

# Within the Spinning Stillness of the Present: Reflections on Transcultural *Zhuangzi*-Studies in Taiwan

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## Abstract

Taiwan is an island in East Asia on which the complex effects of hybrid modernization have been experienced particularly directly and strongly. This situation also gave rise to perspectives in the study of literature and philosophy which differ significantly from those on the Chinese mainland. Why did transcultural philosophy find good conditions for development in contemporary Taiwan? This paper addresses this question by situating the recent development of “transcultural *Zhuangzi*-studies” within a larger cultural and political constellation. It begins with very general reflections on “transcultural Taiwan” and ends with a more specific discussion of Yang Rubin’s 楊儒賓 conceptual paradigm of a “material-energetic-spiritual subject”. My aim is to give an overview of the broader cultural and political situation, in which “transcultural *Zhuangzi*-studies” appeared and developed. Moreover, the paradigm of triadic subjectivity that Yang has been developing for decades can be read as “transcultural” because it allows the communication of different, often disparate cultural sources, classical and modern, Eastern and Western. This proposal is not only philosophically but also politically significant: Taiwan’s complex path to democratization and the development of this new “paradigm of subjectivity” deeply correspond to one another.

**Keywords:** *Zhuangzi*, subjectivity, transcultural turn, hybrid modernization, Yang Rubin (Yang Rur-bin), Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, Taiwan

## Znotraj vrteče se negibnosti sedanjosti: misli o Zhuangzijevih transkulturnih študijah na Tajvanu

### Izvleček

Tajvan je otok v Vzhodni Aziji, ki je še posebej neposredno in močno izkusil zapletene učinke hibridne modernizacije. To stanje je prav tako pripomoglo k oblikovanju vrst perspektiv v literarnih in filozofskih študijah, ki se močno razlikujejo od tistih na celine. Zakaj je transkulturna filozofija našla primerne pogoje za razvoj prav na sodobnem Tajvanu?

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Članek to vprašanje naslavlja tako, da nedavni razvoj »Zhuangzijevih transkulturnih študij« postavlja v širšo kulturno in politično konstelacijo. Študija se začne s splošnim premislekom o »transkulturnem Tajvanu« in zaključí s podrobnejšo razpravo o Yang Rubinovi 楊儒賓 konceptualni paradigmi »materialno-energetsko-duhovnega subjekta«. Moj namen je podati pregled širše kulturne in politične situacije, v kateri so se prvič pojavile in razvile »Zhuangzijeve transkulturne študije«. Poleg tega je paradigmo triadne subjektivnosti, ki jo je Yang razvijal desetletja, mogoče brati kot »transkulturno«, saj dopušča prenos med različnimi, pogosto povsem drugačnimi kulturnimi viri, tako klasičnimi kot modernimi, tako vzhodnimi kot zahodnimi. Takšen predlog ni pomemben samo v filozofskem, ampak tudi političnem smislu: zapletena pot Tajvana k demokratizaciji namreč globoko sovпада z razvojem te nove »paradigme subjektivnosti«.

**Ključne besede:** *Zhuangzi*, subjektivnost, transkulturni obrat, hibridna modernizacija, Yang Rubin (Yang Rur-bin), sodobni novi konfucianizem, Tajvan

## Transcultural Taiwan<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan is an island in East Asia on which the complex effects of hybrid modernization have been experienced particularly directly and strongly. This situation also gave rise to perspectives in the study of literature and philosophy which differ significantly from those on the Chinese mainland. The defeat of China in the first Sino-Japanese War changed the historical fate of Taiwan. It also urged Chinese intellectuals to radicalize their reflections on China's modernization. Since the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898, waves of revolutionary change have caused old and new China, East and West, to engage in a dynamic of cultural communication unprecedented in Chinese history.

Transcultural research, as I understand it, has to deal, from the very beginning, with two strands of cultural development which are interconnected but, nevertheless, distinguishable from each other: one is the relation between the old and the new, between Tradition and Modernization; the other is the relation between Eastern and Western culture(s). The urgent need to respond to the challenges of Western modernity and the imperialism associated with it led studies of the West in China to intellectual experiments which focused on ways of learning from the West and on self-transformation that went well beyond the framework of comparative

1 This essay is the revised version of a paper I presented at the International Conference on "Taiwanese Philosophy and the Preservation of Confucian Tradition" at the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) on October 17–18, 2019. Parts of my discussion on Yang Rubin's "paradigm of subjectivity" were first presented at the International Workshop "Towards a New Paradigm of Subjectivity: On the Contemporary Significance of the *Zhuangzi*" on June 30–July 2, 2017 at Charles University, Prague (co-organized with Olga Lomová).

studies, which basically assumes two or more separate and intrinsically homogeneous cultural entities that remain more or less unchanging. The transcultural dynamic, which emerged in this situation of crisis and urgency, was driven by the desperate need to respond to Western powers and Japan. At the same time, this dynamic was also affected by the complicated and highly disputed relationship between different historical layers of Chinese culture(s), old and new, past and present.

Between 1895 and 1945, under Japanese rule, Taiwan entered into a new transcultural constellation, in which increasing Western influence, mainly mediated through the Japanese reception of Western knowledge (including the fields of philosophy, literature, and the fine arts) was intertwined with the tendency towards the Japanization of language, education, and an everyday culture encountering the strong historical influence of Han-culture (*han wenhua* 漢文化) introduced by immigrants from mainland China, especially since the 17th century.

Next to 1895, 1949 is the second key date in the history of contemporary Taiwan, when Taiwan and the Republic of China merged, and a historical entity appeared that is called “Republic of China (Taiwan)”. Ever since, the “Republic of China (Taiwan)” (ROC) and the “People’s Republic of China” (PRC) have been, especially culturally and politically, competing models of Chinese modernization. My discussion on transcultural philosophy in Taiwan, and about the example of “contemporary *Zhuangzi*-studies” (*dangdai Zhuangzi yanjiu* 當代莊子研究), is based on the assumption that this historical situation not only deeply influenced the ways in which “Chinese culture” is seen on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, but also the philosophical interpretation of classical Chinese texts.

This paper will focus on the work of Yang Rubin (or Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓, b. 1956), who is one of the main proponents of contemporary *Zhuangzi*-studies in Taiwan. In order to understand some of the main philosophical ideas which motivate not only his studies of the *Zhuangzi*, but his intellectual activity in general, it seems necessary to refer to the historical conditions in post-1949 Taiwan that made those studies possible in the sense of a *historical a priori*. Yang is convinced that the critical and normative reconstruction of the cultural and political heritage of the pre-1949 Republic of China is helpful for overcoming the split between “Taiwan” and the “Republic of China” which is at the centre of the major political divide between the perspectives of either (Taiwan) independence or unification of the ROC and the PRC.

Yang’s reconstruction is critical, because it recognizes the necessity to break with the Sinocentrism that was the official ideology of the KMT-government after 1949 and, more or less, continues to have a deep impact on the way mainland China is perceived in Taiwan—the political instrumentalization of Chinese

culture in Taiwan found its main expression in the “movement for the renaissance of Chinese culture” (*Zhonghua wenhua fuxing yundong* 中華文化復興運動), directed against the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (*wuchan jieji wenhua dageming* 無產階級文化大革命) on the mainland. Yang’s reconstruction has normative significance because it leads to a re-evaluation of the response to the challenge of modernization opened up in the early Republican period, a response that can be said to have been guided by the idea of a the communication of “old and new, China and the West” (*gujin zhongxi* 古今中西).

In this context, transcultural studies pay particular attention to the difficult communication between Taiwan’s Han-Chinese or Chinese-speaking, “sino-(grammatical) culture” (*hanzi wenhua* 漢字文化), which dominated Taiwan long before 1895, and the strong cultural influence of Republican China after 1949, which has been ensured through authoritarian rule and thereby only in heavily mutilated form. De-sinicization can therefore be seen as a highly legitimate attempt to counter this later wave of cultural sinicization deeply entangled with one-party rule. But now it is increasingly clear that it is necessary to distinguish between the legitimate dimension of de-sinicization, which aims at overcoming the dictatorial legacy of the KMT, and a de-sinicization that is motivated by a Taiwanese nationalism, which in itself shows the pathological traits of modern nationalisms that are fixed to a vision of purified cultural identity. De-sinicization understood as a necessary move beyond the authoritarian legacy of Republican China thus appears to be an imported condition for the possibility that the de-ideologization and de-centralization of Chinese culture in Taiwan can enhance further cultural and political democratization. It is also an important step on the way towards realizing the normative potential of Republican China beyond KMT-ideology. At least, such a perspective makes it possible to link the cultural and intellectual potential of Republican China before 1949 to the transcultural potential accumulated in 20th century Taiwan. It further presumes that the different nationalistic positions (Chinese nationalism *versus* Taiwanese nationalism) pose a major obstacle to the democratization of Taiwan, which can, with regard to its transcultural situation, only succeed insofar as the paradoxical coexistence of “Taiwan” and the “Republic of China” is possible. For Yang Rubin, their coexistence or even reconciliation can be regarded as a condition for the possibility that the “Republic of China (Taiwan)” remains important as a cultural and political alternative to the Communist regime in the “People’s Republic of China”.

The *normative value* (*guifanxing jiazhi* 規範性價值) of the Republic of China before 1949 can be seen in the development, however experimental, of modes of communication between old and new China, East and West. If we conceive the relation between Sun Yat-sen’s “three principles” (or “-isms”) and between the

three main political discourses of modernity related to it (conservatism, liberalism, and socialism) in terms of trans-cultural and trans-positional communication, it becomes clear that Republican scholarship was able to respond to the challenge of hybrid modernization and the transcultural constellation of contemporary China in highly creative ways that are significant well beyond the specific historical situation in which they emerged.

The *transcultural turn* (*kua wenhua zhuanxiang* 跨文化轉向) in the study of classical Chinese literature and philosophy largely inherits earlier attempts in the Republican period before 1949. This leads to criticism of the widespread and unilateral emphasis on “radical anti-traditionalism” during and after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which has largely neglected the richness and complexity of the modes of communication between old and new and East and West that developed at the time.

Before discussing “transcultural *Zhuangzi*-studies” in Taiwan, it seems necessary to explain the specific use I make of two concepts which are important for understanding the theoretical framework in which these studies emerged: *hybrid modernization* (*hunza xiandaihua* 混雜現代化) and *transculturality*. Hybrid modernization is understood as a (hybridizing) interweaving of external and internal modernization, the former referring, in the present context, to the relationship between China and the West, and the latter to the relationship between old and new, ancient and modern China. From this perspective, it is striking that a peculiar way of modernization in China could be set in motion, owing to the fact that, even before the intrusion of imperialist powers, there had been an internal movement of self-reflection and self-transformation that made it easier to respond to and absorb impulses from the outside. In a more schematic way, *internal modernization* can thus be understood as a condition of the possibility of *external modernization*. Conversely, the cultural rupture associated with external modernization was exactly what created the conditions of possibility for reconstructing the history of this internal modernization in its continuity. This reconstruction was, in turn, exactly what provided normative criteria for the assessment of external modernization. The idea of hybrid modernization seems to me particularly effective in foregrounding the *transcultural dynamic* that decisively shaped the development of China in the 20th century. This transcultural dynamic can be expressed in a seven-character formula encapsulating, so to speak, the cultural imperative of philosophical discourse in China since the late 19th century: *tong gu jin dong (zhong) xi zhi bian* 通古今東（中）西之變, which can be loosely translated as “let old and new, East (Chinese) and West communicate through each other in their changes”.<sup>2</sup>

2 For a more detailed discussion see Heubel 2018.

This concept of *transculturality* can be further specified by reference to *comparison*. While *comparative studies* are more or less interested in the differences and similarities between cultures that presuppose the existence of ethnically or linguistically influenced cultural spaces or national cultures, of one's own and foreign culture—as in the language of Western and Eastern, European and Asian, Greek, and Chinese philosophy, for example—*transcultural studies* are interested in phenomena of the hybridization of cultures that require casting, more or less, doubt on the existence of cultural spaces or national cultures. In its extreme, the comparative dimension touches on a nationalist, ethnic-racist understanding of cultures, while the transcultural dimension tends to regard cultures in principle as the result of processes of hybridization and thus rejects any form of cultural essentialism. Often “intercultural (or cross-cultural) philosophy” is still very much restricted to its “comparative” dimension, which has led to the development of “transcultural” approaches in critical opposition to comparative and intercultural ones. This, however, has the unfortunate consequence that comparative approaches can only be perceived as deficient and regressive. Therefore, transcultural studies should not neglect the importance of “comparison” so as not to lose the possibility of addressing the question of why the assumption of cultural spaces or national cultures continues to shape the contemporary situation of philosophy to a large extent, and will probably continue to do so in the foreseeable future.<sup>3</sup>

### Transcultural Studies in the *Zhuangzi*

Between 2007 and 2019, the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at Academia Sinica in Taiwan consistently organized a series of conferences focusing on the contemporary significance of the *Zhuangzi*.<sup>4</sup> This initiative was triggered by the observation that, since around the year 2000, French-speaking sinology showed a strong interest in the *Zhuangzi*, producing works which brought the Daoist classic into dialogue with contemporary French thought and philosophy (mainly phenomenology and post-structuralism). The discussion soon entered into a dynamic field of issues related to key notions such as “body” (*shenti* 身體), “subjectivity” (*zhutixing* 主體性), and “breath-energy” (*qi* 氣), but also to modern politics. Inspired by novel ways to relate past and present, this dynamic opened up a new space for critical reflections on Daoism and Confucianism. A major

3 I began to work with the concept of “transcultural philosophy” when I became aware of the failure of “comparative philosophy” to express the dynamic and complex relation between Michel Foucault’s and Mou Zongsan’s 牟宗三 philosophies of self-cultivation and philosophical “askesis” (Heubel 2005; 2008a; 2008b).

4 Selected results have been published in two edited volumes in Chinese (see Heubel 2017a; 2017b).



influence on these developments was the work of Swiss sinologist Jean François Billeter, whose four lectures on the *Zhuangzi* held in October and November 2000 at the Collège de France in Paris greatly inspired recent French research on this classic work (Billeter 2002).

During the first workshop at Academia Sinica, Billeter appeared to be outspokenly critical of an energetic, *Qi*-oriented interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*. He appeared to reject any use of *Qi* that goes beyond the realm of individual experience and assigns cosmological dimensions to the notion of the subject<sup>5</sup> (Billeter 2010). According to Billeter, the cosmological reading—the cornerstone, in his view, of a whole hermeneutic tradition beginning with the classical commentary by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312)—is not only problematically esoteric, but also carries a political significance which allowed the uncritical integration of the *Zhuangzi* into the imperial order of the Confucian state. To bring to the fore the critical potential of the *Zhuangzi*, neglected already in its first critical revision by its foremost editor and commentator, thus became the declared aim of Billeter’s research.

It is no coincidence that Billeter’s approach fell on fertile ground in Taiwan. Sandwiched between a strong tendency towards cultural de-sinicization and the neglect of Chinese philosophy on the one hand, and the new enthusiasm for classical Chinese culture among many scholars in the PRC (often embossed with the arrogance and blindness of cultural nationalism) on the other, scholars in Taiwan readily feel an urgent need to rethink and overhaul the study of Chinese philosophy by embracing a new, transcultural perspective. The question of how to give research on classical Chinese texts a transcultural and critical turn, which would enable contemporary scholarship to regain analytic and diagnostic force when confronted with contemporary problems, could no longer be neglected, and therefore became the topic of scholarly debates. Billeter’s sharp-minded and often provocative perspective proved to be an important stimulus for further attempts to understand and unleash the transcultural potential of the *Zhuangzi* in Taiwan.

When the dialogue with Francophone *Zhuangzi*-studies began to lose steam, the effort to rethink the significance of the *Zhuangzi* by linking it to the cultural and political experiences of contemporary Taiwan became more conscious and concretized. Since 2009, academic conferences on the *Zhuangzi* reveal a tendency, on the one hand, to deepen the conversation with contemporary German philosophy—critical theory (of the Frankfurt School in particular) and Martin Heidegger’s thought—, and on the other to pay special attention to “paradoxical thinking”

5 「若莊子說法語：畢來德莊子研究工作坊」(“If Zhuangzi Spoke French: Workshop on Jean François Billeter’s *Zhuangzi*-studies”), November 30–December 1, 2009, Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taipei.

(*diaogui sixiang* 弔詭思想) and those historical interpretations which emphasize *Zhuangzi's* “theory of things” (*wu lun* 物論) or on the “equalization of things” (*qi wu* 齊物)—Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (d. 1692) and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (d. 1936) became especially important as commentators, because *Zhuangzi* was helpful for the development of their critical or even revolutionary thought.

Taiwan’s transcultural potential thus found a philosophical expression, which reveals an astonishing autonomy and freedom of thought, but also critically reflects contemporary problems in a way that may be important also outside the Chinese-speaking world insofar as the paradoxical effects of hybrid modernization in China have repercussions for the rest of the world.

### *Zhuangzi*-Studies and Contemporary Neo-Confucianism

Since the Communist takeover in 1949, cultural and intellectual developments in Taiwan have been strongly influenced by scholars and artists who fled the mainland. The philosophical school of “Contemporary Neo-Confucianism” (*dangdai xin ruxue* 當代新儒學), mainly represented by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (d. 1995), Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (d. 1978), Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (d. 1982), Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (d. 1969), and their predecessors, like Xiong Shili 熊十力 (d. 1968) and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (d. 1988)—who both decided to stay in the PRC after 1949—pushed towards a theoretical modernization of Confucian learning, which today is generally regarded as one of the great achievements of 20th-century Sinophone philosophy, and has been in itself a highly transcultural phenomenon. Since the 1980s, Contemporary Neo-Confucianist writings have, in turn, significantly influenced the revival of Confucianism in the PRC.<sup>6</sup>

In *1949: A Eulogy* (Yang 2015), Yang Rubin 楊儒賓, as part of the wider context of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, openly challenges the CCP’s official discourse on “1949”. For him, the historical narrative of 1949 is misleading as it normally focuses on October 1, the day of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, but neglects another date, which he sees as equally important for the understanding of modern China from the perspective of counter-history: December 7, when the government of the Republic of China officially retreated to Taiwan (*guofu du hai qian Tai* 國府渡海遷台) and moved the capital

6 In this essay I prefer to use the rather complicated term “Contemporary Neo-Confucianism” because I refer to a specific Confucian school which mainly developed in Taiwan and Hong Kong after 1949 and therefore is to be distinguished from the more general term of “Modern Confucianism” that includes developments in Taiwan and in the PRC. In other contexts there are, of course, good reasons for the term “Modern Confucianism” (Rošker 2016, 1).



to Taipei (Taipei) (Yang 2019). Yang emphasizes the outstanding importance of those scholar immigrants who fled from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan after 1949. Their influence has, in his view, helped to enable the cultural development in Taiwan which can only be discarded if one is willing to pay the price of cultural self-impoverishment. Critics of this position are tempted to say that this cultural influx is an external, “Chinese” influence that has only temporarily found the social and political conditions for development in Taiwan, but ultimately did not grow out of Taiwanese soil and therefore does not belong to Taiwan, but to the Chinese mainland. For Yang Rubin, this kind of Taiwanese nationalism would deprive Taiwan of the transcultural potential emerging out of the dynamics of hybrid modernization. But Yang’s perspective is not limited to the defence of the cultural impact of Republican scholarship in Taiwan after 1949. He goes well beyond the so called “movement for the renaissance of Chinese culture”, once promoted by the KMT-government in response to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and is highly critical of tendencies in the PRC to instrumentalize Chinese history and culture, once again, in the service of one-party rule. Instead, what Yang seems to take into serious consideration is a topic which has for long been crucial for contemporary Neo-Confucianism, namely, the reconstruction of Confucian learning in light of the need for democratization in Chinese politics (Heubel 2015). From Yang’s discussion, it is not difficult to recognize one of the major deficiencies of this endeavour: democracy is mostly discussed from the perspective of ideological struggle or institutional arrangements, but not from the perspective of *democratic subjectivity*. Unlike other leading figures in contemporary Neo-Confucian scholarship, Yang attempts to rethink this problem not only by drawing on Confucian sources but also on classical “Daoist” ones like the *Zhuangzi*.

Contemporary Neo-Confucianism has, in principle, recognized democracy and science as universal achievements of mankind that are not only compatible with Confucianism, but should in fact be assimilated to allow it to fulfil its historical role. However, this recognition of democracy and science entails a problem, which makes it understandable why Yang has turned to reflections on the *Zhuangzi* and the idea of a “wandering subject” (*you zhi zhuti* 遊之主體) to criticize some basic assumptions of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism. The possibility of a reconciliation between “inner holiness” (*nei sheng* 內聖), a model of subjectivity oriented towards the ideal of the holy person (*shengren* 聖人), and “new external kingliness” (*xin waiwang* 新外王), namely, democratic politics, is based on the assumption that the conception of moral subjectivity developed in the idealist “school of the heart” (*xinxue* 心學) of Song-Ming Confucianism can provide the necessary conditions to open Chinese thought up for democracy and science, although this turn from the “tradition of the way” (*daotong* 道統) to democracy and science would

not be an easy one, but would be accompanied by broken and complex ways of communication (*qutong* 曲通). The difficulties to democratize subjectivity and to open it towards a scientific spirit of criticism and experiment have been largely neglected and underestimated in contemporary Neo-Confucianism. Here, Yang's idea of a "wandering subject" or "energetic-transformative subject" (*qibua zhuti* 氣化主體) inspired by the *Zhuangzi* provides a fresh perspective which challenges not only the basic assumptions of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, but also dominant conceptions of subjectivity in the West. In Yang's reflections, therefore, important philosophical problems correspond to the ability to unfold the specific transcultural potential accumulated after 1949 in Taiwan. His way of exploring this possibility carries in itself the potential to attract attention well beyond the limits of a regional experience or a particular language.

### The Triadic Subject: An Alternative Paradigm of Subjectivity?

Yang Rubin is a prolific writer and his many books cover a wide range of topics. Instead of giving a general overview of his work, I will focus on his concept of the "subject", because this is, in my understanding, the philosophical heart of his response to the crisis of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism.

"The Wandering Subject" (*You zhi zhuti* 遊之主體) is the title of a paper Yang published in 2014. It was republished in 2016 as the third chapter of his book *Zhuangzi as Confucian* (儒門內的莊子). At first sight, the title of this book seems to be a strange provocation, because the *Zhuangzi* is generally regarded as a Daoist classic. Among Chinese commentators, however, there is a tradition that links Zhuangzi less to Laozi 老子 than to Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius) and the Confucian school. The title of Yang's book is therefore not as provocative as it initially seems. The author's aim is to revive the tradition of a Confucian interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, elaborating on Zhuangzi's cultural and educational background, his understanding of Confucian morality and ritual, or the ambiguous, often ironic portrayals of Kongzi in some dialogues of the *Zhuangzi*. A question worthy of attention comes up here: In which sense is the figure of Zhuangzi as a Confucian a necessary as well as critical counterpart to the more or less obvious tendency of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, and Modern Confucianism in general, towards theoretical exhaustion, non-ironic dogmatization, dry moralism, and authoritarianism?

The idea of a "wandering subject" helps to understand from which perspective Yang enters into the relation between the *Zhuangzi* and the problem of subjectivity, namely, the well-known claim of Western philosophers and sinologists that

subjectivity is lacking in the Chinese philosophical tradition. This problem is still relevant, as Yang does not fail to remind the reader, with regard to the debate between Jean François Billeter and François Jullien on the contemporary significance of the *Zhuangzi* in particular and of Chinese philosophy in general (Heubel 2013). Yang recognizes that “subject” (*zbuti* 主體), as discussed in contemporary Chinese or Sinophone philosophy, is not a traditional term but a modern translation. Nevertheless, as he explains, there are related terms in classical Chinese philosophy, mainly dating back to Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism, like *benti* (本體), *xinti* (心體) or *xingti* (性體), which have been used in contemporary Chinese philosophy to interpret and assimilate the modern Western notion of the subject into modern Chinese.

Besides the “wandering subject”, Yang uses two other terms to discuss the paradigm of subjectivity in the *Zhuangzi*: *qihua zbuti* (氣化主體) and *xingqi zbuti* (形氣主體), which may be translated as “energetic-transformative subject” and “material-energetic subject”. In what follows, I will mainly focus on the former concept. Throughout his discussion, Yang contrasts his perspective with three other notions of the subject, one well known in the Chinese context, the other two popular in contemporary Western philosophy: *xinxing zbuti* (心性主體), *yishi zbuti* (意識主體) and *shenti zbuti* (身體主體), which may be translated as “spiritual subject” (a more literal preliminary translation might be: heart-disposition-subject), “conscious subject,” and “bodily subject”.

To understand the idea of a “spiritual subject”, one has to keep in mind that it has been crucial for the attempt of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism to modernize Confucian learning through the reception and transformation of Kantian philosophy and post-Kantian German idealism. Philosophers like Mou Zongsan and his followers were strongly convinced that only this paradigm of spiritual or idealist subjectivity provided Chinese modernization with the normative root it desperately needed in order to overcome the destructive consequences of a purely instrumental learning from the West—and of a Socialist modernization, which, for Mou, has no deep roots in Chinese tradition and therefore is not only perceived as lacking normative legitimation, but also as necessarily short-lived. For him, only the “spiritual subject” can constitute the metaphysical foundation for what he has called the “moral subject” (*daode zbuti* 道德主體) and, furthermore, for opening up to science and democracy without losing the necessary rootedness in Confucian learning.

This proposed fusion of the “heart-learning” (*xinxue* 心學) of Neo-Confucianism with German idealism was mainly developed after 1949 in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Within the ideological framework of the Cold War, this approach aimed

at providing a philosophical critique of Marxism in general and the rule of the Chinese Communist Party over the Chinese mainland in particular. *Qi* 氣 (in this essay translated as breath-energy or energy) and the “(breath-)energy-learning” (*qixue* 氣學) of Confucianism has been, at least since the beginning of the 20th century, linked to the materialist reconstruction of Chinese philosophy and to the reception of dialectical materialism in China—it is well known that young Mao Zedong 毛澤東 participated in a study group reading the works of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, one of the most important proponents of *Qi*-philosophy in Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism, who lived most of his life in a secluded village in Mao’s home province Hunan 湖南.

Throughout the 20th century, a philosophical as well as ideological struggle between idealist and materialist interpretations has deeply marked attempts toward the modernization of Confucian discourse. Within this philosophical framework, Contemporary Neo-Confucianists, especially Mou Zongsan and his followers, strongly opposed the “energetic” reconstruction of Neo-Confucian philosophy as leading to disastrous moral consequences and therefore as illegitimate. Mou doubted, in principle, the possibility of grounding “moral subjectivity” in “breath-energy”, because for him *Qi* is mainly a naturalistic or aesthetic category without normative significance. In his view, subjectivity is necessarily a normative idea linked to a moral subject grounded in “moral metaphysics”. Therefore, “energetic learning” appears as not only lacking subjectivity, but as fundamentally opposed to the possibility of moral subjectivity as such. In this sense, the idea of an energy-school of Confucianism and, moreover, an “energetic-transformative subject” is questionable in terms of its philosophical foundation, as well as in terms of its normative content. It is even perceived as morally dangerous insofar as it is related to the alleged amorality of materialist and Marxist philosophy.

It is, therefore, of major importance that Yang Rubin, who is intellectually and emotionally deeply attached to the academic context of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, not only defends the distinction between the energy-school and the heart-school, but also tries to show that the idealist insistence on a spiritual subject is not only theoretically one-dimensional but also normatively problematic. Drawing on the *Zhuangzi* and the motif of wandering or roaming (*you* 遊), Yang opens up a discussion which leads to a new understanding of a possible linkage between modern democracy and the reconstruction of classical Chinese sources.

Yang introduces his concept of the subject as a “triadic structure” (*sanyuan gou-zao* 三元構造) constituted by a material, an energetic, and a spiritual moment: “material form-breath energy-spirit=subject” (*xing-qi-shen=zbuti* 形—氣—神=

主體). This conceptual framework is not only important for Yang's reading of the *Zhuangzi*, but was already a constitutive aspect in his 1996 book on the *Confucian Concept of the Body*, especially for his interpretation of the book *Mengzi* 孟子. In this context he speaks of a "material-energetic-spiritual paradigm" (*xing-qi-shen de dianfan* 形—氣—神的典範), as I would like to tentatively translate it. For him this paradigm is connected to the wider conceptual field of "body (institutional being, form)—breath-energy—heart (will, meaning)" [*shen (ti, xing—qi—xin (zhi, yi)* 身(體、形—氣—心(志、意)]. At this conceptual level, Yang also stresses that there is "no big difference" between "heart" (*xin* 心) and "spirit" (*shen* 神) (Yang 1996, 154). This makes clear that the concept of a triadic "material-energetic-spiritual subject" forms the common background for Yang's interpretation not only of Daoist but also of Confucian texts.

This conceptual structure has at least three aspects that correspond to the idea of an alternative "paradigm of subjectivity" in the *Zhuangzi* put forward by Jean François Billeter (Billeter 2002, 115–48). The first aspect is the relation between the "conscious subject" (*yishi zhuti* 意識主體) and the "non-conscious subject" (*fei yishi zhuti* 非意識主體), which corresponds, in Yang's interpretation, to the relation between "heart (consciousness)" (*xin* 心) and "heaven" (*tian* 天) in the *Zhuangzi*. The second aspect is the importance of the "body", implied in the "material-energetic-spiritual" triad. In this context, Yang looks into the understanding of the "body" in the so called "body subject" (*shenti zhuti* 身體主體) which, in his view, is inferior to the notion of a "material-energetic-spiritual subject" connected to rich sources in Chinese philosophy. The third aspect is the link between "material form" (*xing* 形) and "thing" (*wu* 物). For Yang, one of the merits of the notion of a "material-energetic-spiritual subject" is that it can accommodate the relation between "heart (consciousness)" and "thing".

How does "self-transformation" (*zihua* 自化) in the triadic subject work? Yang employs a term from chapter 27 of the *Zhuangzi*, the "balance (equilibrium) of heaven" (*tian jun* 天均; "*Gleichgewicht des Himmels*", according to Richard Wilhelm's translation), in order to explain the transformative logic within the triadic structure of material form, breath-energy, and spirit. He notes that each of the three moments is intertwined with the other two, constituting a responsive constellation, which is more dynamic than the dualist structure of body and mind dominating the Western paradigm of subjectivity (Yang 2016, 189). It is the "system of breath-energy" (*qi de tixi* 氣的體系), which enters into dyadic subjectivity and makes it breathe in constant change, turning around in a very literal sense, since Yang also refers to the "potter's wheel" (*tao jun* 陶鈞 / 陶均), in terms of Zhuangzi's image of "resting in the middle of Heaven the Potter's Wheel" (*xiu hu tian jun* 休乎天鈞), to explain this "balance of heaven" (Ziporyn 2009, 14). The



potter's wheel turns around a "spinning centre" (*huan zhong* 環中), a moving hub or axis, thus being, at the same time, relatively stable at its centre. This is a "figure" (*yixiang* 意象) or "metaphor" (*yinyu* 隱喻), as Yang says, at the heart of his discussion of the "material-energetic-spiritual subject".

But how are we to understand the relation between the triadic subject and this paradoxical figure of standing and moving at the same time? What distinguishes this triadic subject from dyadic conceptions of subjectivity is a moment of *betweenness* which enters the relation between the material and spiritual, between body and mind, between matter and soul. In the Chinese tradition Yang refers to, this third moment is called *Qi* 氣. There is an endless discussion about how to translate *Qi* and whether it is translatable at all. In theories of cultivation, *Qi* is often related to the "breath", to exercises of breathing. This helps to understand *Qi* as a relation between the outside and inside world. Breathing is a very material experience—we see and feel ourselves breathing, most of the time breathing is merely present in unconscious subtlety, but we may suffer great pain when we have difficulties breathing. On the other hand, breath is not visible, it is associated with the very experience of life, which comes and goes beyond human control. In many languages therefore breath has been associated with the "soul" or some spiritual dimension. This twofold meaning can also be expressed, although in more abstract terms, by the word "energy". "Energy" can be material and immaterial and therefore corresponds to *Qi* and can be helpful for understanding it.

In what Yang calls the "material-energetic-spiritual subject", the "energetic" moment is placed at the centre, it is the common ground of both "material form" and "spirit". This makes sense, because in this triadic model *Qi* is intimately linked to "transformation", namely, to "energetic transformation" (*qihua* 氣化). In Yang's understanding, *Qi* can transform into "form" (*xing* 形) and become "formed/material energy" (*xingqi* 形氣), but it can also transform into "spirit" (*shen* 神) and become "spiritual energy" (*shenqi* 神氣). *Qi* is thus at the centre of the subject as a "spinning hub", it is the epitome of turning movement and pulsation, but also a comparatively stable standpoint in the midst of change. The central position of "breath-energy" is an important reason for naming this paradigm of subjectivity the "energetic-transformative subject" (*qihua zhuti* 氣化主體), although it is hard to deny that this translation is problematic and that the term makes much more sense in Chinese than in English—therefore I may add that I use the words "energy" or "energetic" in a rather vague sense: "energy" (*nengliang* 能量) is in modern Chinese often used as a synonym for *Qi* 氣 and I, pragmatically, translate this usage back into "energy" or "breath-energy", the latter being the English translation from a common translation of *Qi* into French: *souffle-énergie*.



Besides this understanding of the central position of the energetic moment within the triadic subject, Yang suggests a second, additional meaning, which is more egalitarian and dynamic, but also more difficult to understand.<sup>7</sup> This meaning obviously goes beyond a “dialectical” reading of the triadic structure and is radically “paradoxical”. Now, each of the three moments can become and be the centre: material form, breath-energy, and spirit. Paradoxical movement is a changing standpoint, the spinning stillness of a hub or of a spinning top, the relation of the three moments needs a (temporary) centre, but the “stillness” of this centre is stillness in movement—it is a “spinning stillness”. In general, every moment contains the other two, but it is the central moment that is particularly open to the other two. The central position is thus at the same time position and non-position. From the alternating centre of change emanates the dynamics of ever new transitions from one moment to the others, thus allowing the central position to be replaced and to *let* itself be replaced. The centre empties itself in order to become open for some “thing” that will replace it eventually as the new centre. We may call this the *paradoxical logic of self-transformation*. It can be understood as a creative interpretation of what is called “emptying oneself in order to wait for things” to arrive (*xu er dai wu* 虛而待物) in the famous dialogue about the “fasting of the heart” in chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi*.

This turning or spinning movement is a paradoxical “transformation” (*hua* 化) in “non-transformation” (*bu hua* 不化) and a “non-transformation” in “transformation”. To become aware of and realize this *structure of transformation*, this *standing in change* is what Yang calls “true wandering” (*zhen you* 真遊) or “perfect wandering” (*yuan you* 圓遊) (Yang 2016, 222). It is not surprising that Yang also

7 I am convinced that this second meaning is entailed in Yang Rubin’s writings but, for now, I find it difficult to provide specific evidence. However, in a recorded conversation I had with him on April 24, 2020 at the Wistaria-Teahouse in Taipei, when I asked him whether the triadic subject can be understood in this way, he answered: “I can agree to this; there should be this aspect, and it is a very important aspect” (這個我可以接受, 而且應該要有這個方面, 而且是很重要的一個方面). At some point the founder of the teahouse, Zhou Yu 周渝, joining our conversation, touched upon the question of how the triadic framework can be applied in the context of tea-culture. Zhou mentioned that he has no difficulty speaking exclusively about “breath-energy” (*qi* 氣) in this context, but that this becomes difficult when he wants to refer specifically to “material form” (*xing* 形) and “spirit” (*shen* 神). The moment we speak about the “material” and the “spiritual” dimension of tea-culture, he pointed out, we often tend to give prominence to the “spiritual” dimension, establishing a hierarchy between the two. This, however, is equally problematic, because the “spiritual” side can never be independent from the “form” in which it is expressed, whether it is the form of this concrete tea cup or the form of the movements we make when using it. I responded by referring to my interpretation of the triadic structure of transformation as allowing for the dynamic “rotation” of the central position—responding to changing contexts, sometimes it is the “material”, sometimes it is the “energetic”, and sometimes it is the “spiritual” moment that “becomes” central and continues to “be” central for some time.

introduces terms such as “heavenly wandering” (*tian you* 天遊) or “wandering transformation” (*you hua* 遊化) to speak about a layer in the *Zhuangzi* with aesthetic as well as mythical implications. The cultivation of the ability of a subject to wander freely and creatively through the three moments of its internal structure leads to a “transformational level” of perfection (*hua jing* 化境) (ibid., 206).

From this perspective it becomes clearer how Yang tries to introduce the “theory of breath-energy” (*qi lun* 氣論) in a way that avoids a “materialist” or “naturalist” reductionism that was very influential throughout the 20th century. According to Mou Zongsan’s reconstruction of Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism, the modern, materialist interpretation of *Qi* 氣 has a precedent in the tendency to bring the meaning of *Qi* 氣 close to its homophone *qi* 器 (tool, instrument), thus supporting a “non-metaphysical” understanding of the “Way” (*dao* 道). This tendency was already criticized by Cheng Hao 程顥 (d. 1085) in his discussion of the philosopher Zhang Zai’s 張載 (d. 1077) conception of breath-energy (Mou 2003, 438–39, 459–60; Heubel 2007).

Generally speaking, for Yang, the conception of “breath-energy” can overcome this reductionist reading because it also contains a metaphysical (*xing er shang* 形而上), ontological (*bentilun* 本體論) or even transcendent (*chao yue* 超越) layer. What seems to underlie Yang’s understanding of the triadic structure of the subject is the dialectical relation between *ti* 體 (“constitutive being”)<sup>8</sup> and *yong* 用 (“use”), fundamental for Neo-Confucian philosophy. According to Yang’s proposal, breath-energy is unavoidably linked to subjectivity and can thus unfold the normative significance of “energetic Confucianism”, because breath-energy cannot be reduced to its “material” or “physical” (*xing er xia* 形而下) dimension—it internally contains a spiritual-energetic dimension (*shen qi* 神氣). Accordingly, Yang distinguishes between “*a priori* breath-energy” (*xiantian qi* 先天氣) and “*a posteriori* breath-energy” (*houtian qi* 後天氣). This distinction corresponds to the fundamental importance of “metaphysics” within Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, for which the ultimate result of a non- or post-metaphysical philosophy is some kind of amoral materialism or nihilism that has to be rejected. The difference of Yang’s perspective from “idealist” positions within Contemporary Neo-Confucianism can be traced not only in his insistence on the constitutive meaning of “breath-energy” for subjectivity, but also in his strong emphasis on the notion of “thing” (*wu* 物) and “thingification/reification” (*wuhua* 物化), which Yang has developed into a sophisticated “theory of the thing” (*wu lun* 物論). His understanding of the relation between “thing” and “transformation” clearly

8 *Wesen* in German, meaning “living being” or “entity”, which seems to be a better translation than “essence”.

refrains from a purely materialistic approach by introducing the idea of “things which transform themselves” (*wu zihua* 物自化), or “things which manifest themselves” (*wu zixian* 物自顯). Yang even claims that the “transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化) is Zhuangzi’s version of the idea of the “thing in itself” (物自身), which is also the Chinese translation for Kant’s “*Ding an sich*” (Yang 2016, 200).

Yang emphasizes that, in the *Zhuangzi*, free wandering can never be realized without “things” to which it has to relate. This is how free wandering is connected to “ascetics” (*gongfu lun* 工夫論) in the *Zhuangzi*, to techniques of self-cultivation like “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuo wang* 坐忘) or the “fasting of the heart (consciousness/mind)” (*xin zhai* 心齋). What he calls “heavenly wandering of the heart” (*xin zhi tianyou* 心之天遊) can only be realized through things, in which the “learning of the heart” (*xin xue* 心學) and the “learning of breath-energy” (*qi xue* 氣學) may finally be reconciled.

After a long and sophisticated discussion on the relation between “breath-energy” or “energetic transformation” (*qihua* 氣化) and subjectivity, Yang, in the end, seems to return to the metaphysical language that characterizes Contemporary Neo-Confucian theory as developed by Mou Zongsan. Critical reflections on Yang’s theory of “breath-energy” and the idea of a triadic “material-energetic-spiritual subject” often object to his unwillingness to abandon some of the basic metaphysical assumptions of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism. In reaction to this criticism Yang ironically admits that the intellectual revolution he has undertaken is “not radical enough”, or not ironic enough, we might say, since his interpretation of the relation between Confucianism and Daoism still places them in a rather conventional mutual opposition: Confucianism is non-ironic and normative, while Daoism is ironic and critical, but also fundamentally amoral. This approach seems to neglect the (self-) critical attitude and potential within Confucianism as well as the normative significance of a Daoist paradigm of subjectivity.

## Conclusion

This paper began with very general reflections on “transcultural Taiwan” and ended with a much more specific, technical discussion of Yang Rubin’s conceptual paradigm of a “material-energetic-spiritual subject”. My aim has been to give an overview of the broader cultural and political situation, in which “transcultural *Zhuangzi*-studies” appeared and developed. Moreover, the paradigm of subjectivity that Yang has been developing for decades can be read as “transcultural” because it allows communication between different, often disparate cultural sources, classical and modern, Eastern and Western. This proposal is not only

philosophically but also politically significant. One may ask to what extent Taiwan's complex and twisted process of democratization and the development of this new "paradigm of subjectivity" correspond with one another. Obviously, there may be many scholars and intellectuals in Taiwan who would deny this kind of correspondence, largely perceiving *the* Chinese tradition as overall authoritarian or even despotic, and therefore tending to identify the development of liberal democracy with the Westernization of political discourse. This understanding is also very influential in the PRC, where it often provides justification for the rejection of liberal democracy as a Western model and the favouring instead of a Chinese model of non-liberal, "socialist democracy".

Since the 1940s and 50s, Contemporary Neo-Confucianism has tried to prove that liberal democracy and classical Confucianism are not incompatible. Apart from this "negative" contribution of not directly opposing democratization, however, the positive impact of Neo-Confucianism on Taiwanese democratization in general and on democratic discourse in particular has been very limited. From a philosophical perspective, the attempt to develop a Confucian foundation for democracy in terms of a metaphysics of moral subjectivity seems to be largely outdated, or would have to be fundamentally rethought to remain significant in the future. Recent attempts towards "Civic Confucianism" (*gongmin ruxue* 公民儒學) in Taiwan, for instance, openly resist this line of thought (Teng 2015, 17).

Yang Rubin is deeply convinced that Taiwan's democracy cannot develop and thrive by solely relying on Western sources, and that, therefore, it has to take the necessary step of seriously reconstructing the *normative value* (*guifanxing jiazhi* 規範性價值) of the "Republic of China", before and after 1949. From a broader perspective, the most important normative potential embedded in the "idea of the Republic of China" (*Zhonghua Minguo de linian* 中華民國的理念) is its *transculturality*, the richness of experiences and experiments with "communicating old and new, East and West" (*tong gujin dongxi* 通古今東西). This is, of course, a huge and at times rather depressing topic, since the "Republic of China" faces the very real danger of being wiped out of history and memory, either through a movement for the independence of Taiwan or through forced unification with the Chinese mainland. Confronted with this stark reality, Yang Rubin's historical consciousness has led him to pursue, at the same time, a critical analysis of two historical narratives which he rejects: on the one hand, a narrative of Taiwanese democratization and of "Taiwan subjectivity" (*Taiwan zhuti xing* 台灣主體性), which emphasizes the struggle of liberation against the authoritarian, one-party rule by invaders from the Chinese mainland after 1949, and tends to neglect the crucial importance of the many cultural, political, and economic resources that moved across the Taiwan Strait and came to Taiwan along with the Republican

government; and on the other hand Yang sees the necessity to challenge the official narrative on Chinese modernization put forward and controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

Obviously, this is more than an intellectual struggle against the current, and seems to be an utterly quixotic endeavour. At this point, it becomes understandable why Yang's version of Confucian learning needs the *Zhuangzi*. For Yang, Zhuangzian humour and irony is crucial for resolutely standing up against an allegedly unavoidable course of history, without ending up in dogmatism and pseudo-religious moralism, which has been the fate of other scholars of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism before him. What we may learn from Yang Rubin is the ability to combine a broad and keen consciousness of historical urgency with a thorough and meticulous reading of classical Confucian and Daoist sources. They can both help us live and work *within* the spinning stillness of the present.

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