the means for the empirical oppression of the lives of common people.

Loreta Poškaitė's article resonates with that of Chun-chieh Huang in its discussion of political issues, but from a micro- or individualistic perspective. She reconsiders the treatment of human talent (*cai* 才) in pre-imperial and early imperial China (from Classical Confucianism and Legalism to the Six Dynasties) and concentrates on its relationship with other Chinese philosophical and anthropological concepts such as *xian* 贤 (the worthy), *de* 德 (virtue), and human nature (*renxing* 人性). The author argues that the discussions concerning human resources or talent in pre-imperial and early imperial China were inseparable from the anthropological and philosophical thinking about human nature and from the resolution of political problems. The understanding of human resources in China had from the very beginning a strong motivation for applicability in the political sphere. This could be the reason why the Chinese avoided the mystification, essentialisation and romanticisation of human talent, as happened in Western culture (especially with the titanism of the Renaissance and beyond).

Frank Kraushaar's article on translating personality into the landscape stems from the idea that the correspondence of personality and landscape in Chinese aesthetics replaces its Western counterpart—the relativity of subjectivity and external space. He argues that the appreciation of the beauty in Chinese landscape transforms the latter into a part of the spectator's point of view, of his subjectivity, which provokes

not the opposition of man and nature/landscape, or of subject and object, but rather a dualism progressing by itself and enclosing the human subject. Discussing one of the most important constitutive factors of landscapes in painting and poetry—the immediate unity of the creator and created as expressed through the meaning of absoluteness of *dao* and universality of *qi*—the author argues that the intangible and unfeasible *dao*, given as the ultimate condition of any manifestation in life and in the arts, dissolves the borderline between imagination and reality that is present in contemporary aesthetical discourse. In the mind of the Chinese literati, the *shan-shui* constitutes a reality that is to be valued higher than other realities, a revelation of the virtual strength of one's personality, not as something stemming from a god but as one's own personal achievement and the success of the training of one's mind. Its appreciation is contrary to the kind of detachment that is often provoked by the perspectives of traditional European romantic landscape painting.

Thus, one of the most important questions in Chinese Classic poetics is, according to the author, how to translate the full personality into the landscape and avoid the latter appearing as a clumsy cut-out of what is accessible by the senses. In verse the distance between the landscape and personality is usually created by framing a certain aspect of landscape into the restricted metre of a couplet, which is placed like a window into the less restricted text. Kraushaar comes to the conclusion that the relation created by the translation of the real manifestations of a human character into the reality of a landscape never seems to be a deliberate and subjective act. Before the character is translated into the landscape, the landscape translates itself into human sentiment. This combination of an absolute spatial order obtained by distance and its microcosmic, individual correspondence in a personally shaped frame seems the characteristic Chinese way to translate concepts of personality into an aesthetic reality—almost bare of any relation to the physical presence of the subject.

Finally, we have in this issue two more articles that deal with the historical and moral dimensions of human life and personal endeavour.

In her article on travel records (*youji*) for gardens, Jekaterina Stepanova aims to answer the questions why and how this genre of literature could be used as a source for researching the private life of officials or those who wrote the records. She starts her discussion from an observation of the meaning of the word *you* in *youji*, pointing out that in Chinese tradition *you* is understood not only as actual travel (or spending time in a garden), but also as mental travel. On the other hand, staying in a garden, which was considered a model of nature, was like real travelling among mountains and streams. According to *youji* materials, a Chinese garden can be presented as a part of nature, a source of pleasure, or a shelter for a hermit, becoming a place that was far from daily urban life or official life. After discussing those three main aspects

of gardens as they were described in the *youji* of the Northern Song in relation to the gardens of Luoyang in particular, the author comes to the conclusion that despite the many detailed descriptions of these gardens (arrangement of artificial streams and mountains, buildings, vegetation, etc.) in *youji* texts, the most important for us is the opportunity to see an unofficial side of noble men and understand the authors and garden owners through things they loved.

Diana Yuksel analyzes one of the key concepts in Zhu Xi's thought, *Li* 理, from the perspective of Confucian ethics, stating that recent studies in Neo-Confucianism agree on the predominance of the moral side of the definition of *Li*. She starts her analysis with the concept of *ren* (humanity) as a principle of goodness above all and cosmic virtue, thus identified with *Li* in Zhu Xi's thinking. The author takes into consideration the definition of *Li* as causality and necessity, stressing that *Li*, according to Zhu Xi, has two main features that apply to each thing in nature: the reason by which a thing is as it is and the rule according to which things ought to be. As applied to the moral discipline, it presupposes *nourishing* (*cun yang* 存養) the original moral mind when the principle is still not manifested and *self-examination* (*xing cha* 省察) when *Li* starts acting through the vital force *Qi*. The author suggests that for Zhu Xi, *Li* is a concept composed of a sum of various aspects (*li*) resulting from the different instances of its issuance in the world and with which the mind-heart governed by it is confronted. Therefore, *Li* is the sum of moral norms that encompass humanity, righteousness, rites and wisdom, the pillars of the Confucian moral order.

We hope that such a collective endeavour to reconsider the human in traditional China from very different perspectives and through various problematic issues will help to enrich and specify the understanding of the peculiarities of traditional Chinese culture in general and the treatment of the human in particular.

Last but not least, I would like to extend sincere gratitude to the Taipei Mission in the Baltic States, which was the main and the only sponsor of our seminar. Without its help, the organization of this seminar and the collection of this issue would not have been possible.