

The Gadamerian Discourse in China and the Fusion of Aesthetic Realms

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Abstract

Based on comparative philosophical methodology, this paper presents a new hermeneutic method for interpreting Chinese (especially ancient Chinese) texts. It first introduces the rich tradition of Chinese hermeneutics and then analyses its possible dialogues with European hermeneutic methods, especially Gadamer's "fusion of horizons". It identifies some methodological problems inherent in this method and, on this basis, proposes the application of a new hermeneutic method that may be more suitable for the interpretation of traditional Chinese metaphysical and literary texts. It is based on the traditional philosophical-aesthetic notion of *jingjie* 境界. The author preliminarily refers to this method as a "fusion of aesthetic realms".

Keywords: Gadamer, Zhuangzi, *jingjie*, fusion of horizons, fusion of aesthetic realms

Gadamerijanski diskurz na Kitajskem in zlitje estetskih sfer

Izvleček

Prispevek na podlagi primerjalne filozofske metodologije predstavlja novo hermenevitično metodo za interpretacijo kitajskih (zlasti starokitajskih) besedil. Najprej predstavi bogato tradicijo kitajske hermenevtike, nato pa analizira njene možne dialoge z evropskimi hermenevitičnimi metodami, zlasti z Gadamerjevo metodo »zlitja obzorij«. Potem prikaže določene metodološke probleme, ki so prisotni v tej metodi, in na tej podlagi predlaga uporabo nove hermenevitične metode, ki bi lahko bila primernejša za interpretacijo tradicionalnih kitajskih metafizičnih in literarnih besedil. Temelji na tradicionalnem filozofsko-estetskem pojmovanju koncepta *jingjie* 境界. Avtorica to metodo preliminarno pomenjuje s frazo »zlitje estetskih sfer«.

Ključne besede: Gadamer, Zhuangzi, *jingjie*, zlitje obzorij, zlitje estetskih sfer

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Introduction: Some General Remarks on the Issue of “Chinese Hermeneutics”

Understood as a study or methodology of text interpretation, and as a theory of the principles of the transfer of meaning respectively, Chinese hermeneutics has a rich (and very specific) tradition, which can be traced back to Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) from the Wei Jin Nanbei Chao Period. A most important figure who left indelible traces on the history of Chinese interpretative theory was Liu Xie 劉勰 (ca. 455–522), the author of the famous work *Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin dialong* 文心雕龍).

As King Po-Chiu (2016, 76) notes, Chinese hermeneutics mainly describes various methods of interpreting Chinese thought (mostly through comments and explanatory annotations) rather than problematizing questions regarding why we interpret something in such different ways. According to him, metaphysical discussion is not the subject matter of “Chinese hermeneutics”.¹

Now let us take a closer look at hermeneutic methods as applied and described in contemporary China. Very soon it becomes clear that in this field we can encounter similar problems to the ones pertaining to the much more general question of the very existence of Chinese philosophy:

If all acts of reading, interpreting, and understanding are seen through the Western hermeneutic lenses, based on the premise that Western hermeneutics is the only legitimate conceptual and philosophical tool, can an accurate image of the Chinese exegetical efforts ever be captured? When Western hermeneutics is taken as the normative and prescriptive manner of reading, cultural particularities are swamped and flattened out for the spurious cause of analytical unanimity and coherence; and such, in its essentials, is the sin of cultural hegemony, to employ a much-used neologism. (Ng 2013, 374)

On the other hand, some (mostly Western) scholars also express their doubts in the opposite direction, namely doubts regarding the question of whether the Chinese tradition of interpreting the classics is truly comparable with the European hermeneutic method, and hence whether it is suitable to call it hermeneutics (e.g., Kubin 2005, 312). Here, we have—once again—landed on the unstable ground on which we have to build the entire concept of Chinese philosophy. It

¹ Because of this richness, many important contemporary works were published in the recent years in this field (see for instance Tu 2000; 2005). But many scholars also directly compare traditional Chinese and modern European hermeneutic theories (Ng 2005, 297–310).

is very clear that Chinese ideational and intellectual tradition did not categorize its thought in accordance with strictly separated disciplines, which means that we cannot find in this tradition systematic ideational branches of epistemology, logic, phenomenology or hermeneutics. However, this does not mean that it does not include a magnificent amount of thriving and detailed epistemological, logical, phenomenological and hermeneutic theories. Once again, we cannot but emphasize that one of the greatest differences dividing Chinese and Euro-American thought might be found in their respective classifications.

Gu Ming Dong also points out (2005, 11) that although traditionally China did not lack conceptual inquiries into reading and writing, its hermeneutic perceptions were scattered in various kinds of discourses that have never been synthesized into a clearly defined system. On the other hand, however, he also argues that the Chinese tradition has formed an implicit system of reading and writing with “fascinating insights that not only predated similar ideas in the West by centuries but also anticipated contemporary ideas of hermeneutic openness and open poetics” (ibid.). On this basis, he created a modern interpretative instrument based upon the concept of “hermeneutic openness” that proves itself as a very useful tool not only in Chinese, but also in inter-cultural research.

Here, we also have to mention Cheng Chung-ying’s innovative theory of “onto-hermeneutics”, according to which the Chinese interpretative paradigms are always rooted in a specific understanding of reality. In such a view, understanding is inseparable from being. This paradigm is tightly connected to another special feature of Chinese hermeneutic, namely to its surpassing of the subject–object division and its deep embedment into intersubjective understanding (Wu Kuan-min 2004, 237). Notwithstanding many problems and difficulties with which all scholars dealing with Chinese hermeneutics are necessarily confronted, one can certainly sense a quite optimistic spirit among them: and if there can be socialism with Chinese characteristics, why not a hermeneutics with Chinese characteristics?

Dialogues with Western Hermeneutics and the Falling for Gadamer

Notwithstanding the aforementioned kernels and promising seeds of different interpretative models, most scholars investigating classical Chinese texts still apply interpretative mechanisms derived from Western hermeneutic theories. In the first three decades after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese intellectuals were in this respect mostly limited to the studies of Hegelian

and Marxist theories.² From the 1980s on, however, they again gained access to most of the classical works of modern Euro-American hermeneutics, including Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, who's theory of the fusion of horizons soon gain a widespread popularity among Chinese theoreticians:

Overall, however, it has been the influence of Gadamer that has seemed to dominate, even though more informed discussions of a relatively wider range of European hermeneutic philosophical works were already manifest in publications available during the early years of the twenty-first century. (Pfister 2006, 4)

As it is well-known, Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons was based on an elaborated version of Schleiermacher's notion of the hermeneutic circle, i.e., on the idea that one's understanding of a text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts, and *vice versa*: the understanding of each individual part is established by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, which can be illustrated by a circular model of comprehension. According to this view, the "fusion of horizons" takes place between the writer and the readers, the speaker and the listeners, or the artist and the observers in the dialectical process of transferring meanings. In this sense, the concept of horizon refers to the particular situation into which every individual is embedded, whereas the situation is not limited to the vision or perception of what is nearby. As such, the horizon implies an openness of existence and a possibility to overcome one's own prejudices. The fusion of horizons always creates new meanings, for in this dialectical process of mediating and perceiving it incorporates both horizons and at the same time surpasses their individual limitations.

On the basis of free and unlimited horizons, Gu Ming-Dong has drawn his method of traditional Chinese hermeneutic openness, which is rooted in the so-called metaphysical-aesthetic tradition of interpretations (Gu 2005, 9).³

2 Here, it has to be pointed out that in the early years of the P. R. China, Hegelian hermeneutic was not particularly welcome, because those years were generally marked by a strong anti-Hegelian tendency. This did not change until the mid-fifties: "Engels' anti-Hegelian interpretation of Marx quickly became canonical. His anti-Hegelian approach to Marx has long influenced Russian Marxism and continued to influence Chinese Marxism. In broad terms Chinese Marxism is dependent on two main sources: Russian Marxism and the Chinese intellectual tradition. The shared Russian and Chinese anti-Hegelian interpretation of Marx was called into question in the middle of the last century through the relatively late publication of crucial Marxian texts, that is texts prepared by Marx and that are crucial for understanding his position" (Rockmore 2019, 56).

3 Although I have predominantly limited this paper to the new insights of Chinese scholars (including those situated overseas), Western Sinologists have also proposed some new directions in interpreting

However, while in China the theories of the Gadamerian discourse (i.e., including Gadamer's predecessors and successors) might represent a valuable contribution to an eventual establishment of transcultural hermeneutics, the enthusiasm for such moves could also be gently reduced by asking some questions on the nature of this circle and this horizon.

Of course, the circular character of understanding does not make it impossible to interpret a text, but instead emphasizes that the meaning of a text must be found within its context. Still, the problem is precisely that the very concept of the context has never been sufficiently explained and defined, particularly in view of different layers of reality and different modes of their perception and categorization. In my view, the very term of contextualization and its respective contents can, for instance, at least be divided into external and internal contextualization. The former refers to the cultural, historical, and literary context of the text, and the latter to its inherent conceptual dimensions and their semantic and philosophical implications and developments. The hermeneutic method is thus still lacking a binding, inherent consistence.

Recent Sinological research has still not managed to develop a method of unifying these two kinds of contextualization, and the situation in Chinese-speaking academia is not much different in this respect. On the one hand, scholars in China and Taiwan have developed brilliant theories, which help us understand the historical significance of the time, space, and politically, ideologically and culturally conditioned factors involved in the interpretation of any important classical text. Such theories of external contextualization are mainly written in the area of intellectual history. Contemporary Taiwanese scholar Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑, for instance, has written several significant works in this field that have clarified many important elements of the historical development of the exegesis of Mencius (see, for instance, Huang 1997; 2015). He has also clarified how and why certain classical works of Chinese tradition have been—for various cultural, political, and ideological reasons—de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the course of their incorporation by Korean and Japanese cultures.

China or developing a modern Chinese hermeneutics. For example: “David Hall and Roger Ames pinpoint what they call ‘analogical or correlative thinking’ as the first order strategy of coming to grips with reality and the human condition in classical Chinese culture. In pondering the ‘trouble with Confucianism’ in the context of modernity, Wm. Theodore de Bary posits the critical, prophetic role of the *chüntzu* (the noble man) as the fulcrum of a politico-social community in which this figure must play the ambiguous roles of a conscientious critic of the dynastic state, a loyal servant of the ruler and a caring representative of the people whose voice could only speak through him. Thomas Metzger suggests looking at Neo-Confucianism as a shared cultural ‘grammar’ that involves a ‘sense of predicament’, the result of the nagging awareness that there is a chasm between the idealized goal of life—transforming state and society by the heroic moral self—and the dismal realities of the given world—the source of the anxiety of moral failure” (Chow et al. 1999, 1).

On the other hand, let us briefly return in this context to Cheng Chung-Ying, and his aforementioned method of onto-hermeneutics (*benti quanshixue* 本體詮釋學) that was rooted in Gadamerian hermeneutics, but further explored and developed in terms of the Confucian worldview. Cheng believes that the traditional Chinese hermeneutic is ontological—his model is rooted in the presumption according to which the “understanding of reality and truth is simultaneously the source of meaning and the driving force for seeking understanding” (Cheng 2003 290). According to Cheng, no understanding or interpretation can be made without such a reference.

Irrespective of the questionable nature of the notion of truth in the Chinese worldview, onto-hermeneutics is, in general, doubtless an interesting and innovative approach to the investigation of the traditional Chinese mode of exegesis. However, the problem that should be discussed in this context is linked to the question of different contextualities underlying all these theoretical approaches. Although Huang and Cheng both write about traditional Chinese hermeneutics, the two kinds of hermeneutics they each propose obviously refer to two very different things. As I have shown elsewhere (see Rošker 2021, 113), the first is based on the external and the other is rooted in the internal contextualization. The former refers to the cultural, historical, and literary context of the text, and the latter to its inherent conceptual dimensions and their semantic and philosophical implications and developments. Hence the hermeneutic method is still lacking a binding, inherent consistency, not only in regard to its various particular methods, but also the multifarious differentiations that can be detected within and between traditional explanations of its crucial terminology.

However, this is by no means the only problem linked to this method. In my view, what is even more questionable is its premise, which presupposes the existence of a normative intelligible meaning. Proceeding from a positive re-evaluation of the function of prejudice⁴ in the sense of Heideggerian anticipatory structures, Gadamer highlights that understanding always involves what he terms the “anticipation of completeness”. In other words, it always involves the verifiable assumption that “what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable, that is, something that is constituted as a coherent, and therefore meaningful, whole”

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer offers the clearest explanation of his notion of prejudices in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, where he describes them as the “biases of our openness to the world”. Gadamer writes: “Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience” (Gadamer 2008, 9). In this sense, prejudices are simply “conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us” (ibid.).

(Malpas 2018, 3). In Gadamer's own words, the concept of horizon and the fusion of horizon respectively could represent a means to grasp the "own meaning" of a text:

The concept of "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. ... We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. Thus it is constantly necessary to guard against over hastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard. (Gadamer 1989, 305)

Obviously, this is still a conceptual view of hermeneutic understanding⁵. As we have seen, it still presupposes an "own meaning" of a certain tradition (or discourse). The problematic nature of such suppositions can be illuminated by Derrida's famous statement that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (Derrida 1997, 158). This has often been misinterpreted in the sense that "there is nothing outside the text", implying that there was nothing outside the words (Derrida 1988, 136). He emphasized that what he really meant by "there is no outside-text" is that "there is nothing outside of context":

The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction ("there is nothing outside the text" [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context. In this form, which says exactly the same thing, the formula would doubtless have been less shocking.⁶ (ibid.)

5 In this predetermined (and hence, conceptualized) notion of meaning that is implied in such a positive conception of prejudice, Gadamer redeploys the notion of our prior hermeneutic situatedness as it was developed in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (first published in 1927) in terms of the "fore-structures" of understanding, i.e., "in terms of the anticipatory structures that allow what is to be interpreted or understood to be grasped in a preliminary fashion" (Malpas 2018, 3.1). Since, in this view, understanding functions by means of such anticipatory structures implies that it necessarily implicates what Gadamer denotes as the "anticipation of completeness". Such an understanding is necessarily preconditioned by revisable presupposition that "what is to be understood constitutes something that is understandable, that is, something that is constituted as a coherent, and therefore meaningful, whole" (ibid).

6 Indeed, for Derrida, the word "text" implies all possible referents. Hence, even when claiming that "there is nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) this does not mean that "all referents are suspended, denied or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace [*d'une trace différentiale*], and that one cannot yield to this 'real' except in an interpretative experience". The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. (Derrida 1988, 148).

The contextual nature of meaning has hence prevailed in several contemporary Western discourses, including psychoanalytical philosophy. On such a level, the very idea of the hermeneutic circle also becomes problematic, and thus it is not surprising that Lacan also highlighted that such a circle is without semantic support, since the meaning is a product of an infinite sliding of the referential surface.⁷ On this basis, Žižek (1976, 75) rejects the hermeneutic circle, which implies the anteriority of the entirety of the semantic horizon in particular statements. In his view, “hermeneutics proceeds to the edge of interpretation, but just before reaching it, it covers its eyes for the realization of the fact that there is no original meaning, which could provide a basis for a different referential network for the transmission of the reference, because the meaning is always relational.” (ibid.)

I agree that meaning is always relational. Hence Gadamer’s model of the hermeneutic circle, which is based upon a conceptual view of horizons, is indeed problematic. However, instead of mourning this we should rather search for a non-conceptual foundation of the semantic unification in the process of interpretation. In my view, Gadamer’s paradigm of horizons (which is—as we have seen—still conceptual in essence) should be replaced by a non-conceptual paradigm, such as *jingjie* 境界 (sphere, atmosphere, aesthetic realm), which has a Buddhist origin and belongs to crucial notions in traditional Chinese metaphysical and literary writings. Hence, in hermeneutic interpretations of Chinese philosophy, we could replace the notion “fusion of horizons” with the term “fusion of *jingjie* or aesthetic realms (境界融合)”.

Beyond the Hermeneutic Circle: The Fusion of Aesthetic Realms?

This important and typically Chinese aesthetic notion is a hermeneutic tool that can help us understand artistic and intellectual creations through the lens of the various manifestations of the living, human world. The *jingjie* sphere can only be

7 This critique of a static conception of meanings can also be connected to Jacques Derrida’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence” (Huang Kuan-min 2020, 23). Derrida criticized this discourse for its systematic tendency to prefer or privilege notions such as identity, unity, and entirety over marginality, otherness, and difference. Particularly damaging in his view has been the tendency to conceive of linguistic truth as the “presence” of what is expressed by its representation in words. Indeed, the ungrounded nature of meaning—the fact that meanings are not given by a direct relation with things in the world, but only by their mutual structural connections—confirms that what is expressed is never fully “present”, but is instead infinitely mediated by an endless chain of meanings. The concept of truth as “presence” is therefore not viable (ibid.). In Derrida’s theory, the two concepts of “différance” (a neologism that implies both a (spatial) difference and a temporal deferral) and “dissemination” characterize the infinite nature of meaning and the futility of metaphysics’ attempts to reach a point of finality or closure.

experienced, but it cannot be fully described in concrete language, nor can it be reflected upon in purely conceptual thought.

In the beginning, *jingjie* was a term pertaining to geopolitical discourses. Expressing a certain realm limited by boundaries, it was used for mapping out the geopolitical world of ancient China. It evolved into a philosophic-religious discourse of a mental or psychological “territoriality” after it was employed to communicate the Buddhist ideas of spiritual reality and enlightenment in the sense of crossing to the other shore (Han 2014, 86). In other words, the notion of the aesthetic realm primarily pertained to the “objective” features of external reality. The internalization of the psychologically transmitted formations of this basic level of *jingjie* is linked to the Buddhist interpretation of its nature. The unification of external and internal elements takes place on the level of transforming these outward formations and images into a specific mental realm (Cheng 1995, 92). According to Christina Han (2014), it further gained many new implications and complex semantic dimensions in the Neo-Confucian discourses of the Song and Ming dynasties.

In pre-modern Chinese philosophy, the notion of *jingjie* was central to Wang Guowei’s⁸ (1877–1927) aesthetics. Wang himself defined the concept in as follows:

The “realm” does not only refer to a landscape or scene. The emotions of joy and sorrow, anger, and pleasure also constitute a sort of aesthetic realm in the human heart. (Wang Guowei 2013, 18)⁹

What Wang is referring to in the above quotation is the objectification of a psychological state in which the external realm¹⁰ is fused with inner world through subjective sensuality. In this way, *jingjie* is a paradigm that appears within an aesthetic *noumenon* in order to manifest a certain (in)significance of human life and convey a certain meaning (Li 2010, 210). This manifestation of meaning is therefore rooted in the experience of the *noumenal*, and hence in the merging of immanent and transcendent sections of time and space within the present moment of here and now.

8 Besides being the first scholar to introduce to China the works of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Kant, Wang Guowei initiated the comparative study of Western and Chinese aesthetics. Similar to Li Zehou’s thoughts, the idea of “human life” was the basic foundation of all aesthetic studies also for Wang Guowei. On this basis, he created an aesthetics of life in the sense of modern humanitarianism and purposelessness by elaborating Zhuangzi’s category of “the use through the useless (*Wu yong zhi yong* 無用之用)” in aesthetic activities (*Zhuangzi* s.d., Nei pian. Renjian shi: 9).

9 境非獨謂景物也。喜怒哀樂，亦人心中之一境界。

10 This “external realm” can refer to both an objective state in present or past external reality in which a subject is embedded, or a subjective reflection that is either thought of or imagined in their mind.

In spite of the fact that Wang's theoretical framework was clearly strongly influenced by Western philosophy (especially by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), it can still be defined as the "revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene, and the objectified realm of the artistic subject" (Li Zehou in Samei 2010, xvi). However, this aesthetic realm cannot be reduced to the mere integration of feeling and scene, nor to the emotion, sensibility, or motivation of its author or creator. It also implies dissolving the difference between the self and others, and it transcends all utilitarian purposiveness without having to negate the will, desire, and life itself.¹¹ Therefore, it could also serve as a tool for creating subtle blends between traditional Chinese hermeneutic notions, techniques and approaches on the one hand, and Western philosophies of hermeneutics on the other.

The aesthetic realm conveys meanings with diffuse, continuously dispersing edges, which cannot be compared to the meanings confined to the narrow semantic spaces with fixed borders of conceptual definitions.

Wang Guowei continues:

Hence, if a text captures in words a real scene or a real emotion, it can be said to convey an aesthetic realm. (Wang Guowei 2013, 18)¹²

This is not only true for poetry, painting, or other works of art. Because *jingjie* possesses a noumenal dimension, it can also be discovered in numerous (but certainly not all) philosophical works. They also contain insights, which convey a philosophical idea not only through conceptual phrases, but rather through that which is engraved between the lines, creating a certain atmosphere, consisting of images, associations, sensations, and emotions, experienced and expressed by their author, and perceived and re-experienced by the readers. No wonder that—precisely through the realm of inner experience—philosophy is often linked to literature or poetry. Li Zehou, for instance, has defined it as "science, imbued with poetry" (Li 2016, 4): as science, it offers us a systematic way of exploring and comprehending reality; as poetry, it walks with us through the opaque jungle of our life, on

11 Wang Guowei used the term *jingjie* or aesthetic realm interchangeable with the concept of *yijing* 意境 or artistic conception (Cheng 1995, 93). The latter notion is a kind of imaginary domain, which is—similar to the aesthetic realm—also based upon a fusion of emotion and scene or situation (*qingjing jiaorong* 情景交融, see *ibid.*, 95). However, what the artistic conception implies, is more centered upon the mindful awareness of the here and now, which is conveyed by artistic creation. In his writings about the artistic conception Li Zehou (see for instance Li 2010) hence always highlights that it is—precisely because of this fusion or the unity it implies—completely useless and redundant to seek comprehension through any kind of conceptual medium between feeling and object.

12 故能寫真景物，真感情著，謂之有境界。

a long and intimate journey that not only offers us beauty and pleasure, but also forces us to confront fear and melancholy. Philosophy can be a way of life that is rational and artistic at the same time; it not only urges us to search for answers to eternal questions of being, but also to unceasingly raise new ones. It does not remain limited to discovering the world, but also allows for its ongoing creative change. *Jingjie* or the aesthetic realm might be one of the most typical hermeneutic tools of philosophy that was created in China. Because it seems that precisely here could this affinity and subtle closeness between the philosophical depths of rationality and sensitivity come to life and find its untroubled home—even when it comes to the ultimate existential concerns:

Jingjie, attained through literary appreciation, is the sudden realization and cognition of ultimate reality that embodies the principle of truth, goodness, and beauty simultaneously. The experience contained in *jingjie* is not only aesthetic, but religious and existentialistic as well. Our close reading of Wang’s remarks on *jingjie* has revealed the rich spiritual meaning of this concept: the fusion of subject and object through intuition, the consummation of truth, goodness, and beauty, and a deep existential concern. (Wu 2002, 450)

To a certain extent or in certain aspects, *jingjie* can be compared to Heidegger’s understanding of “moods” (or attunements),¹³ which, for him, reveal the Being of *Dasein*, for according to Heidegger, *Dasein* is always in an attunement, and the world is discovered in a mood (Heidegger 1996, 126ff, 313ff). It is a basis on which we can establish our being-in-the-world. In other words, moods establish *how we find ourselves in the world*. Similar to Heidegger’s moods, aesthetic realms or *jingjie* represent a pre-subjective and pre-objective sense of being in the world.

The *jingjie* of Zhuangzi: Birds, Fish, and the Circular Nature of Intersubjectivity

It is thus completely clear that *jingjie* is not a conceptual paradigm, but one that can at the most be grasped through situational, contextual approaches. Hence, like the Chinese language and Chinese philosophy, interpretations through aesthetic realms are always linked to contexts, as much as concrete experiences. I will try to illustrate such a holistic contextual interpretation using the example of two essays

13 *Stimmung*. The term has often been translated into English as “mood”, however in my opinion attunement is a more appropriate translation.

from Zhuangzi.¹⁴ For this purpose, let us first take a closer look at Zhuangzi's famous essay about the seabird:

Have you not heard of this? Once upon a time, on the outskirts of the land of Lu, a bird of paradise appeared. The Emperor of the land of Lu received it with the highest honours and expressed his heartfelt welcome to it. He had it transferred to the highest temple, treated it to the most select wines, and offered it the most enchanting music to please it. He had a good number of cattle and sheep slaughtered and he organized a sumptuous banquet. But the bird remained gloomy and depressed, not taking a bite to eat or a sip to drink. After three days, it died, just like that. This is what happens if one feeds birds with food for humans instead of food for birds. Those who know how birds should receive food suitable for them, would have let the bird fly into deep woods, where it would rest on trees. They would have let it fly merrily above sandy ground and soar above rivers and lakes. They would have let it hunt for its own food and feast on the small fish that it likes. It would have followed its flock, and stopped and rested wherever it pleased. It would have complete freedom of movement. Birds are most bothered by human voices. If symphonies of the greatest human musicians were played somewhere in the wild, birds would immediately fly away, all wild beasts would flee and fish would hide in the deepest waters. However, when humans hear such music, they gather around it and enjoy it. Fish can only live in water, but people die in it. Since man and fish have different properties, what they hate and love differs as well. The ancient wise men did not measure individual features of ability and behaviour with the same criteria. The name is created before the reality. Meaning is effected through appropriateness. To follow these principles brings happiness and satisfaction. (*Zhuangzi* s.d., *Zhi le*, 5)¹⁵

That which is not a bird, therefore, cannot simply judge on its own and conclude that what is best for them is best for birds. This is a Daoist critique of the Golden Rule, advocated by the Confucians, which finds its most famous expression in

14 For an informative analytical background regarding the central concepts of Zhuangzi's philosophy, which constitute the core of his aesthetic thought, see Sernelj 2017.

15 且女獨不聞邪？昔者海鳥止於魯郊，魯侯御而觴之於廟，奏九韶以為樂，具太牢以為善。鳥乃眩視憂悲，不敢食一臠，不敢飲一杯，三日而死。此以己養養鳥也，非以鳥養養鳥也。夫以鳥養養鳥者，宜栖之深林，遊之壇陸，浮之江湖，食之鰕鱗，隨行列而止，委蛇而處。彼唯人言之惡聞，奚以夫譊譊為乎！咸池、九韶之樂，張之洞庭之野，鳥聞之而飛，獸聞之而走，魚聞之而下入，人卒聞之，相與還而觀之。魚處水而生，人處水而死，故必相與異，其好惡故異也。故先聖不一其能，不同其事。名止於實，義設於適，是之謂條達而福持。

the advice “not to impose on others what you would not wish done to yourself” (*Lunyu* s.d., Yan Yuan: 2).¹⁶ We must be aware of the fact that we are parts of different worlds, living in different realities.

But let us return to the basic message of the story. Because I am not a bird, I cannot inherently know the likes and dislikes of birds. This, naturally, is merely an assumption of Zhuangzi’s method of perception and communication. It is not, by any stretch, a system of logical systematization. In Zhuangzi’s basic work, his friend Hui Shi always represents the fundamental type of argumentation, which attempts to derive logical, universally valid conclusions from assumptions. And in doing so he naturally often makes himself ridiculous. If humans cannot know birds, since we are not birds, shouldn’t it also apply that we cannot know fish, since we are not fish? Or, translated into logical inferences:

P1: Humans can not know birds.

P1: Zhuangzi is human.

C: Zhuangzi cannot know birds.

P1: Humans can not know fish.

P1: Zhuangzi is human.

C: Zhuangzi cannot know fish.

However, Zhuangzi is not quite convinced that it is all that simple.¹⁷ Let us listen to an anecdote from the *Autumn Water* section in Zhuangzi’s *External Chapters*.

Zhuangzi and Huizi are strolling on a bridge over the Hao river. Zhuangzi says: How easily the white fish swims to and fro—this is the joy of fish!

16 己所不欲，勿施於人。

17 Zhuangzi was also quite deliberately not interested in a systematic uniformity of his philosophy (Heubel 2021, 273). François Billeter (2010, 34) writes the following on this subject: “An overly coherent discourse would have seemed suspicious to him, for he was interested above all in the aporias of thought, the paradoxes and discontinuities that we encounter in the course of our experience of self and world.” In this context, Heubel refers to the phrase “an overly coherent discourse”. In his view, such a formulation proves that Billeter assumes that the author Zhuangzi certainly does have a certain desire for discursive coherence. However, despite this desire, his main interest was still in the “paradoxes and discontinuities” of self- and world-experience. In Heubel’s view, this is “an important insight” (Heubel, 2021, 273).

Huizi says: But you are not fish, so where can you know what is the joy of fish?

Zhuangzi then says: But you are not me, so how can you know that I do not know what is the joy of fish?

Huizi says: I am not you, therefore I cannot understand you; but you are also not a fish, and therefore you cannot understand fish. That is all.

Zhuangzi says: Well, then, let's go back to the beginning. You asked me: Where can you know what is the joy of fish? So at the time you asked me that, you must have known that I knew what is the joy of fish. Well, I knew this on this bridge over the Hao river. (*Zhuangzi* s.d., Qiu shui, 13)¹⁸

Was Zhuangzi here playing with sophistry? He has obviously been playing with words, for the Chinese interrogative *an* 安 can refer to time, space, or manner. It can thus mean *what, how, when, or where*. If it was understood in the latter sense, Zhuangzi provided a proper answer. However, if one takes into account the sociocultural context of traditional China at the time when this work was (or is supposed to have been) created, we will readily think that Zhuangzi truly wanted to say something more meaningful with this anecdote, and to impart a message.

Of course, the following is only my subjective interpretation of the two stories—one among many, many others.¹⁹ But since we have already rejected the idea of an absolute text or an absolute meaning, we should also question the notion of an absolute interpretation. However, the real reason for my adding more water to this flood is because with these interpretations I would like to demonstrate how a new meaning and understanding can be acquired through the method of unifying (fusing) the aesthetic realms (*jingjie*) that can be experienced in these two separate anecdotes, without relying on their strictly conceptual connotations.

18 莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：「儵魚出遊從容，是魚樂也。」惠子曰：「子非魚，安知魚之樂？」莊子曰：「子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？」惠子曰：「我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂全矣。」莊子曰：「請循其本。子曰『汝安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。」

19 Throughout history, there have been hundreds of different interpretations of this charming story. The most recent ones can be enjoyed in the collection *Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish* (2015), edited by Robert T. Ames and Takahiro Nakajima. The editors wrote in the description of the anthology that they have brought together “essays from the broadest possible compass of scholarship, offering interpretations that range from formal logic to alternative epistemologies to transcendental mysticism”. Many were commissioned by the editors and appear for the first time. Some of them have been available in other languages—Chinese, Japanese, German, Spanish—and were translated especially for this anthology. And several older essays were chosen for the quality and variety of their arguments, formulated over years of engagement by their authors. All, however, demonstrate that the *Zhuangzi* as a text and as a philosophy is never one thing; indeed, it has always been and continues to be, many different things to many different people.

If we try to connect and understand both stories in this way, namely considering the broader essential context that they are part of, we can easily see that they are both dealing with human relations (or relations between living beings in general). In Lao Sze-kwan's view, the 'fundamental source' of both stories would probably be linked to the question of the nature of inter-subjectivity. The common ground in both debates is doubtless connected to this problem. It shows, if speaking with Ram Adhar Mall (2000, 6), that in our attempt to understand one another, we meet to differ and differ to meet.

The first story emphasizes differences between different beings. If one desires the well-being of everything that exists, one must—according to Zhuangzi—first get used to the fact that we are all different. Only based on knowing this fact, i.e., that we all live in different worlds, can one create close mutual contacts.²⁰

The creation of such contacts and communication, in turn, proves again that we all live in a single, unified world, as the second essay shows. Zhuangzi's comprehension of the joyfulness of fish resulted from the entire context in which the fish were observed. Zhuangzi was joyfully strolling in friendly nature, accompanied by his best friend, and he enjoyed the whole situation, of which the fish were also a part. Hence his joyfulness could not be separated from the fish, and *vice versa*. It was precisely this very unification in joy (a fusion of this joyful *jingjie*), which made his innate, complete, and comprehensive understanding of fish possible.

The fusion of aesthetic realms, experienced in both stories, shows us very clearly that ultimately it is human individual subjectivity which determines what should be regarded as a genuine relationship. In this sense, it can offer a new, and more complex, image of intersubjectivity. This kind of fusion is not to be mixed with a melting together of two different entities. The story of the seabird shows that what makes any aesthetic fusion possible is precisely the experience of difference and separation. The happy fish from the second essay show through the very fact of their happiness that these differences and separations are instrumental for any genuine, vital and creative unity, precisely because a fusion of aesthetic realms is always conditioned by diversity.

20 This—implicitly and latently proposed—fusion of *jingjie* could apply to contacts and relations between birds and people, as well as those between Sinologists and the Chinese, or between authors and readers.

Conclusion

Intersubjective understanding is thus not conditioned by the criteria of objectivity (with agreed-upon names) but rather by the thing itself, i.e., by understanding and experiencing the aesthetic realms in which the subjects are embedded. The apparent objectivity and independence of the human rational mind has repeatedly been proven a chimera, which only leads to self-deception.

The dynamics of being limited to the intimate world of an individual, on the one side, and the muddled, continuous merging of all individual worlds into a single one on the other, permeate our existence and position us in what we call 'time and space'. And finally, the fusion of individual aesthetic realms is precisely the starting point for constructing a tiny bridge of understanding, connecting Zhuangzi and his reader, Chinese and Western philosophy, you and me.

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