

The Frontiers of Academic Imperialism

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The “Frontiers of Philosophy in China” – a “distinguished” academic journal with an impressive editorial board composed of many prominent “China experts”- involuntarily supports Western sovereignty over the interpretation of Chinese thought. And it’s not alone.

The Journal’s open propaganda is striking: the word “philosophy” is a Western term and concept that is nowhere to be found in pre-colonial East-Asia. I would guess that 90% of China’s population have never heard of “philosophy”. The Journal’s title deliberately conceals from the public what China has instead. The correct Chinese term for philosophy, zhexue, is a late 19th-century import from Japan, where it is pronounced tetsugaku. It therefore cannot exist in any of the Chinese classics. Have a close look at the Journal’s ‘Aims’:

“Frontiers of Philosophy in China aims to disseminate new scholarly achievements in the field of broadly defined philosophy, and promote philosophical researches of the highest level by publishing peer-reviewed academic articles that facilitate intensive or extensive communication and cooperation between philosophers in China and abroad. It covers nearly all main branches of philosophy, with priorities given to original works on Chinese philosophy or in comparative studies in Chinese philosophy and other kinds of philosophy in the world.”

Apart from the self-praise for being elite and exclusive (it tacitly offers the title “philosopher” to its authors) – and essentially an old-boy network – , the ‘Aims’ propagates the Western term ‘philosophy’ no less than eight times. If this looks like ideological indoctrination, that’s because it is ideological indoctrination.

We can only guess at how this propaganda pamphlet came into being; something along the lines of:

Editor: Hmm, that’s awkward. We’ve put “Philosophy” in our ‘Title’, but we couldn’t find the term “philosophy” nowhere in Chinese tradition. Editor-in-Chief: That’s why we have to repeat it another eight times in our ‘Aims’, Goebbels Law!

The Journal’s mission is self-evident: to hammer home “Philosophy in China” in China and abroad. It is precisely this easy-peasy formula of parading Chinese thought under European prescription that should set serious scholarship on its ears. In its form it resembles fascist and ideological writings intended to forcefully pull a world-view, in this case the (Western) History of philosophy, over China’s own contributions to history like rujiao, daojiao, fojiao and thousands of other xue, jia and jiao.

Many Western Sinologists spent the formative years of their lives learning and mastering

European culture and language, an education that is guided by a colonial and imperial sense of mission. They inevitably continue old habits and cultivate a “China image” that is going to confirm their own world-view and advance the complete Westernization of China. They prefer to do it by translating China’s socio-cultural originality into Western biblical or philosophical taxonomy. If nothing else, it’s grand intellectual property theft.

Western publishers understandably embrace such ideology. How else can we explain – given that no “philosophy” existed in China – thousands of recent titles like *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (2006), *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (2011), *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1997), *Oriental Philosophy* (1979), and so on?

There are exceptions to this propaganda, of course, as seen in neutral titles like *Chinese thought* (1960). Yet, even that author had to work in the word “philosophy” on the book cover for promotional purposes.

One can often guess from the book titles what ideology the publishers (and/or the authors) are trying to instigate. For example, Cambridge University Press – maybe because it served British imperialism for so long – is the usual offender; its title range includes propaganda like *Chinese Philosophy and Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, and so forth. On the other hand, Harvard University Press is explicitly more tactful in its title choices, for example in *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (1985) by Benjamin Schwartz.

Most Western universities and those that harbor Western-educated Chinese require their students to write essays, class assignments, and to attend seminars on “Chinese philosophy” as if it was a fact of life that the Hellenic and the Judeo-Christian tradition also applies to the Chinese one.

Many China historians, such as Ji Xianlin, Tu Weiming, Gu Zhengkun and Roger T Ames, persistently warn against misleading biblical and philosophical Western translations of non-Western concepts, but few people outside the profession have heard about their critique. Meanwhile, Western language imperialists pick “Cultural China” into pieces word by word.

In these days only those students who are receptive to Western indoctrination may reach a doctoral level, post-doctoral level, lectureship and then, finally, a professorship, by which time they will have become so indoctrinated and subservient, and will have “manufactured” so much propaganda material on “Chinese philosophy” that they cannot possibly blame an omnipotent Big West for having deceived them or forced them to do it. Such a confession would jeopardize their academic careers and vindicate their “good reputations” (as “peer-reviewers” and “cross-quotation careerists”).

There are thousands of Chinese scholars who still fight for Chinese terminologies, but who will not be given a voice in Western mainstream media. Such Chinese are virtually unemployable globally, as they do not conform to Western standard.

Often Chinese scholars involuntarily support the Western onslaught on Chinese terminology and, without giving too much thought to it, enabling the Western hold for power over the history of thought. Peking University’s Department of Philosophy, The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, in 2007 published its pamphlet “Chinese Philosophical Studies” entitled “Dialogues of Philosophies, Religions and Civilizations in the Era of Globalization”. All those key words in here: philosophy, religion, civilization, globalization are Western

concepts and inventions. Chinese concepts are left out of world history.

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