

# Modernization of Chinese Philosophical Methodology: Zhang Dainian's Innovation and the Challenges of Neo-Materialism<sup>1</sup>

Jana S. ROŠKER\*

## Abstract

The present paper aims to shed light on certain methodological challenges that Chinese intellectuals faced in the process of coming to terms with Marxist thought. Even at the beginning of these processes, i.e., in the first decades of the 20th century, Chinese theorists faced several difficulties regarding the issue of cross-cultural philosophical syntheses. Thus, in their endeavours to adapt Marxism to the specifically Chinese worldview, they sought suitable adaptations of traditional philosophical methodologies that would enable them to fruitfully integrate classical Chinese and modern Marxist discourses. Zhang Dainian 張岱年 (1909–2004) has played a particularly prominent role in this process. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on his contribution to the establishment of new Chinese and cross-cultural philosophical methodologies. In terms of exploring general philosophical issues, Zhang established a unique philosophical system known as “neo-materialism” in which he attempted to integrate Marxist materialism with some basic approaches of traditional Chinese philosophy. The crucial features that defined this philosophical system were based on his innovative methodology, which is critically presented in this paper.

**Keywords:** modern Chinese philosophy, Chinese and intercultural philosophy, modernization of Chinese thought, methodology of Chinese philosophy

1 The author would like to express her gratitude to the Institute for International Communication of Chinese Studies at the Beijing Normal University for its support of the research work which has led to the publication of this paper. The author also acknowledges the support of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS) in the framework of the research core funding *Asian Languages and Cultures* (P6-0243) and in the scope of the research project N6-0161 (Complementary scheme) *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Europe and China*.

\* Jana S. ROŠKER, Professor of Sinology, Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.  
Email address: jana.rosker@ff.uni-lj.si



## Modernizacija kitajske filozofske metodologije: Zhang Dainianova inovacija in izzivi neomaterializma

### Izvleček

Pričujoči članek je nastal s ciljem osvetlitve metodoloških izzivov, s katerimi so bili soočeni kitajski izobraženci in izobraženke v procesu sprejemanja marksistične miselnosti. Že na samem začetku teh procesov, tj. v prvih desetletjih 20. stoletja, so bile kitajske teoretičarke in njihovi moški kolegi prisiljeni ukvarjati se z reševanjem problemov v zvezi z medkulturnimi filozofskimi sintezami. Tako so v prizadevanjih po prilagoditvi marksizma specifično kitajskemu videnju sveta iskali primerne načine prilagoditev tradicionalnih filozofskih metodologij, ki bi jim omogočili plodno integracijo klasičnih kitajskih in sodobnih marksističnih diskurzov. Zhang Dainian 張岱年 (1909–2004) je v teh procesih igral še posebej pomembno vlogo. Zaradi tega želi pričujoči sestavek osvetliti njegov prispevek k vzpostavitvi novih kitajskih in medkulturnih filozofskih metodologij. Za reševanje splošnih filozofskih problemov pa je Zhang poleg tega ustvaril enkratni filozofski sistem z imenom »neomaterializem«, s pomočjo katerega je želel marksistični tip materializma povezati z določenimi temeljnimi pristopi tradicionalne kitajske filozofije. Ključne značilnosti, ki so opredeljevale ta filozofski sistem, so temeljile na njegovi inovativni metodologiji, ki jo avtorica v tem prispevku kritično predstavi.

**Ključne besede:** moderna kitajska filozofija, kitajska in medkulturna filozofija, modernizacija kitajske miselnosti, metodologija kitajske filozofije

## Political and Intellectual Background: The Troubled Waters of Sinicized Marxism

Before focusing on Zhang Dainian's new methodology, we need to introduce the intellectual background against which it was established. Its roots can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century and the emergence of the so-called "New Intellectuals", who were mainly educated abroad and were mostly advocating a more intense Westernization of Chinese culture. Among the most influential of the young scholars, who dedicated themselves to the dissemination and popularization of Marxist thought in the 1920s, and especially during the 1930s, were Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1889–1927) and Ai Siqi 艾思起 (1910–1966).

While Ai Siqi's reputation is based on his systematic treatises in the field of "socialist philosophy", which were a mainstay of standard philosophical textbooks for many decades, the first two figures are among the founders of Chinese Marxism.

As the first party leader, Chen drew many intellectuals away from earlier Chinese radical movements, such as anarchism, while Li's arguments

for interdependent moral and economic revolutions formed the basis for Marxist ethical thinking in China. (Bunnin 2002, 9)

The works of these pioneers of Chinese Marxism were mostly aimed at introducing and popularizing a theoretical framework and providing social, as well as historical constructions of dialectical materialism.<sup>2</sup> Here, we should also mention the modern logician, Zhang Shenfu, who translated Wittgenstein's *Logical Philosophical Treatise*, and is best known for his attempt to fuse Confucianism with the philosophy of Bertrand Russell and dialectical materialism.

These beginnings bore their fruits much later, during the second half of the 20th century in which a more profound study and theoretical elaboration of Marxism, in terms of integrating certain aspects of traditional Chinese approaches into the framework of Marxist thought, was carried out.

Of the long list of theorists who, each in their own way, contributed to a similar cognitive synthesis and succeeded in formulating their own, more or less innovative theories, we should mention the Modern Confucian, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990), whose work was examined in the previous chapter, as well as Feng Qi 馮契 (1915–1995), and Zhang Dainian 張岱年 (1909–2004). The works of the latter will be summarized in later sections of this paper.

Alongside the creation of these new cognitive systems, “philosophy” also served as a purely symbolic tool for the formation of dominant ideologies. The main goal of these popularized forms of “Marxist-Leninist” or “Maoist” theories was, obviously, to preserve the political power of the ruling oligarchy, and to formulate the direction of concrete policy. This form of popularized philosophy, which was usually expressed in all-inclusive slogans, assumed the role of providing ideological links between the existing power structure and those it ruled, in the same way as orthodox forms of Confucian doctrine had done in traditional China. Hence, every major government official was also a “leading philosopher” who formulated the “correct” interpretation of “Marxist” (and, in Taiwan, Modern Confucian) “truth”, which replaced the dogmas of orthodox Confucianism in the latter half of the 20th century, while most leading politicians were also immortalized in philosophical encyclopaedias and modern histories of thought. This practice, which had already emerged during the first Nationalist Republic, is still alive and well today, not only in the People's Republic, but also in Taiwan.

The gamut of “theoretical systems” in contemporary Chinese encyclopaedias and philosophical textbooks thus includes a great number of ideological currents,

2 For a more detailed information on these processes, see for instance Tian (2019, 13), Rockmore (2019, 56), Altinok (2019, 76), and Sernelj (2019, 102).

beginning with Sun Zhongshan's (Sun Yat-Sen's) 孫中山 concept of "Three National Principles 三民主義", and followed by Mao Zedong's "Maoism 毛澤東思想". Even in later periods, these kind of slogan-guided ideologies have flourished, for instance in Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 "Theory of Socialism with Chinese Features 中國特色的社會主義理論", Jiang Zemin's 江澤民 ideology of the "Three Representations 三個代表", and the current "Chinese Dream 中國夢" promoted by Xi Jinping 習近平.

However, it is clear that these theories do not in any way represent new theoretical systems, and are therefore of little scholarly interest and, besides, the majority of these treatises were not written by the political figures to whom they were ascribed, but by their "court ideologues". For example, modern sinology demonstrated many years ago that the works of Mao Zedong 毛澤東, who is still considered by many to be the spiritual father of so-called "Maoism" (i.e. the sinicized form of Marxist-Leninist theories), was mostly of plagiarized.

Several works analyzing the close dependence of Mao Tse-tung's theoretical works on Soviet sources, and his plagiarisms, have already appeared (Wittfogel, Takeuchi Minoru, Schram, Lippert, Wylie, Knight, Fogel) and do not need to be discussed at length here. Wittfogel notes the fact that approximately 40 per cent of Mao's work *Dialectical Materialism* is plagiarism, while the other parts hardly deviate at all from Soviet models. (Meissner 1990, 11)

The transformation of Marxism to Maoism was, to a great extent, based upon the "inertial" principles of Chinese tradition, which also pervaded the social reality of the new "socialist" society:

There is little evidence to suggest that contemporary China has abandoned any significant elements of its syncretic Confucian orthodoxy. The dynastic leadership of contemporary China maintains many of the same characteristics that have dominated since the Han dynasty: a governing state ideology that assigns each person their respective place in their community, the nation understood as a family, a programmatic constitution which functions more like a "Bill of Rites", than a Bill of Rights, a filial respect for the ruler as "father and mother" of the people, and the consequent sense of rule as a personal exercise. With respect to the personal character of ruler, objecting to the policies that articulate the existing order continues to be considered a condemnation of the ruler's person. (Hall and Ames 1998, 10)

The only real changes that Mao made in his modification of Marxist thought are his emphasis on specific elements which, in his view, define even the most general category, and his idea of permanent revolution. This idea, which served Mao Zedong throughout his long rule as an ideal foundation for mobilizing the masses in order to preserve his power, was rooted in the classical concept of correlative dialectics, by which synthesis (as the repeated reappearance of a qualitatively new state) does not occur in an instantaneous leap, but through a continual process of interaction between contradictory poles. The former idea can also be found in ancient Chinese tradition, in its specific understanding of humanness (人性) and its tendency towards more flexible criteria for regulating human social interactions, which considers the particularities of a given situation (and which is most clearly expressed in the classical concept of rituality (禮)). It is precisely this situational adaptability that provides the crucial discriminant with respect to the normative, legal regulation of social relations which forms the basis of Western societies (Rošker 1996, 71).

Human malleability and the fluidity of social nature go far beyond the standard Marxist line. Where Marx stresses the uniformity of class-originated identity, Mao emphasizes the importance of those differences which derive from ways of living and thinking that must be factored into the evaluation of any specific 'concrete' personality. There is in Mao a basic distrust of abstract, general claims, and a recurrent return to specific cases and historical examples. The contemporary Chinese view so historicizes the Marxist sensibility as to allow for an almost unlimited flexibility in terms of the shaping of individual personalities and the development of individual skills. (Hall and Ames 1998, 10)

However, this very Maoist version of popularized Marxism also established elementary valuation criteria for public debates that embraced a wide range of socially significant disciplines, including philosophy and the theory of knowledge.

The utopian aims and ideological rigidities of Mao's thought were used repeatedly to restrict the range of debate, even though Mao's theory of contradictions distinguished between acceptable and dangerous disagreements. The imposition of orthodoxy curtailed much of the potential creativity of Marxist theory. Nevertheless, some philosophers contributed to serious Marxist thought and historical reassessments of Chinese philosophy. (Bunnin 2002, 9–10)

Among these “court ideologues”, whose theories were entirely at the service of the ruling party and its ideological directions, we can mention Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), who created a new periodic classification of the history of Chinese philosophy. His categories were based upon a simplified application of Marxist conceptual frames and provided new valuation criteria for a number of philosophers. His judgement of philosophers as either progressive or reactionary did much to shape the study of the history of philosophy in China. In the open exchanges earlier in the century, Guo’s rejection of a static essence of Chinese society and thought “contributed to the development of historical understanding, but when imposed as orthodoxy, these views distorted and constricted philosophical study” (ibid., 10).

Most of Hou Wailu’s later works 侯外廬 (1903–1978) are based upon similar, though much more complex and theoretically more profound periodizations, and, in terms of content, much better differentiated approaches, making him one of the most important modern historians of Chinese thought.

From the 1930s on, he explored Chinese history in accordance with Marxist theories and methods. His research was an important pioneering work in the fields of social and ideal history. His *General History of Chinese Thought*, a work of many volumes which he co-authored with others, still remains the most complete work on the history of Chinese thought and had a profound influence on the academic world. Other works worthy of mention are: *On the Social History of Ancient China*, *A History of Ancient Chinese Theoretical Thought* and *A History of Modern Chinese Theoretical Thought*. He was also a chief editor of *The History of Modern Chinese Philosophy*, *An Outline of Chinese History of Thought* and *A History of the School of Principles of the Song and Ming Dynasties*.<sup>3</sup> (*Zhexue xiao cidian* 2003, 485)

Despite the great, at times almost unbearable, political and ideological pressures in the latter half of the 20th century a number of theorists were sufficiently subtle and creative (and sufficiently courageous) to plant the seeds of new theories that combined Marxist, Confucian, Daoist and even Buddhist approaches. While maintaining a Marxist perspective, they tried to reconstruct

3 從 30年代起, 他應用馬克思主義的理論和方法研究中國厲史, 在社會史, 思想史領域作了大量開闢性的研究工作. 和他人合著的多卷本 ‘中國思想通史’, 是迄今中國最詳備的一部思想史著作, 在學術界影響很大. 著作另有 ‘中國古代社會史論’, ‘中國古代思想學說史’, ‘中國近世思想學說史’ 等, 並主編 ‘中國近代哲學史’, ‘中國思想史綱’, ‘宋明理學史’.

Chinese philosophy and methodology. Through this combination of commitments, they were perhaps more culturally representative than many other Chinese philosophical figures from the 1940s through the 1990s (Cheng Chung-Ying 2002, 381). Zhang Dainian, to whose work and thought we will turn in the next sections of this paper, belongs to such brilliant scholars who have truly and distinctively shaped the modern image of Chinese philosophy and its methodology.

### Zhang Dainian's Life and Work

Zhang Dainian was one of the most influential Chinese philosophers of the era that was very briefly described above. He thus belongs among the most important Chinese philosophers and historians of philosophy who left an enduring impact on the development of modern Sinophone thought. His research mainly focused on interpretations of Chinese intellectual history, on developing a new methodology of Chinese philosophy, and also on questions linked to intercultural philosophy and various encounters with Western thought. In his cultural philosophy, Zhang rejected total Westernization, but also disagreed with cultural nationalism. He strove for a synthesis of Chinese and Western culture and a mutual completion of different Chinese and Euro-American philosophical discourses.

Due to his revitalization of classical categories and the concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy he later—in the second half of the 20th century—also became famous outside China. One of the reasons for this international fame doubtless lies in his important contribution to the modernization of cross-cultural methodology. Among other issues, he established numerous innovative and extremely significant methodological approaches for researching ancient Chinese traditions of thought and created a number of specific tools for comparative philosophy and related cultural sciences.

The continuation of the Chinese tradition was already apparent in the philosophical works of Jin Yuelin and Feng Youlan. With Zhang Dainian, this continuity finally became a conscious, self-aware methodology. It can be said that Zhang Dainian, as opposed to Jin or Feng, was not only vigilantly preserving the special characteristics of traditional Chinese thought but, more importantly, was also preserving and continuing traditional methodological principles ... In terms of its range, Zhang Dainian's continuation of the Chinese philosophical tradition goes far beyond Jin

Yuelin's and even Feng Youlan's. His work represents a genuine synthesis of the continuations of traditional philosophy.<sup>4</sup> (Hu 2002, 230)

Zhang Dainian was born in the Xian 獻 district of Hebei 河北 province. Influenced by his older brother, he began studying philosophy at an early age. He attended Beiping University of Education (北平師範大學), graduating in 1933. A number of his early philosophical treatises attracted considerable attention and even before the establishment of the People's Republic he was recommended by Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 and Jin Yuelin 金岳霖 (Cheng Lian 2002, 235). He first taught Chinese philosophy at Qinghua University (清華大學) in Peking, where his brother was also a professor, and in 1952 he began teaching at Peking University (北京大學), where he worked as professor emeritus until his death in 2004. However, the turbulent periods of the Anti-rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution did not spare Zhang Dainian, and he was forbidden to lecture or publish for a number of years. Because of political and historical factors, his ideas received little attention until the last two decades of the 20th century. Although his major works were written before 1949, only a few were published. Thus, while his older contemporaries Feng Youlan and Jin Yuelin established their academic reputations before 1949, Zhang was not so fortunate (ibid. 244).

In China, Zhang Dainian is also well known for elaborating and completing the innovative philosophy developed by his brother, Zhang Shenfu 張申府 (1893–1986), which combined analytical, Marxist and ancient Chinese thought.

His major works were published in 1996 in eight volumes with the title *Collected Works of Zhang Dainian* (張岱年全集). His most important works include *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy* (中國哲學大綱), the modern methodological classic *Key Concepts and Categories in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (中國古典哲學概念範疇要論), which has also been published in English and German, the collections of essays *Culture and Philosophy* (文化與哲學) and *Searching for the Truth* (求真集), and the anthology *Zhang Dainian's Collected Academic Essays, selected by the Author* (張岱年學術論著自選集).

During the first three decades of the 20th century, Zhang closely followed the ideological disputes between the radical proponents of a complete Westernization (全盤西化) and the conservatives who argued for a renewal of the ancient

4 在金岳霖與馮友蘭那裡，對中國傳統哲學的繼承是浸透在他們的哲學研究中的，而到了張岱年，終於將這種對傳統哲學的繼承轉化為一種自覺的方法論。可以說，較之金、馮二人，張岱年不僅更注意對中國傳統哲學特征的整體把握，也更注重繼承傳統的方法論原則... 張岱年對中國傳統哲學的繼承，就其廣度而言，遠遠超出了金岳霖，也超過了馮友蘭，顯示他對傳統哲學繼承的'綜合性'。



Chinese traditions (復古派). However, Zhang, who actively participated in these debates, began looking for a middle way which would combine the most appropriate aspects of both discourses.

This view of culture has obtained popularity in China over the last two decades as the “synthesizing innovation theory of Chinese culture” ... An enhanced version was developed and expounded during the period of the cultural debate in the 1980s. For Zhang, the important question is not what to synthesize, but how to synthesize. (Cheng Lian 2002, 243)

Over the course of his intellectual and academic career, Zhang gradually developed his own specific vision of a method capable of achieving such a synthesis. As a young man, he was interested in certain Western philosophical issues, and was especially attracted to the analytical philosophy of Moore and Russell. But increasingly he devoted himself to exploring ways of integrating analytical methods into re-constructions and reinterpretations of classical Chinese philosophy. A systematic treatment of this approach, which would henceforth constitute the main thrust of his intellectual interests, can be found in his *Five Essays on Men and Nature* 天人五論, which appeared in 1940 and can also be found in his *Collected Works* (1996).

## Methodology and Epistemology: From Chinese Tradition to Marx and Beyond

For Zhang, approaching Chinese philosophy from a Marxist point of view was extremely fruitful, for Marxism represented an important contribution to examining the relationship between being and consciousness (*Sein – Bewusstsein*).

Although Chinese philosophy has its own specifics, its basic problem is still the problem of being and consciousness. This is a universal characteristic of all philosophies.<sup>5</sup> (Zhang 2003, 12)

In his cultural studies, he sought a synthesis of traditional Chinese and Western approaches, especially with regard to the relations between men and nature, the individual and society, and analytic and dialectical reasoning (Bunnin 2002, 11). He believed that future Chinese philosophy should be based upon the development

5 中國哲學雖然具有自己的特殊性，但中國哲學的基本問題也是思維與存在的問題。這是不同民族的哲學所共有的普遍性。

and elaboration of positive elements from within its own tradition: "In the future, Chinese philosophy will surely be influenced by Western philosophy; but at the same time, it also has to be the product of its own ancient thought"<sup>6</sup> (Zhang 1982a, 587).

His vision of intercultural syntheses was based upon a renovation of the central approaches belonging to traditional Chinese philosophy:

Contemporary Chinese philosophy should remain connected to and continue the Chinese philosophy of the past. The kind of philosophy we need should not be based only on the most recent results of Western currents but should look primarily to the authentic and original Chinese tradition.<sup>7</sup> (ibid. 1984, I, 219)

Of course, this did not imply denying the need to confront Western (and international) philosophy. European and Indian philosophy were especially valuable here, for they contained many elements that could not be found in the Chinese tradition. In Zhang's view, the exploration and application of these elements not only provided a precious tool for generating new systems of thought, but also helped the Chinese to gain a better understanding of their own tradition:

In studying Chinese philosophy we must also possess at least an elementary knowledge of Western philosophy. Ancient Greek philosophy developed clear concepts and sound argumentation. Its system was quite well developed. This can help us to practise our reasoning. And modern bourgeois philosophy represents one of the most developed stages of world philosophy. German classical philosophy, which is part of this tradition, also provides one of the ideal foundations of Marxism. Thus, it is even more worthy of being understood ... In general, the works of ancient Chinese philosophy did not establish such a formal system. Their philosophical positions were usually expressed hermetically and between the lines. Therefore, its profound meaning is difficult to understand. But if we first gain some knowledge in Western philosophy, and then try to explore Chinese philosophy anew, we will discover its genuine profundity. Only by comparing these works with Western philosophy, we will be able to discern the real value of dialectic logic

6 將來的中國哲學，固然必是西洋哲學影響下的產物，而亦當是中國舊哲學之一種產物。

7 今日中國的新哲學，必與過去中國哲學有相當的繼承關係，我們所需要的新哲學，不只是從西洋的最新潮流發出的，更須是從中國本來的傳統中生出的。

in Laozi or Yizhuan, or the real significance of Mo Di's and Xunzi's logical theories.<sup>8</sup> (ibid. 2000, 2)

Zhang underscored the error of using incompatible methods, which try to explore and evaluate China's history through the perspective of Western concepts and categories: "Different philosophical theories apply different concepts and categories. Concepts and categories applied by philosophical theories which arose from different cultures (nations), are even more divergent"<sup>9</sup> (Zhang 2003, 118).

According to Zhang, Chinese philosophy differed fundamentally from European or Indian philosophy; systematizing it, therefore, meant first understanding its basic characteristics, for if we tried to apply European or Indian paradigms, the subtle essence of Chinese philosophy would necessarily elude our comprehension (ibid. 1982a, 5). In his historical research he thus tried to develop a specific system which would inherently correspond to Chinese philosophy. To this end, he made an exhaustive analysis of semantic contexts and formal functions in order to establish a framework for traditional categories that avoided the limits of (often misleading) purely chronological categorizations.

In 1935–36 he explored conceptual categories and the multi-layered system of Chinese philosophy, and integrated it into his book *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, which represents the first modern systematization of Chinese philosophical categories.<sup>10</sup> (*Zhexue da cidian* 2003, 1911)

His system followed a strict differentiation between the notions of categories and concepts which, as he pointed out, had already been developed by classical Chinese philosophy in inquiries into the relation between names and actualities. This approach placed him in disagreement with most modern students of traditional Chinese logic, who generally considered distinctions of "names" (*ming* 名), as

8 學習中國哲學史，還要具備西方哲學史的基本知識。古代希臘的哲學思想，概念比較明確，論證比較詳密，系統比較完整，對於進行思想訓練有較大的幫助。而近代西方資產階級的哲學，是世界哲學發展的較高階段，其中德國古典哲學更是馬克思主義的來源之一，更有理解的必要... 中國古代哲學著作大都沒有形式上的系統，很多哲學觀點是用‘厄言’，‘雋語’表達出來的，其所包涵的深刻含義不易理解。受過西方哲學的初步訓練，再來鑽研中國哲學著作，才能發現其中的精旨奧義。例如‘老子’，‘易傳’的辯證法，‘墨經’‘荀子’的理解學說，拿來西方思想對照，才顯出其中的精滲意義。

9 不同的哲學理論包涵不同的概念，範疇。不同的民族的哲學理論，更是具有不同的概念，範疇。

10 1935–1936 他研究中國哲學的概念範疇和層次體系，著成‘中國哲學大綱’，為中國近代第一本系統論述中國哲學範疇的專著。

applied by Moist, Nomenalist and other logical traditions, as differentiations between concepts and categories:

“Concept” (*gainian*) and “category” (*fanchou*) are translated notions. Ancient China developed the so-called “name” (*ming*). This word had a dual meaning: terms, and concepts. In the “Mo Jing” it was written: “Terms (*ming*) can be divided into complete and particular (*partial*)”. Here, both kinds of terms represent concepts. Xunzi’s distinction between “Great universal names” (which referred to every thing or being) and “Great particular names” (which referred to particular species) in his essay on “Correct names” was also dealing with concepts in both cases.<sup>11</sup> (Zhang 2003, 118)

Thus, Zhang Dainian saw concepts as a way of naming concrete objects and phenomena. Naming could embrace wider, more general entities, as well as their specific or partial features, but in each case they always referred to concrete existing things. These distinctions were therefore always of an exclusively quantitative nature. Hence, the two meanings implied by the ancient Chinese term *ming* 名 did not represent any differentiation between concepts and categories. For Zhang, the latter notion represented only a formal, arbitrary tool for decomposing actuality. In the ancient Chinese tradition, it could be found, for example, in the work of the philosopher Han Yu 韓愈:

In his work *The Origin of the Way (The Origin of Dao)*, Han Yu developed a theory of categories “*xuwei*” and concepts “*dingming*”. In this work he wrote: “Humanity and justice are concepts, while Dao and virtue are categories”. A so-called category is an empty shelf, which can be filled by various contents. Confucians, Daoists and Buddhist all spoke about Dao, but for each of these currents, Dao meant something different; therefore, this term refers to a category (*xuwei*). On the other hand, the terms humanity (*ren*) and justice (*yi*) do have precise, fixed, inherent meanings. While Confucians professed humanity and justice, Daoists opposed them. They did not advocate any other form of humanity or justice. Hence, the terms humanity and justice are concepts (*dingming*). The meaning of Han Yu’s term “*xuwei*” is very close to the Western term “category”.<sup>12</sup> (*ibid.*)

11 ‘概念’和‘範疇’都是翻譯名詞。中國古代有所謂‘名’。‘名’有兩層意義，一指名詞，一指概念。‘墨經’說：‘名：達，類：私’。‘達名’，‘類名’都是概念。荀子‘正名’篇所謂‘大共名’（‘物’）和‘大別名’（‘鳥獸’）也都是概念。

12 韓愈‘原道’有虛位定名之說。‘原道’云：‘仁與義為定名，道與德為虛位’。所謂虛位即是空格子，可以添上不同的內容。儒家，道家，佛教都講道，而其所謂道，彼此意義不同，所以稱為虛位。至於仁義，則有確定的內涵。儒家宣揚仁義，道家反對仁義，不可能提出另外一種仁義，所以仁義是定名。韓愈所謂虛位，比較接近於近代所謂範疇。

He also tried to prove this difference based on the etymological meaning of the Chinese translation of the western term “category”:

The expression category (*fanchou*) is a foreign word. It is a compound of two words taken from the essay “The Great Plan” from the book *Shang Shu*. This essay is divided into “nine sections (*chou*) of the universal plan (*fan*). Here, the word ‘*fan*’ means a principle, and the word ‘*chou*’ means ‘kind’. The compound word ‘*fanchou*’ means principal kinds (or the principles of sorting). The use of this compound word as a translation of the Western term ‘category’ seems quite appropriate.”<sup>13</sup> (*ibid.*, 118–19)

Zhang stressed the importance of understanding essential and culturally determined specifics of categories and concepts. Exploring the history of thought without an analytical comprehension of these methodological foundations could easily result in false interpretations. This was especially important when researching traditional Chinese thought, an area in which many of his contemporaries critically applied Western methodological premises:

When researching the history of Chinese philosophy, we have to know and understand the original meanings of Chinese philosophical categories and concepts. Only on this basis will we be able to properly perceive (i.e. in a relative sense) the ideas of individual philosophers. We must also know the processes of the modification of these categories and concepts. Only in this way will it be possible to gain a deeper knowledge of the developmental processes of Chinese philosophy.<sup>14</sup> (*ibid.*, 130)

## From Marxist Philosophy to Marxist Ideology

However, due to objective circumstances which prevailed in his country after the establishment of the PRC, the understanding of these processes always implied the ideological valuation of particular currents and their representatives. Until the mid-1990s, such valuations had to be based on the opposition between materialism and idealism. In this respect, Zhang Dainian was no exception; just like most

13 範疇是譯名，而範疇二字源於‘尚書’的‘洪范’篇，所謂‘洪范九疇’。范者原則，疇者類別。範疇即是事物的基本類別。用範疇二字翻譯西方‘楷特格里’，看來還是適切的。

14 我們研究中國哲學史，必須了結中國哲學的概念，範疇的本來意義，才能對於思想家的哲學學說有比較正確的理解。同時，必須了結其概念，範疇的演變過程，才能對於中國哲學思想的發展過程有比較深刻的認識。

other scholars of the time, he had to adapt to the prevailing guidelines of creating “proper” theory.

The struggle between the defenders of materialism and idealism is fundamental and most important. The history of the human processes of comprehension is intricate and complex, but at its heart, this process is one of the triumphs of truth over error. Basically, materialism is the current which explains the world as it is. Therefore, this direction is the proper one. Idealism, on the contrary, drowns in illusory escapes from reality; it deals with fragmentary treatises on insignificant matters. Therefore, this current is false. We cannot avoid this great issue of the difference between right and wrong.<sup>15</sup> (ibid., 117)

The second important criteria for distinguishing between “good” and “bad” philosophers was, in keeping with the Marxist theory of class struggle, class affiliation and, consequently, the moral-political integrity of a specific philosopher’s thought.

We also have to accurately determine which class of that society was supported by the opinions of a given philosopher, we have to discover to which class interests a philosopher’s theory was serving and to which class his theory was useful. This is the most important method for evaluating the class essence of any thought or teaching.<sup>16</sup> (ibid., 34)

The “consistency” of Zhang’s analyses in his historical work can be seen from the fact that all “idealistic” philosophers are introduced as potential explorers, whereas proponents of the “materialist” worldview are usually seen as possessing social awareness and as potential revolutionaries.

Li Zhi, for instance, criticized the Mencian stream of Confucianism, while still acknowledging the importance of Confucius himself. He criticized false feudal morals and strove for equality between men and women, and showed compassion for the suffering peasants and merchants, but opposed peasant uprisings. Hence, it is obvious that his thought to a

15 唯物主義與唯心主義兩個派別的對立鬥爭是根本的，是最重要的。人類認識史的內容複雜錯綜，但總的說來，是真理戰勝謬誤的厲史。從基本觀點來說，唯物主義按照世界的本來樣子來理解世界，方向是正確的；而唯心主義耽溺於製造脫離實際的幻想，從事於支離煩瑣詭辯，方向是錯誤的。這個大是大非的問題不能迴避。

16 其次，要全面考察一個思想家的主張符合當時的哪一個階級，一個思想家的理論要求同當時哪一個階級的實際要求相符合，一個思想家的理論對於哪一個階層有利。這是確定一種思想學說的階級實質最重要的方法。

certain extent corresponded to the needs of the bourgeois class. The fact that he was not able to create an independent, authentic and coherent philosophical system of his own indicates the weakness of the bourgeois social class at that time. Let us also look at the class background of Wang Fuzhi, whom some people also believe to be a representative of the bourgeois class. Wang advocated the feudal system. He passionately opposed landlords and their tyrannical usurpation of land. He showed pity for the suffering of the people, but opposed peasant uprisings. We can therefore conclude that he represented the interests of the lowest class of proprietors.<sup>17</sup> (*ibid.*, 35)

Zhang's main argument for the correctness of the materialistic worldview was based upon a materialistic worldview itself, an irony which was typical of the China of that time. He explained this in the following way:

Why do we say that materialism is theoretically more valuable? Above all, because it is closely connected with the natural sciences. Natural sciences are based on materialism and therefore represent the chief support for philosophical developments. Hence, materialism is the force which brings about progress in philosophy.<sup>18</sup> (*ibid.*, 114)

In his historical studies Zhang, being an orthodox Marxist, concentrated upon the exploration and exposition of “materialistic” traditions in ancient Chinese thought, the interpretations of traditional dialectical methods and on different aspects of humanism and Confucian social ethics. In the 1990s, however, Zhang was a firm supporter of the campaign for the liberation of thought (*sixiang jiefang* 思想解放) and a severe critic of the exaggerated politicization of theory:

In recent years, we witnessed unhealthy tendencies, namely tendencies of calculation. Articles were written in accordance with the prevailing current. The interests of the ruling authorities were more important than

17 又如李贄，他一方面批判孔孟之道，另一方面又給孔子一定的地位；他批判封建禮教，主張男女平等，同情商人和農民的痛苦，又反對農民起義，可以看出，他的思想在一定程度上反映了市民階層的要求。但在哲學上，他未能提出完整的哲學體系，這又表明了當時市民階層的軟弱性。再如王夫之哲學的階級性問題，也有人認為他是代表市民階層的。我們看看他對當時社會各階級的態度，他維護封建制度和封建秩序；猛烈反對豪強大地主兼併土地；同情人民的痛苦，但反對農民起義，可見，王夫之還是代表地主階級中下層的利益。

18 為什麼我們要肯定唯物主義有較高的理論價值呢？主要是因為唯物主義是與自然科學密切聯系的，自然科學建立在唯物主義的基礎上，而自然科學的進步又是哲學發展的憑借，所以唯物主義是引導哲學思想前進的主要力量。

the actual situation. If they declared that something was right or wrong, it had to be accepted. This attitude is not an academic one and articles, written in this spirit, cannot be regarded as scholarly either. Now we have to eliminate these unhealthy tendencies.<sup>19</sup> (Zhang 2003, 134)

Later, in a private conversation with Edmund Ryden, the English translator of his work *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, Zhang admitted that he was forced to apply “Marxist jargon” during periods of intense political pressure, and he permitted Ryden to omit from his translation those portions of his book which were included only as a tribute to the then prevailing ideology (Ryden 2002, XV).

### Foundations of “Neo-Materialist” Thought and Dialectics of Complementarity

Although Zhang’s theories were based upon a materialist worldview, he still stressed that ideas cannot be reduced to the category of matter (Bunnin 2002, 10), and tried to apply the traditional binary categorical pair of “roots or basis” (*ben* 本) and “completion or (achieved) perfection” (*zhi* 至) as a dialectical basis for the unification of (primary) matter and (secondary) idea. Zhang revised Marx’s dialectical materialism in accordance with the Neo-Confucian modification of the classical Chinese model of correlative relations. Although he still saw matter and idea (or economic base and ideal superstructure) as parts of a strictly hierarchical structure, in this context they were mutually dependent and complementary. Both revisions produced similar results, though tending in opposite directions. While the Neo-Confucian revision of the classic correlative dialectics, in its original construction of egalitarian correlativity, introduced the principle of the (unequal) valuation of both poles, Zhang’s revision of the Marxist dialectic, in its primary hierarchically structured construct based upon an absolute contradiction (discrepancy and mutual exclusion) between both poles, introduced a principle of relativity and mutually complementary interaction. In this model, which to some extent was both Neo-Confucian and Maoist, the elementary poles of the dialectical process were no longer seen as absolutely contradictory, but merely as parts of a contradiction, based upon mutual interdependence. In contrast to the classical concept of ancient China, which already appeared in the oldest “proto-philosophical”

19 過去若干年中，有一種不良的風向，即窺測風向，看風向寫文章，不管真實情況如何，專門看權威者的意向，完全以某一權威的是非為是非。這種研究學問的態度，不是科學的態度；這樣寫出的文章，不可能是具有科學性的文章。我們現在要糾正這種不正之風。



theories of *yin* and *yang* 陰陽, and which had remained unchanged in its basic structure until the Song 宋 dynasty, this renewed type of correlativity was no longer seen only as an interaction between two parts (or situations) of the same entity, which because of the all-embracing relativity of all that exists, manifested itself in a bipolar opposition; in this new framework it became a relation, based upon a hierarchically valued differentiation of both poles (Zhang 2003, 23–24). While this new construct destroyed the original balance of the bipolar relation, it also made possible a dynamic development of both poles, which grew out of the inherent tension of this new imbalance. Thus, for Zhang, the economic base still represented the “basis” (*ben* 本), without which the ideal superstructure could not exist; but without the superstructure, the basis could not manifest itself in its “wholeness” (*zhi* 至), which represents the only relevant reality (ibid. 1982b, 9).

For reasons which can be easily understood (the possibility of a “higher” valuation of ancient Chinese philosophy from the viewpoint of Marxist conceptual patterns), Zhang argued that traditional Chinese theories, which are based upon the principle of complementarity, represented a kind of dialectic. He saw this construct as a form of an ideational pattern which had to be distinguished from the traditional European structure based on static, formalized concepts of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, but which were still defined by interaction between two opposite poles. Therefore, according to Zhang, the principle of complementarity also represented a form of dialectical thought.

Dialectic thought in Chinese philosophy arose from observing nature and men. (Ancient Chinese) Philosophers claimed that these necessary principles defined reality, while Hegel believed that they represented a necessary form for understanding ideas. We have formulated arguments for applying the term dialectical method to the aforesaid theories of Chinese philosophy, just as we can apply the term dialectical method to certain ideas of Heraclitus or Spinoza.<sup>20</sup> (Zhang 1984, I, 139)

In our view (which is based on different assumptions), defining the traditional principle of complementarity in this way is admissible, especially if we consider the etymology of the word dialectic. As with the concepts of philosophy or logic, the concept of dialectic, in different cultures and within divergent linguistic structures, has been expressed differently and can appear in diverse structural

---

20 中國哲學中的辯證法思想，主要是對自然及人事的觀察。哲學家們肯定事物有必然的規律，而不是像黑格爾那樣，認為這是理解觀念的必然方式。我們有理由把以上所述的這些理論稱為中國哲學中的辯證法，正如我們有理由把西方赫拉克利特斯、辟諾薩的許多思想稱為辯證法一樣。

patterns which are mainly defined by the language itself. As demonstrated at the outset of this study, if the naming of certain theoretical discourses is based solely upon Western categorical patterns, then traditional Chinese philosophy cannot be considered as philosophy at all. The same holds true for logic, dialectic or epistemology. However, if we accept the premise that these concepts assume different structural forms in different cultures, then the ancient Chinese theories of the principle of complementarity can also be considered as belonging to the discourse of dialectical thought.

Zhang Dainian also found a categorical correspondence to the Western concept of matter in traditional Chinese thought, which despite its dialectical union with the idea, in his view indubitably represented a primary defining pole of the aforesaid binary pair. As with the majority of other (much earlier) Chinese advocates of materialism, Zhang saw a determinant of matter in the ancient (and much disputed) notion *qi* 氣 (substantiality, vitality). He supported his assertion by citing specific interpretations of Laozi's 老子, Zhuangzi's 莊子 and Xunzi's 荀子 philosophies, which are analysed, however, for the most part without taking into account their full contextual connotations:

*Qi* is a thing that constructs everything that exists ... *Qi* itself has no life, and no consciousness, but it is their basis. It can be said that *qi* is the concept of matter within Chinese philosophy ... In short, the so-called *qi* in Chinese philosophy is a lifeless objective substance without awareness that represents a foundation of life and consciousness.<sup>21</sup> (Zhang 1984, 123–24)

The supposition of the existence of a clear concept of substantiality (matter) in traditional Chinese philosophy would characterize all of Zhang's efforts to reassess his own tradition of thought. Although insufficiently grounded in terms of academic discourse, it still satisfied the demands for a popularised sinization of Marxism, which was dictated by the specific circumstances in China during the latter half of the 20th century. In this respect, Zhang's research was an adequate response to the obligations he had to meet if he wished to survive (in an intellectual sense) and continue to work and develop.

His focus upon "materialistic" streams that could be found in the framework of the historical development of Chinese philosophy, also led Zhang to analyse one of the basic differences between Chinese and European philosophy, or their different approaches to the problem of the relation between noumenon and phenomena.

21 氣就是構成萬物的東西... 氣是無生，無知，而是生與知地基礎。我們可以說，氣是中國哲學中的物質概念... 總之，中國古代哲學中所謂氣是無生命無意識而為生命和意識的基礎的客觀實體。

While Western philosophy proceeded from the presupposition of a strict division between the concepts of substance and appearances, as Zhang pointed out, this distinction was completely alien to traditional Chinese thought:

Although materialism is not an orthodox Chinese current, we can still find some basic tendencies in Chinese philosophy which are compatible with it. The unity of appearances and reality is a basic cosmological tendency in Chinese philosophy. Appearances are identical with reality and *vice versa*. The concept of a reality situated somewhere beyond appearances is completely alien to Chinese philosophy.<sup>22</sup> (Zhang 1984, I, 231)

The Chinese translation of the European term substance with the old Chinese expression *benti* 本體 was thus mistaken and could lead to profound misunderstandings in the field of ontological research. According to Zhang, the term *ben-gen* 本根 was a much more appropriate translation of the notion of substance, though even here he cautioned against simplified equivalents. In his view, the most influential currents of the European ideal tradition saw the relation between substance and being as primarily a relation between actual and non-actual (實在與非實在), while Chinese tradition treated this relation as one between substance and non-substance (根本與非根本) (ibid. 2003, 231). He was thereby relying once again (though only implicitly) upon the ancient Chinese principle of immanent transcendence. In Chinese tradition “the relation between substance and actuality is not a relation between superficial appearances and reality which lies beyond them, but a relation between source and stream, between roots and branches”<sup>23</sup> (Hu 2002, 236).

## Conclusion

Zhang Dainian’s most significant contribution to modern Chinese philosophy is to be found in his attempts to synthesize Chinese and Western traditions of thought, and therefore in the field of intercultural methodology. His “*theory of creative synthesis* 綜合創新論” differs from most of his predecessors and contemporaries in terms of its specific content, but most especially in its methodologies. His search for the most reasonable interactions between different discourses was much more complex and subtle than first appears. Zhang’s aim was not that of

22 唯物論雖不是中國的正統思想，但中國哲學有一些根本傾向，頗合於唯物論。在宇宙論，中國哲學之基本傾向是不將現象與實在分為二事，現象即實在，實在即現象。在現象背后之實在的觀念，在中國哲學中是沒有的。

23 根本與事物的關係不是背后實在與前面現象之關係，而是源流根枝之關係。

finding a balance between the conservative (復古派) and progressive (全盤西化派) currents, for he realised that both discourses proceeded from flawed premises.

At the same time, intercultural synthesis for him was something more than a conglomerate of discrete, mutually unrelated contents or methods, which could (in a scientific or moral sense) serve as suitable tools for constructing a fusion of intercultural discourses. While his methodological studies are not always fully realized, one senses the genuine search for an innovative integration of both cultural traditions which could meet the demands of a global world, and which were based upon the principle of equality. For Zhang, a cultural project is an everlasting endeavour that constantly assimilates new truths. His philosophy displays a passion for truth and morality, a capacity to incorporate a broad scope of human values, and an attachment to the needs and problems of his era (Cheng Lian 2002, 234–44). In this sense, we cannot but acknowledge the great significance of his theories for the modernization of Chinese philosophy.

## References

- Altinok, Ozan Altan. 2019. "Mao's Marxist Negation of Marxism." *Asian Studies* 7 (1): 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2019.7.1.75-96>.
- Bunnin, Nicholas. 2002. "Introduction." In *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Chung-ying Cheng, and Nicholas Bunnin, 1–15. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cheng, Chung-ying. 2002. "Recent Trends in Chinese Philosophy in China and the West." In *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Chung-ying Cheng, and Nicholas Bunnin, 349–404. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Cheng, Lian. 2002. "Zhang Dainian: Creative Synthesis and Chinese Philosophy." In *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Chung-ying Cheng, and Nicholas Bunnin, 235–44. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. 1998. "Chinese Philosophy." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. Craig. London: Routledge. Accessed August 4, 2020. <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001SECT10>. DOI: 10.4324/9780415249126-G001-1.
- Hu, Weixi 胡偉希. 2002. *Zhishi, luoji yu jiazhi – Zhongguo xin shizai lun sichaode xingqi* 知識，邏輯與價值 — 中國新實在論思潮的興起 (*Knowledge, Logic and Values—The Rise of New Chinese Realism*). Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe.
- Meissner, Werner. 1990. *Philosophy and Politics in China: The Controversy over Dialectical Materialism in the 1930s*. Translated by Richard Mann. London: C. Hurst & Co.

- Rockmore, Tom. 2019. "Hegel and Chinese Marxism." *Asian Studies* 7 (1): 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2019.7.1.55-73>.
- Rošker, Jana. 1996. *Metodologija medkulturnih raziskav*. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani.
- Ryden, Edmund. 2002. "Translator's Preface." In *Zhang Dainian: Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, translated and edited by Ryden, Edmund XV–XVII. London, Beijing: Yale University Press, Foreign Languages Press.
- Tian, Chenshan. 2019. "Mao Zedong, Sinization of Marxism, and Traditional Chinese Thought Culture." *Asian Studies* 7 (1): 13–37. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2019.7.1.13-37>.
- Sernelj, Téa. 2019. "Modern Confucian Objection Against Communism in China." *Asian Studies* 7 (1): 99–113. <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2019.7.1.99-113>.
- Zhang, Dainian 張岱年. 1982a. *Zhongguo zhexue dagang* 中國哲學大綱 (*An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*). Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe.
- . 1982b. *Qiu zhen ji* 求真集 (*Searching for the Truth*). Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe.
- . 1984. *Zhang Dainian wenji* 張岱年文集 (*A Collection of Zhang Dainian's Essays*). Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe.
- . 1988. *Wenhua yu zhexue* 文化與哲學 (*Culture and Philosophy*). Beijing: jiaoyu kexue chubanshe.
- . 1996. *Zhang Dainian quan ji*. 張岱年全集 (*Collected Works of Zhang Dainian*). 8 Volumes. Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe.
- . 2000. "Zenyang xuexi Zhongguo zhexue shi? 怎樣學習中國哲學史?" (How to Learn the History of Chinese Philosophy?). In *Zhongguo zhexue sanbai ti* 中國哲學三百題 (*300 Questions Regarding Chinese Philosophy*), edited by Xia Nairu, 1–2. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- . 2002. *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Edmund Ryden. New Haven, London, Beijing: Yale University Press, Foreign Languages Press.
- . 2003. *Zhongguo zhexue shi fangfalun fayan* 中國哲學史方法論發凡 (*Introduction to the Methodology of the History of Chinese Philosophy*). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Zhexue da cidian, xiuding ben shang, xia* 哲學大辭典修訂本, 上, 下. 2002. (*The Great Encyclopedia of Philosophy—An Actualized and Expanded Edition in two Volumes*). Edited by Feng Qi. Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe.
- Zhexue xiao cidian* 哲學小辭典. 2003. (*A Small Philosophical Dictionary*). Edited by Yu Penglin, Zhang Liangyi, and Liao Jianhua. Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe.