

'Immanent Transcendence' in the Chinese Tradition – Remarks on a Chinese  
(and Sinological) Controversy

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There is widespread consensus among many Western sinologists that traditional Chinese thought is purely secular and lacks a transcendent dimension. This view has already had an illustrious history starting from G.W.F. Hegel, the philosophical authority (not only) of the nineteenth century. Here we have what Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* wrote about “Heaven” (天 *tian*) in Confucian thought and practice:

*Tian* designates the physical power and not a spiritual deity. *Tian* is the highest, though not only in the spiritual and moral sense. This *Tian* designates wholly indeterminate and abstract universality; it is the wholly indeterminate sum of the physical and moral nexus as a whole. In this context it is the emperor and not heaven who is sovereign on earth; it is not heaven that has given or gives the “laws” of religion and ethical life, which human beings respect. It is not *Tian* that rules nature, for the emperor rules everything and only he is connected with this *Tian*. Only he brings offerings to *Tian* at the four main festivals of the year; it is only the emperor who converses with *Tian*, who directs his prayers to *Tian*. He alone stands in connection with *Tian*, and thus it is the emperor who rules the whole earth. Among us the prince rules, but God does, too; the prince is bound by the divine commandments. But there (it) is the emperor who has dominion over nature and rules the powers themselves, and that is why all things on earth are the way they are.

We distinguish the world or worldly phenomena in such a way that God rules beyond this world, too. That is where heaven is, which is perhaps populated by the souls of the dead. The heaven of the Chinese or *Tian*, by contrast, is something totally empty.<sup>1</sup>

Hegel presents a view of *tian* purely from sociological observations – which was, of course, not his own – and focuses on the imperial order of society, on the role of the emperor and his offerings to *tian*. There is no consideration (i.e. no knowledge) of textual sources whatsoever.

On the differences between Western and Chinese religion, Hegel has the following to say:

Chinese religion cannot be what we call religion, for to us religion means the retirement of the spirit (Geist) within itself, in contemplating its essential nature and inmost being.<sup>2</sup>

No inherent morality is bound up with the Chinese religion, no immanent rationality through which human beings might have internal value or dignity. Instead, everything is external, everything that is connected with them is a power for them, because in their rationality and morality they have no power within themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel comes to the conclusion that “everything which has to do with spirit (Geist) . . . is alien” to it..<sup>4</sup>

Hegel appears to see Chinese morality completely disconnected from a transcendent source. As will become clear in this chapter, this is a view which is not in accordance with textual evidence, neither from the Confucian classics, nor from the writings of their Neo-Confucian successors.

In some modern Western interpretations of Confucianism, however, we find today an echo of Hegel’s authoritative views, such as with David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames or François

Jullien. As we read in Hall's and Ames's influential book *Thinking Through Confucius* of 1987:

*Tian* is (...) a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own accord. *Tian* is wholly immanent, having no existence independent of the calculus of phenomena that constitute it.<sup>5</sup>

The authors conclude that in terms of Heaven *Tian* is the “cosmological whole.”<sup>6</sup> Jullien holds similar views when he writes that Heaven (*tian*) is the “totalization of Immanence”:

Le ‘Ciel’ – qui s’érige en Transcendance par rapport à l’horizon humain – n’est lui-même que la totalisation – ou l’absolution – d’une telle immanence.<sup>7</sup>

With these authors, in fact sinological authorities of our times, we find a remarkable continuity with Hegel's view of transcendence in the Chinese tradition.

Let us, for the purpose of comparison, look for a moment at the Chinese notions of the “realm beyond”. In contrast to the Western philosophical tradition as it began from the ancient Greeks (i.e. from Plato's search for “ideas” and Aristotle's search for an “unmoved mover”), Chinese thought, indeed, seems not to be that much concerned with discovering transcendence. Zhuangzi, for example, was not interested in the realm beyond:

As to what is beyond the Six Realms (Heaven, earth and the four directions), the sage admits its existence but does not theorize. (Ch. 2)<sup>8</sup>

There is a well-known quote from the *Analects* on the themes that Confucius did not speak about, illustrating that Confucius, just like Zhuangzi, was not heard of lecturing on such grand topics as the “Way of Heaven”. Thus spoke his disciple Zigong:

We can hear our Master's views on culture and its manifestations, but we cannot hear his views on human nature and the Way of Heaven. (子貢曰：「夫子之文章，可得而聞也；夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也。」)<sup>9</sup>

But a remarkable development occurred in Confucian thought. Although Confucius did not talk about the “Way of Heaven” (天道 *tiandao*), his most important immediate successor, Mencius, did talk about it. the “Doctrine of the Mean” (*Zhongyong* 中庸) claims it as its initial – and central – topic. This is why the “Doctrine of the Mean” is often considered to be the most “metaphysical” or “religious” text of the classics. And for this very same reason, the Neo-Confucians of the Song period, for whom the metaphysical dimension became a special focus of their interest, elevated the book of *Mencius* and the “Doctrine of the Mean” to the position of their most esteemed classic. *Mencius* and *Zhongyong* are thus particularly important sources of their thought.

Let us turn to modernity now, to so-called New Confucianism. In the year 1958 there appeared a statement written by four Confucian scholars called "A Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture" (为中国文化告世界人士宣言). It was co-authored by the most prominent Confucian scholars of that time, Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Xu Fuguan 徐复观 (all students of Xiong Shili 熊十力) and Zhang Junmai 张君勱.

This manifesto is what emphasized, for the modern period, the religious dimension of Confucianism and also spoke – implicitly – of immanent transcendence:

The morality of which Chinese Confucians speak is rooted in their concept of ‘mind and human nature’ (*xin-xing* 心性). But this human nature is the same as the heavenly

principle (*tianli* 天理), and this (human) mind is connected with the heavenly mind. Thus this mind and this human nature are the heavenly mind and the heavenly principle. (中国儒者所讲之德性, ... 其本原乃在我们之心性, 而此性同时是天理, 此心亦通于天心。此心此性, 天心天理。)<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence, there was much discussion about transcendence and immanence as well as “immanent transcendence” (*neizai chaoyue* 内在超越) among new Confucians thereafter – although not in the strict Western philosophical fashion.

The concept pair transcendence/immanence is at the core of European philosophy since the ancient Greeks. Kant, in particular, elaborated on transcendence in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. At the same time, he introduced a new term – “transcendental” (concerning the “possibility of knowledge” itself) – and opposed it to the classical term “transcendent” as “that, which goes beyond” (transcends) any possible knowledge of a human being. After Kant, the distinction between immanence and transcendence became an often encountered topic (in quite different contexts, though) for thinkers such as Max Weber, Ernst Bloch, Edmund Husserl, Gilles Deleuze and Paul Tillich, to mention only a few. Since it was absent from traditional Chinese thought, the notion of transcendence (and immanence) as discussed by modern Chinese was triggered through the encounter with the West but, as we will see, the modern Chinese filled it with new meaning.

It was, in particular, the rediscovery of Max Weber’s thought in China in the 1980s that caused a lot of attention for this conceptual pair. As is well known, in his writings on Confucianism and Daoism, Weber sees in European history a tension at work between otherworldliness (transcendence) and worldliness (immanence); and, according to his view, the notion of transcendence (God) led Europeans to have an attitude of critical distance to

matters of the world, whereas he finds in China only worldliness (immanence) without this distance. For this reason, Weber observes that, in contrast to Europe, China lacks political institutions.<sup>11</sup> Hence, some modern Chinese cultural critics deem the moral (and political) decay of China to be due to the lack of (Christian-like) transcendence and to the lack of the notion of sin. They see it as advantageous to have “transcendence” like in the West, since the concept of transcendence has (allegedly) caused all the positive developments that the West has achieved, such as good politics and a legal system.

New developments, that is, a new height and a new dimension of the controversy, occurred when Western scholars joined the debate and emphasized the distinction between a purely Western tradition of transcendence in contrast to an “immanent” way of thought in China. In particular, the publication of Jullien’s as well as Hall’s and Ames’ books in Chinese, such as Hall’s and Ames’ *Thinking through Confucius* (1987, Chinese editions: 2005, 2012) and *Thinking from the Han* (1998, Chinese edition: 1999)<sup>12</sup>. Hence, the issue became a controversy not only within Chinese scholarly circles, but also in international sinology – however within the sphere of the Chinese debate.

For Hall and Ames it is clear that China did not have a notion of transcendence: “We want to argue that China has a tradition that is at once non-transcendent and profoundly religious.”<sup>13</sup> For them, the Chinese tradition marks a radical otherness; thus one should not use terms that are fraught with Western ideas. China should be understood “on its own terms,” similar to the position held by Jullien.<sup>14</sup>

The new dividing line of the controversy appears from the question of whether Confucianism has religious traits or a religious dimension. The advantage of this debate is that it emphasizes concepts like transcendence or immanent transcendence. The disadvantage, in contrast, is that it opposes the concept of transcendence. There is a notable exception, however. Hall and

Ames see a religious dimension – but not transcendent dimension (at least not in a “strict sense”<sup>15</sup>).

The question arises of whether it is legitimate – and whether it makes sense – to explain Chinese “philosophy” with terminology derived from Western philosophy and theology such as transcendence and immanence? Since the encounter with the West, the Chinese seem to have lost their confidence in talking about their own history of ideas through the use of their traditional terminology. The result is a hotchpotch of ideas and a confusing use of terms. There appears to be no “strict” discussion of such terminology in the Western tradition and often, likewise, no “strict” references to Western concepts.

Why do some Chinese scholars feel the need to discuss their own tradition in a way that Western colleagues (such as Hall and Ames) tell them they should abstain from? After all, Hall and Ames see a certain irony in the Chinese being interested in such outdated terms and concepts.<sup>16</sup>

Probing into the background of this apparent contradiction and irony, let us focus on the question: What do Chinese scholars mean when they use concepts like transcendence and immanent transcendence?

Throughout Chinese history there seems to have been an awareness of an unfathomable power “beyond” man and greater than man himself. It was either called *Tian* 天 (Heaven) or *Dao* 道 (Way). In Confucianism, “Heaven” (*tian*) was conceived of as the source of human morality; in contrast, the “Way” (*dao*), in Daoism, according to the first sentence of the *Daodejing* 道德经 (“The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” 道可道非常道) was thought of as the unspeakable “mystery of mysteries” (玄之又玄).<sup>17</sup>

As a further development, Song and Ming, Neo-Confucians who turned towards metaphysics, elevated “Heaven” and the “Way” to central – metaphysical – elements in their thought. Thus, in Neo-Confucianism (the “Learning of the Way”, 道学, as it used to be called in the Chinese), these two realms, “Heaven” and the “Way”, to a certain extent, fused into each other. (Cheng Yi 程颐, 1033-1107: “*Heaven*, in a special sense, is the *Way*” 夫天，专言之则道也。)<sup>18</sup> Hence, we do encounter here a kind of “transcendence”, however again not in a “strict sense”.

The emphasis in the following exploration will be on Confucianism<sup>19</sup>, taking the eminent contemporary scholar Yu Ying-shih 余英时 as an example, in particular his 1983 article “The contemporary significance of Chinese culture seen from the value system” (从价值系统看中国文化的现代意义) which can be found in his 1992 essay collection *The Road of Immanent Transcendence* (内在超越之路).<sup>20</sup>

As Yu Ying-shih summarizes in his arguments, the Chinese maintained the view of a realm beyond but did not attempt to explore it. In contrast, the ancient Greeks tried to explore it by way of reason (Plato, Aristotle), but were not successful. The Christian faith filled this gap – giving answers to the questions of the origin of being and values. The Western world witnessed a development from the religious to the secular. Through the philosophy of Enlightenment, religion (and transcendence) became more and more insignificant. Today, there appears to be a contradiction between religious and scientific or secular views.

Regarding transcendence in the Chinese Tradition, Yu Ying-shih does not see the realms of the transcendent and of the worldly to be fundamentally separated (neither in Confucianism, Daoism or Buddhism). Transcendence, for him, is a power beyond, the basis and destination of all human existence and thus also the basis of human morality. In particular, he emphasizes the transcendent origin of human values in Chinese (Confucian) thought. “Traditional Chinese



culture“ he writes, “holds the view that human values and worldly order have their origin not in the earthly world but have a transcendent origin.”<sup>21</sup> And this origin is called: *tian* 天 and *dao* 道 – “Heaven” and the “Way”. Hence, for him, “immanent transcendence” is the human value system and innate morality.

Let us focus now on the questions: why are some Chinese scholars (such as Yu Ying-shih) drawn to notions like “immanent transcendence” and what are the textual sources for their argument?<sup>22</sup>

Let us begin with Fung Yu-lan (冯友兰), who draws a correlation between cosmic and moral order in his *Short History of Chinese Philosophy* by saying that “the moral principles of man are also metaphysical principles of the universe, and the nature of man is an exemplification of these principles.”<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, the main Ideas of Confucianism according to the mentioned “Manifesto” are that the “Way of Heaven” (*tiandao*) manifests itself as the “Way of Man” (*rendao*) (i.e. in human virtue and morality). Central notions in the “Manifesto” are the “unity of Heaven and man” as well as that the spheres of “Heaven and man penetrate each other (*tian ren jiaoguan* 天人交贯)”. There seems to be the possibility of Heaven reaching down to man and of man reaching up to Heaven.<sup>24</sup>

The authors of the “Manifesto” also maintain that there is an interaction between Heaven and man through the notions of *pei tian* 配天 (man [the sage] matching Heaven) and *tian ming* 天命. The latter important term is usually translated as “decree/will/mandate of Heaven”, that is, the decree of Heaven for man to act morally, but, interestingly, also “destiny, fate” (命运), that is, what is beyond man’s power.

As for textual sources from the classics, let us begin with the “Guodian bamboo strips” 郭店楚簡 (ca. 300 BC) in which we find the saying:

Human Nature emerges from the decree (of Heaven). The decree descends from Heaven. (性自命出，命自天降)<sup>25</sup>

Here we have an early source in which human morality is connected to a transcendent source, that is, Heaven.

Early metaphysical concepts, the notion of a realm and power beyond or of a “metaphysical” agency, can also be found in the Book of Changes. “What exists above form is called the Way (形而上者謂之道).” Such views correspond to a certain extent to a concept of transcendence. Further on the text states that “the great power/virtue of Heaven and earth is to give life (天地之大德曰生).”<sup>26</sup> This became a highly influential notion for Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism since it helped to change the basic Confucian concept of *ren* (仁, benevolence) to encompass the significance of a growing or life-giving power.

There are many quotes about Heaven and man in the *Analects*, such as:

Confucius said, there are three things of which the superior man stands in awe. He stands in awe of the decree of Heaven. He stands in awe of great men. He stands in awe of the words of sages. (孔子曰：君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。) *Analects*, 16.8<sup>27</sup>

The Master said, [...] He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray. (子曰：「獲罪於天，無所禱也。」) *Analects*, 3.13

The Master said, Heaven produced the virtue that is in me. (子曰：天生德於予)  
*Analects*, 7.22

It is Heaven that knows me. (知我者，其天乎) *Analects*, 14.37

At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. (五十而知天命) *Analects*, 2.4

As to the relationship between Heaven and man in the book *Mencius*, we have:

That which is done without man's doing is from Heaven.

That which happens without man's causing is from the decree/mandate of Heaven. (莫

之為而為者，天也；莫之致而至者，命也。) *Mencius*, 5A.6.<sup>28</sup>

As is well known, “original goodness” (*yuan shan* 原善) and “innate morality” (*liang zhi* 良知) are some of Mencius’ main ideas. Why does man have this constitution? Mencius’ answer is that “Heaven” (天 *tian*) is the origin of the goodness of human nature and is, therefore, a transcendent or metaphysical origin of this goodness. Heaven is thus an important point of reference for Mencius since it is the origin of a moral world order and its guarantor.

We also find in Mencius the idea that knowing human nature amounts to nothing less than knowing Heaven:

“He who has exerted his heart/mind to the utmost knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. To preserve one's heart/mind, and nourish one's nature, is the way to serve Heaven.” 孟子曰：盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。) (7A.1)

Hence, for Mencius, fully exerting our human mind (of commiseration, etc.) leads us to knowing the metaphysical origin of human morality and to fulfilling our destiny: the decree of Heaven (天命).

Mencius refers to Heaven in a number of ways:

“There are persons who serve the prince; [...] There are those who are the people of Heaven.” (孟子曰：「有事君人者 [...]. 有天民者。」) (7A.19)

“There is a nobility (*jue*) of Heaven, and there is a nobility of man. Benevolence, righteousness, self-consecration, and fidelity, with unwearied joy in these virtues; these constitute the nobility of Heaven. [...] The men of antiquity cultivated their nobility of Heaven, and the nobility of man came to them in its train. [...]” (孟子曰：「有天爵者，有人爵者。仁義忠信，樂善不倦，此天爵也；[...] 古之人修其天爵，而人爵從之 [...].」) (6A.16)

“He who delights in Heaven, will affect with his love and protection the whole kingdom.” (乐天者保天下。) (1A.3)

When we turn to “Heaven and man” as well as to the “Way” in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), we encounter similar ideas as in *Mencius*, such as in the very beginning of this important text:

“Heaven’s decree (to man) is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called education.” (天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。) <sup>29</sup> (*Zhongyong*, 1)

“The Way (*Dao*) may not be left for an instant. If it could be left, it would not be the Way.” (道也者，不可須臾離也，可離非道也。) (*Zhongyong*, 1)

The Master said: "The Way is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered the Way." (道不遠人，人之為道而遠人，不可以為道也。) (*Zhongyong*, 13)

One of the most important ideas in the *Doctrine of the Mean* is the notion of “sincerity” (or authenticity): *cheng* (誠). The central saying about this is:

Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. The attainment of sincerity is the Way of men. (誠者，天之道也；誠之者，人之道也。) (*Zhongyong*, 22)

This means nothing less than that human morality is prefigured in “Heaven”. Further we have:

It is only he who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under Heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. Able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion. (唯天下至誠，為能盡其性；能盡其性，則能盡人之性；能盡人之性，則能盡物之性；能盡物之性，則可以贊天地之化育；可以贊天地之化育，則可以與天地參矣。) (*Zhongyong*, 23)

It is only he, possessed of all sagely qualities that can exist under heaven, who shows himself quick in apprehension, clear in discernment, of far-reaching intelligence, and all-embracing knowledge, fitted to exercise rule; magnanimous, generous, benign, and mild, fitted to exercise forbearance; impulsive, energetic, firm, and enduring, fitted to maintain a firm hold; self-adjusted, grave, never swerving from the Mean, and correct, fitted to command reverence; accomplished, distinctive, concentrative, and searching, fitted to exercise discrimination. All-embracing is he and vast, deep and active as a fountain, sending forth in their due season his virtues. All-embracing and vast, he is like Heaven. Deep and active as a fountain, he is like the abyss. He is seen, and the people all reverence him; he speaks, and the people all believe him; he acts, and the people all are pleased with him. Therefore his fame overspreads the Middle Kingdom, and extends to all barbarous tribes. Wherever ships and carriages reach; wherever the strength of man penetrates; wherever the heavens overshadow and the earth sustains; wherever the sun and moon shine; wherever frosts and dews fall:-all who have blood and breath unfeignedly honor and love him. Hence it is said, "He matches Heaven." (唯天下至聖，為能聰明睿知，足以有臨也；寬裕溫柔，足以有容也；發強剛毅，足以有執也；齊莊中正，足以有敬也；文理密察，足以有別也。溥博淵泉，而時出之。溥博如天，淵泉如淵。見而民莫不敬，言而民莫不信，行而民莫不說。是以聲名洋溢乎中國，施及蠻貊；舟車所至，人力所通，天之所覆，地之所載，日月所照，霜露所隊；凡有血氣者，莫不尊親，故曰配天。)

(*Zhongyong*, 32)

Thus we find in the book of *Mencius* and in *Zhongyong* the origin of most influential ideas in the history of Confucianism: "Unity of Heaven and Man" (天人合一) as in Song-Ming Neo-

Confucianism as well as of “Immanent Transcendence” (内在超越) in contemporary new Confucianism.

As for “Heaven and Man” in Neo-Confucianism (The “Learning of the Way” – *Daoxue* 道学), there are too many numerous quotes to deal with here. Representative might be the “Western Inscription” (西铭) of Zhang Zai 张载 (1020-1077):

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (乾稱父，坤稱母。予茲藐焉，乃渾然中處。故天地之塞，吾其體；天地之帥，吾其性。)<sup>30</sup>

Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085) says that “the humane person forms one body with Heaven and Earth and the Myriad Things.” (仁者，以天地万物为一体。)<sup>31</sup> The philosophy of Sung Neo-Confucianism is often characterized by the saying “Human nature is identical with the (Heavenly) principle” (性即理), thus showing the unity of Heaven and man.

For Ming Neo-Confucianism such as Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472-1529), on the other side, for whom the focus is not on human nature but on the human heart/mind, we have the identification of the heart/mind with Heaven and the “Way”: “The heart/mind is nothing but the ‘Way’; and the Way is nothing but Heaven.” (心即道，道即天。)<sup>32</sup> Hence the slogan of Ming-Neo-Confucianism is that “the heart/mind is identical with the (Heavenly) principle” (心即理).

We can thus sum up the discussion above with Fung Yu-lan 冯友兰 who regards the main tradition of Chinese philosophy as aiming.

at a particular kind of highest life. But this kind of highest life, high though it is, is not divorced from the daily functioning of human relations. Thus it is both of this world and of the other world, and we maintain that it 'both attains to the sublime and yet performs the common tasks'. (在中国传统中，生活在於追求最高境界，而最高境界不離於日常人伦，它既在此世，也在彼世，我们可以说，它“极高明而道中庸”。)<sup>33</sup>

Guo Qiyong summarizes the controversy by claiming that for the Chinese, transcendence (*tiandao*) is not an epistemological issue but one of ethics and values. Epistemology is not talked about much in the Chinese tradition. Transcendence is talked about only in terms of how it manifests itself in the human person as human nature or heart/mind. For Guo Qiyong, immanent transcendence (内在超越) points at the operation of a power *beyond* (Heaven) but *within* man<sup>34</sup> – that is, as innate morality.

There is also an aesthetic dimension to the discussion about transcendence in the Chinese tradition. For the Chinese, “Heaven”, “Mandate” and the “Way” (*Dao*) are powerful metaphors. The discourse on these topics comprises of a poetic way of speaking about what we cannot comprehend, about what is above the power of human understanding. Seen from this angle, it is a misleading endeavour to attempt to translate these terms as is done here and there. William Franke sees it this way:

Such words as *Dao* and Heaven in Chinese tradition are essential for pointing to what remains always still unexhausted and elicited by the metaphorical languages drawn from empirical, finite, human life.<sup>35</sup>

There is in the ideas sketched above, as Franke sees it, a certain closeness to apophatism in a peculiarly Chinese way. This kind of “negativity” has been reinforced by a tendency towards



“mysticism” – or “mystification” – in Chinese “aesthetics” in general. One of the most important topics of Chinese aesthetics, particularly of poetics, is to say by “not saying,” or rather to speak “beyond words” (*yan wai*). Particularly in Sikong Tu’s 司空图 (837-908) writings, we find plenty of apophatic expressions such as “meaning beyond words” (意在言外), “scenes beyond scenes” (景外之景), and “images beyond images” (象外之象),<sup>36</sup> and in the vein of Sikong Tu, we find expressions such as “marvel beyond painting” (妙在画外) with Huang Yue 黄钺 in the eighteenth century.

Also, in Chinese aesthetics there is much talk about a spiritual/divine dimension (*shen* 神). Representative is Yan Yu’s (严羽, 1191–1241) highest level of poetry, that of “entering the realm of the spirits/God” (*ru shen* 入神). In painting, the same goal had already been stressed 800 years before Yan Yu with Gu Kaizhi (顾恺之, 344-405), who defined the purpose of a painting as “transmitting the spirit” (*chuan shen* 传神).<sup>37</sup>

Finally, as for the relationship between Chinese aesthetics and religion, the eminent modern writer Lin Yutang (林语堂, 1895-1976) has put it this way:

To my mind, poetry has taken over the function of religion in China, in so far as religion is taken to mean a cleansing of man’s soul, a feeling for the mystery and beauty of the universe, and a feeling of tenderness and compassion for one’s fellowmen and the humble creatures of life.<sup>38</sup>

He says that “poetry may well be called the Chinaman’s religion.”<sup>39</sup> And Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940) demanded for modern China that aesthetic education should come in “the place of religion (以美育代宗教).”<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The question about transcendence in Chinese tradition is still up for debate, and we don't want to come to a definite conclusion here. There is much evidence, though, that there is a Chinese notion of transcendence as an unfathomable "cosmological whole" and order, but this is certainly not in accord with prevalent Western notions, mostly circling around God; hence we may not have, as already said by Hall and Ames, a philosophical concept of transcendence in a "strict sense".

In contrast and as already mentioned in the context of aesthetics, due to the reluctance of Confucius to talk about the "Way of Heaven" and the Daoist attitude to regard the "Way" as the "mystery of mysteries", transcendence in the Chinese tradition might preferably be referred to in a negative (apophatic) sense as a realm (or issue) that we cannot talk about.

Is there anything that comes close in Western philosophy to the Chinese ideas sketched above? What comes to mind is the thought of Paul Tillich (1886-1965) – not a philosopher in a "strict sense" but a (unorthodox) theologian of great influence. In Tillich's thought transcendence, according to the Western mainstream, is God; however, it is not a supernatural entity among other entities, but is the "ground of being it-self" upon which all being exists: "being-itself".<sup>41</sup>

Hence, Tillich's main idea is that God is not something "above" (Karl Barth), but "within" man. He is both personal and transpersonal, transcendent and immanent. We thus have here a "divine-human encounter" which cannot be comprehended. As a consequence, statements about God, for Tillich, are simply symbolic. This is a kind of thought which again is close to the apophatic and mystical tradition as well as to the Chinese notions of "Heaven" and the "Way".

But in Tillich we do not find the notion of innate morality as a Chinese equivalent of “immanent transcendence”. What are here possible points of comparison? What may come to mind is the idea of “Natural Law” or “Divine Law” such as with the Stoics or with Thomas Aquinas. But more so than these ideas, it appears that Immanuel Kant’s “Metaphysics of Morals” had a bearing on modern day Confucians with their notion of “immanent transcendence”. For New Confucians such as Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909-1995), Kant’s “Metaphysics of Morals” was particularly intriguing because of the Chinese tradition of innate morality that goes back to Mencius. This is why he called his own project, in the style of Kant’s, “Moral Metaphysics” (道德的形上学).<sup>42</sup> One of Kant’s sayings, from the conclusion of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, has become particularly prominent also in China:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. (“两样东西使我常觉得惊讶与敬畏，那就是：在我头上众星的天空；在我心中道德的法则。”)<sup>43</sup>

With this saying, one is reminded of Fung Yu-lan’s quote above (Fn. 23) in which he correlates the cosmic and moral order in Chinese tradition. And when Confucius says that the superior man “stands in awe of the decree of Heaven”, the decree of Heaven being his sense of innate morality, we get pretty much the same meaning.

Such comparisons might be considered deficient as they require bearing in mind the respective (different) context. But we cannot help drawing comparisons to our own culture when trying to understand other cultures. Comparisons either highlight the differences or the

similarities – thus, aspects are often the same but different... In addition, our ways of making sense are only interpretations – interpretations of metaphors, in fact.

Although the “West” appears to have gained the defining power to determine discourses in the humanities, there is no right to possess certain terms or views – neither by Western or Eastern scholars. As to the controversy which is our topic here, the question is whether it is legitimate to interpret the Chinese past from Western terms and categories such as transcendence and immanence. This question looks similar to other questions and aspects of Chinese philosophy, such as whether it is right to call Chinese thought “philosophy” (without “rational,” “logical,” and “causal” traits...). Or may the Chinese talk about their “theory” of art as “aesthetics”? The answer would be: Not really, at least not in a strict sense... – but we may add: Why not?

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. II: *Determinate Religion*, 447-48.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 131.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. Eric M. Dale therefore summarizes Hegel's views on China: "China is thus for Hegel a necessary but surpassed relic of human history, unable to raise humankind beyond a naked worship of external power and socially sanctioned rituals and norms." Eric M. Dale, "Humanism and Despotism: Jaspers and Hegel on Chinese History and Religion." The above 3 quotes from Hegel also are to be found in Dale's paper.

<sup>5</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> François Jullien, *La propension des choses*, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Burton Watson (transl.), *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Analects*, 5. 13. The quotes from the *Analects* are (sometimes with modifications) from James Legge's translation.

<sup>10</sup> <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/ae37391052d380eb62946d5a.html>; Cf. Carsun Chang (Zhang Junmai), *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, Vol. II, 466.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 148-50.

<sup>12</sup> 郝大维, 安乐哲, "通过孔子而思" (2005); "孔子哲学思微" (2012), "汉哲学思维的文化探源" (1999).

<sup>13</sup> *Thinking from the Han*, 233. As to critics of their position, see William Franke, *Apophatic Paths From Europe to China: Regions Without Borders*, 134: "For Hall and Ames, Chinese culture can be understood only 'on its own terms,' and thus in a manner preserving its distinctiveness and integrity. Unfortunately, this position can become dogmatic. After all, what terms can ever be simply and purely 'one's own'? All have their remote as well as proximate provenances and are never purely autochthonous. Moreover, the qualities in question cannot be apprehended absolutely and in themselves but only through relation and interaction with other cultures. Cultures and their distinctive characteristics are revealed only through mutual contrast and resistance. The aim of respecting differences is laudable and necessary in order to make comparative philosophy viable, and yet it is also impossible strictly to achieve."



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- <sup>14</sup> See William Franke, *Apophatic Paths From Europe to China*, and Fabian Heubel, "Immanente Transzendenz im Spannungsfeld von europäischer Sinologie, kritischer Theorie und zeitgenössischem Konfuzianismus."
- <sup>15</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, 12f.
- <sup>16</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 222.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://cetxt.org/dao-de-jing>
- <sup>18</sup> Cheng Yi, *Zhouyi Cheng shi zhuan* (Cheng Yi's Commentary on the Book of Changes) 《周易程氏传》, sec. I (On the Hexagram "Qian" 乾卦).
- <sup>19</sup> I am guided by a dissertation in German: Yang Xusheng 杨煦生, *Immanente Transzendenz. Eine Untersuchung der Transzendenzenerfahrung in der antiken chinesischen Religiosität mit Berücksichtigung des Konfuzianismus*.
- <sup>20</sup> Yu Ying-shih, "Cong jiazhi xitong kan Zhongguo wenhua de xiandai yiyi", in Xin Hua and Ren Jing (eds.), *Neizai chaoyue zhi lu. Yu Yingshi xin ruxue lunzhu jiyao*.
- <sup>21</sup> Yu Ying-shih, 9. "我们所强调的一点只是中国传统文化并不以为人间的秩序和价值起于人间，它们仍有超人间的来源。"
- <sup>22</sup> Apart from Yu Ying-shih, Feng Youlan and Yang Xusheng, I am indebted in this investigation to Guo Qiyong 郭齐勇: *Zhongguo ruxue zhi jingshen* "中国儒学之精神" (The Spirit of Chinese Confucianism).
- <sup>23</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. "人的道德原则也是宇宙形而上纯粹哲学的原则,而人性则是这些原则的一个范例。" 《中国哲学简史》
- <sup>24</sup> See Fn. 10.
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.bamboosilk.org/zzwk/2003/wuhanhui/liuxinlan01-1.htm>
- <sup>26</sup> *Yijing*, Xici, 易经,系辞 I.12.
- <sup>27</sup> All quotes from the *Analects* are translations of James Legge (with modifications).
- <sup>28</sup> All quotes from the *Mengzi* are translations of James Legge (with modifications).
- <sup>29</sup> All quotes from the *Zhongyong* are translations of James Legge (with modifications).
- <sup>30</sup> [http://www.pep.com.cn/gzyw/jszx/tbjxzy/kbjc/ywdb/zgjdyd/201012/t20101215\\_987691.htm](http://www.pep.com.cn/gzyw/jszx/tbjxzy/kbjc/ywdb/zgjdyd/201012/t20101215_987691.htm)
- <sup>31</sup> <http://www.chiculture.net/0307/html/c07/0307c07.html>
- <sup>32</sup> <http://baike.baidu.com/view/1383167.htm>
- <sup>33</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, 3.

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- <sup>34</sup> Guo Qiyong 郭齐勇: *Zhongguo ruxue zhi jingshen* “中国儒学之精神” (The Spirit of Chinese Confucianism), 242-52.
- <sup>35</sup> William Franke, 111.
- <sup>36</sup> Maureen A. Robertson: “‘...To Convey What is Precious’: Ssu-k'ung T'u's Poetics and the Erh-shih-ssu Shih-p'in”, in D. Buxbaum und F. W. Mote: *Transition and Permanence, Chinese History and Culture. A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan*, 323-57.
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Ästhetik und Literaturtheorie in China*, 132, 280f.
- <sup>38</sup> Lin Yutang, *My Country and my People*, 242.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.
- <sup>40</sup> See Liu Yongsi 刘泳斯, “Cai Yuanpei: Yi meiyu daizongjiao” 蔡元培: 以美育代宗教
- <sup>41</sup> Werner Schüssler, *Paul Tillich*, 55-72.
- <sup>42</sup> Jason Clower, “Mou Zongsan (Mou Tsung-san) (1909—1995)”, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/zongsan/>
- <sup>43</sup> <http://www.philosophy-index.com/kant/critique-practical-reason/conclusion.php>