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Franz Gmainer-Pranzl und Barbara Schellhammer

Erfahrung des »Fremden«

Mit Beiträgen von Mathias Obert, Yukiko Kuwayama, Barbara Schellhammer,
Yves Vendé, Bernhard Leistle und anderen

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- 3 FRANZ GMAINER-PRANZL/BARBARA SCHELLHAMMER
Die Erfahrung des Fremden in interkulturell-philosophischer Perspektive
Einleitung
- 9 BARBARA SCHELLHAMMER
Sensibilisierung oder Selbstbehauptung? Zur Bedeutung einer responsiven Resilienz
- 21 MATHIAS OBERT
Befremden in der Kultur: Einige Überlegungen dazu, was »chinesische Philosophie« nicht ist
- 35 YVES VENDÉ
Chinese Philosophy and Waldenfels' »Phenomenology of the Alien«
- 47 YUKIKO KUWAYAMA
*Die Gefühlskultur und ihre Transformabilität:
Von Ágnes Hellers Gefühlstheorie zu einer interkulturellen Gefühlsphänomenologie*
- 61 BERNHARD LEISTLE
*Begegnung zweier Fremder
Überlegungen zum Verhältnis zwischen Bernhard Waldenfels' Phänomenologie
und interkultureller Philosophie*
- 73 BARBARA NIEDER
Von der Brüchigkeit des Begegnens
- 79 MARTIN MÜHLICH
*Spannungsfeld Atmung.
Überlegungen zu einem alltäglichen, leibkörperlichen Phänomen*
- 85 CORNELIA BRANDSTÖTTER-GUGG
Erziehung als Aneignung, Enteignung oder als Response
- 95 LUCA MARIA SCARANTINO
Ansprache zum 25. Weltkongress für Philosophie am 1. August 2024 in Rom

π' τοπ



- 95 POLYTOP – STIMMEN, BLICKE, NETZWERKE
- 102 BERICHTE, BÜCHER & MEDIEN
- 116 IMPRESSUM
- 117 BESTELLEN

YVES VENDÉ

Chinese Philosophy and Waldenfels' »Phenomenology of the Alien«

ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of phenomenology and Chinese philosophy through the lens of intercultural dialogue and considers the inherent risks of violence in cross-cultural encounters. It first presents Bernhard Waldenfels' phenomenological analysis of how encounters with the Other can lead to violence when boundaries are violated and otherness is pigeonholed into familiar categories. The second part traces historical examples of Chinese-Western philosophical exchange, from 17th-century Jesuit translations of Confucian classics to late 19th-century translations of Western works by Chinese scholars. These cases illustrate both the creative potential and violent risks of intercultural translation and interpretation. The final section shows how *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi* address violence differently: the former invites practising empathy and setting proper boundaries to prevent harm, while the latter criticises the violence inherent in categorisation and advocates preserving individual uniqueness. The article concludes by examining Iso Kern's phenomenological approach to Chinese philosophy, which offers a methodological alternative to static comparative philosophy.

KEYWORDS

violence;
Phenomenology of the Other;
Chinese philosophy

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Erfahrung des »Fremden«

Seite 35–46

Since the 1990s, several intellectual studies have led the paths of sinology and phenomenology to intersect. For example, in a French-speaking context, François Jullien and Jean-François Billeter occasionally read Chinese classics in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty to develop their thinking.¹ Jullien's project to revisit the three folds of the Western tradition (*logos, eidos, theos*) through a *detour* in China and Jean-François Billeter's research on the importance of the body and gesture throughout his investigations on calligraphy both illustrate the creativity triggered by considering juxtaposed texts belonging to different traditions. The cross-comparative reading of texts creates a new context in which one can present and critically question one's own position. This phenomenon can be described thanks to the metaphor of resonance — quasi-universals (Ma Lin and Van Brakel), similar semantic contexts (Ames), or comparable practices (Jullien).² These expressions all refer to the open space between different traditions that also implies a return to a wild region of existence described by Merleau-Ponty as *non-philosophy*.³ For Merleau-Ponty, unveiling this existential, a non-rational common ground, was also part of the intention to challenge and deconstruct a Cartesian vision of the subject, something common among French-speaking heirs of Husserl in the 1950s.

On the German-speaking side, among comparable attempts, two intellectual adventures into crafting a dialogue between Chinese tradition and phenomenology are exemplified by Iso Kern and Bernhard Waldenfels. Iso Kern engaged directly with Chinese philosophy, especially neo-Confucianism, and while

Merleau-Ponty may not have been Kern's main interlocutor, he was certainly among the sources drawn on by Waldenfels, who himself was also keen to experience Chinese culture first-hand; in 2004 he travelled to China at the invitation of the Chinese University of Hong Kong to deliver the Tang Jun-yi lectures, and the book that followed, *The Question of the Other*, shows engagement with Chinese characters.

Interestingly enough, in these lectures, Waldenfels quotes Merleau-Ponty's paper *From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss* to signal how meeting with the Other is always an *atopia*, a term also used by Jullien to refer to the puzzle that the search for a real, rational encounter with the Other may produce. Waldenfels also comments that engagement with the Other never leads to a flat consensus.⁴ There are at least two reasons for this: different people who engage with a foreign tradition do not necessarily share the same assumptions (even Billeter and Jullien, though sharing a language, do not read Chinese texts with the same intentions and methods) and do not choose the same interlocutors. This is also a reminder that when we enter into dialogue, it is never with a tradition in its entirety but rather with one representation of it.⁵

The analyses found in *The Question of the Other* and Waldenfels' approach to transcultural philosophy both highlight the role of violence in intercultural exchanges and how this is a conscious choice that goes beyond the mere absence of consensus. Indeed, depending on the context and the interlocutors, the risk of violence is always present whenever the self is confronted with the Other, unless a conscious decision and the dispositions of the participants lead to its being treated as an (em)pathic experience.⁶ This risk is inherent in the

1 See Jullien: *Un Sage est sans idée ou l'autre de la philosophie* & Billeter: *Essai sur l'art chinois de l'écriture*.

2 For methodological remarks on resonance, not used here in the terms of Hartmut Rosa, see Lin & Van Brakel: *Beyond the troubled water of Shifei From disputation to walking two-roads in the Zhuangzi*; Ames & Hall: *Anticipating China, thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*.

3 Merleau-Ponty: *Signes*, 157–158. Mason: *Philosophical hermeneutics and Chinese metaphors*.

4 Waldenfels: *The Question of the Other*, 21: »How is it possible to understand the other »without sacrificing him to our own logic or our own logic to him?«

5 Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 79: »Cultures meet each other either through outstanding or average representatives of their respective cultures.«

6 Waldenfels, *Ibid.*, 34: »The debate about the alien will have a chance to liberate itself from the back-and-forth of appropriation and disappropriation, [...], only if the alien

very possibility of encountering the Other, as the act of engaging necessarily entails translating the Other's discourse into one's own categories—an unavoidable process when seeking a common language, unless one turns back to the body only and to the wild region of existence described by Merleau-Ponty.

How, then, can we perceive and find a way to live with this risk of violence in the intercultural encounter of philosophies in a reasonable manner? This article tries to address this issue by fostering a dialogue between texts from the Chinese tradition and the writings of Waldenfels that elaborate on this dimension. To this end, I will first examine Waldenfels account of the risks of violence in intercultural processes, drawing on *The Question of the Other* and *Phenomenology of the Alien*, alongside a Chinese perspective on such encounters. This will lead me to analyse how specific excerpts from Classics that have shaped the Chinese tradition, specifically the *Zhuangzi* and the *Mencius*, engage with the phenomenon of violence, before returning to the interesting angle that a phenomenological approach brings to this situation.

1. TAKING VIOLENCE INTO ACCOUNT IN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

1.1 BACK TO MERLEAU-PONTY

In the 1990s, Waldenfels analysed how, for Merleau-Ponty, philosophical questioning consists of turning our gaze back to what we have lived – whether in everyday life, scholarly research, or institutional matters. Citing Merleau-Ponty's idea, Waldenfels writes that »on the one hand we are confronted with a sort of questioning which is rooted in a pre-existing ground of questioning, integrated in a certain order of questioning and sustained by a register of questioning, and on the other hand, with a sort of questioning which not only puts something in question, but rather puts itself in question, including its own order«⁷. This perspective highlights how the positivity of being

is seen from the perspective of pathos as a disruption or disturbance, as in being affected by something which can never be attached to one specific object or meaning.«

7 Waldenfels: *Interrogative Thinking*, 4.

responds to the negativity of questioning, and philosophy consists of going back and forth between facts and essences. According to this view, any question arises from a void experienced by a concrete subject, one rooted in fundamental beliefs, while responding involves a kind of fulfilment or appropriation. This process is a regulative circle: no answer lies in the wild being (the domain of encounter with the East), beneath essences, or above facts.⁸ In this space, the portals of cultural orders remain open; the continuity of the world is present in an interrogative mode. Consequently, philosophical questioning arises as a second order of questioning, that is, a self-questioning.⁹ Reading the *Visible and Invisible*, Waldenfels explains that this self-questioning reveals a structure that defines the self. It surpasses dichotomies between soul and body; it is a question that implies a state of knowledge itself, and it cannot be closed by an answer. This form of questioning displays an intention — *I want to know something* — and unveils a discrepancy between languages and the wild being, which has already started the moment we experience something strange. As Waldenfels puts it, »we are called in question by what we experience. Questioning has already begun by the time we pose questions.«¹⁰

Consequently, the stranger's presence will unsettle the self in two domains: language and the body. Both places form a continuity inhabited by the notion of chiasmus in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and Waldenfels' research on violence illuminates precisely these two dimensions.

In the fifth lecture recorded in *The Question of the Other*, Waldenfels builds on his reading of Merleau-Ponty. The body is a central object of study across various disciplines and the locus of the self. It is inhabited thanks to the symbols of cultures (myths,

8 Cf. *ibid.*, 5: »The region of ›wild Being‹ presents itself as a region where it is not yet settled once and for all if something is the case, what something is and what it is good for.«

9 Walter Schweidler has similar remarks, cf. Schweidler: *Overcoming Metaphysics*.

10 Waldenfels: *Interrogative Thinking*, 11.

rituals, texts), which leads to different formulations: *corps vivant*, *corps propre* (an expression widely used by Billeter), *corps sujet*, *chair*. Yet, there is always an element that defies definition. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, *chair* designates both one's own body and the body of the Other. In this lecture, tackling the issues of intentionality (and its relation to affection), self-awareness (the split self), and intersubjectivity (the Other as My Double), Waldenfels shows that the space between oneself and others is always dealt with thanks to these intersections.¹¹ In reality, our body is a space where our corporeal experiences blend self and Other, challenging clear boundaries of identity. The body, Waldenfels argues, is both *my own* and yet carries elements that are beyond my control, such as involuntary reactions or physiological processes, thereby embodying a form of alienness within ourselves. In other words, alienness is not merely external but is also internally constituted. This insight into corporeality underscores the concept of *half-alien*, where our bodies remind us of our interconnectedness with others. Therefore, receiving our bodies is a pathic experience that also leads to opening ourselves to others: »Birth out of pathos, concerning sense and myself, leads back to a sort of allopathos, concerning others. After all, our bodily experience is not comfortable. We will never completely be settled in our own body as if we were the owner of ourselves. But it may be that it is just this disquiet which keeps us alive.«¹²

These considerations on the body naturally lead to the sixth lecture of *The Question of the Other*, in which Waldenfels examines violence as an extreme yet significant form of response to the Other.

1.2 THE AMBIGUITY OF ENCOUNTER

Following on from the previous analysis, Waldenfels suggests that violence occurs not only as a clash between entities but also as a breakdown of the relational boundaries between self and Other. In that sense,

violence is always related to a form of violation.¹³ In any form of verbal or physical violence – individual, collective, or anonymous – a relationship is disrupted by reducing the Other to an object and forgetting a common belonging to the same material or space.

This theme of violation is particularly relevant in contexts where alienness becomes threatening or unsettling, which is another way of saying that violence is often related to the feeling of strangeness and the fear that this feeling can trigger. Rather than treating violence as an aberration, or merely an opposition to civilisation, Waldenfels frames it as a relational dynamic, where alienness is met with attempts by individuals and cultures to domesticate it. Violence signals the fundamental unease alienness can provoke, especially when it challenges established norms and identities. In that sense, there is always a tension between violence as a disruption of norms (violence against order) and attempts to normalise violence (violence in the service of order). Here, Waldenfels notes the ambivalence of rationality: »The over-rationalisation of violence, which tries to justify or legitimate what is unjustifiable, will never cease to provoke reprisals in terms of violence in revolt against every order.«¹⁴ These reflections on violence enrich the way we experience the Other, as they suggest that violence is not simply an ethical or political failure but a critical point at which the tension between self and Other becomes explicit. The alien is always going to disrupt how »I« and »we« organise our experiences: »There will always remain something which is alien (fremd), extra-ordinary because it does not find its place within the given order.«¹⁵ This is true at a linguistic and physical level.

In his *Phenomenology of the Alien*, Waldenfels does not dedicate a chapter to violence. However, he consistently extends his previous analysis: »Yet violence comes to light more prominently when it is from the

11 Cf. Waldenfels: *The Question of the Other*, 97: »What we feel, perceive, do or say is interwoven with what others feel, perceive, do or say.«

12 Ibid., 98.

13 Waldenfels: *Violence as Violation*, 79: »Who or what can be violated? There are three possibilities: something, somebody or a general rule.«

14 Waldenfels: *The Question of the Other*, 118.

15 Ibid., 119.

beginning conceived as pathos, injury which happens and is done to somebody. Violence then appears as an alien matter which tears apart the existent structures of meaning.¹⁶ If violence can never be entirely rationalised or moralised, then how do we face it? Like Paul Ricoeur in *La Symbolique du Mal*, at this stage of the conversation, Waldenfels explains that symbolic expressions (myths and rituals) help deal with violence, which remains inexplicable.¹⁷ Violence always eludes systematic and rational discourse. However, historical examples demonstrate its impact on intercultural communication and how it is possible to overcome it in practice.

1.3 HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

Alongside the two constructive ways to engage the alien, through corporeity and language (which implies translation), violence always remains a possible outcome of the encounter, and one that risks affecting the process itself. From this perspective, the context of encounters between Chinese and Western cultures – relatively peaceful in the case of Mateo Ricci and the Jesuits in the 17th century, and violent in the case of the opium wars and conflicts at the end of the 19th century – is not neutral.

When Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) set foot in China in 1582, they encountered a highly structured tradition. After experiencing life as a Buddhist monk, Ricci recognised the significance of Confucian classics. Consequently, he and his successors dedicated themselves to learning the language and customs and understanding key texts, particularly the *Four Books* compiled by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200). In a hugely progressive move, the Jesuits, in collaboration with Chinese literati, produced translations of these Classics, such as the *Sapientia Sinica* (1662) and the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687). Little by little, the Jesuits relied increasingly on several commentaries to understand

the works they were translating, especially those of Zhang Juzheng (张居正, 1525–1582). As the Jesuits were not able to take into consideration all the different schools of interpretation of the Classics, they had to choose interlocutors, which they did by picking up early Confucianism; this they viewed as less influenced by Buddhism and Daoism (with the exception of the Figurists). The Jesuits integrated traditional Chinese hermeneutic methods into their publications of translations, maintaining the format of original texts alongside commentaries. However, Jesuits also made interpretative choices aligning Confucianism with Christian values, as seen in their translation of *ren* (仁) as »universal love«, a debatable equivalence.¹⁸ By introducing Confucius as a philosopher rather than a sage in the Chinese sense, Jesuit writings shaped European perceptions of Confucianism. Like any other agent mediating between traditions, the Jesuits had an ulterior motive, which was a missionary project reflecting their theological concerns. Their works, published in Latin, aimed to present Confucian thought to a European audience as compatible with Christianity, in a context of controversy about Confucian rituals. The contexts of translation (in China), transmission (between China and Europe), and the reading of Chinese Classics in Europe by the Enlightenment philosophers carried the risk of progressive violence, i. e., integration of the Other in one's own categories. By disconnecting these Classics from their contexts of production and their traditional community of interpretation, Enlightenment philosophers, with the exception of Leibniz, had more limited hermeneutic awareness than their Romantic successors.

Chinese intellectuals would partly translate these same Enlightenment authors a century and a half later. Consequently, a parallel movement occurred in China at the end of the 19th century when figures like Yan Fu (嚴復, 1854–1921) and Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929) translated Western philosophical works to address what they perceived as deficiencies in Chinese traditional scholarship, especially regarding method-

¹⁶ Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 33.

¹⁷ Cf. Waldenfels: *The Question of the Other*, 120; see also Waldenfels: *Metamorphoses of Violence*.

¹⁸ Cf. Meynard: *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius*, 50.

ology.¹⁹ Their comparisons between Chinese and Western thinkers, such as Zhu Xi with Aquinas, and Descartes with Wang Yangming, helped transform scholarship on Chinese Classics into Chinese Philosophy as an academic discipline. Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877–1927), another key figure, advanced this *comparative philosophy* by directly engaging with Western philosophical problems. He argued that debates on human nature in Chinese philosophy paralleled Kantian antinomies. Others, like Liang Shuming (梁漱溟, 1893–1988), warned against losing Chinese cultural identity through uncritical Westernisation. He rejected exerting violence on Chinese tradition by imposing Western categories on it. The same worry is still present today.²⁰ However, as Chen Shaoming argues, Chinese tradition is used to absorb foreign material, as it did, for example, with Buddhism and the Jesuits' introduction of Aristotle in China. Through the process of *constructing equivalent meanings* (*geyi* 格义), Buddhist sutras have been translated from Sanskrit into Chinese.²¹ Of course, the non-correspondence of languages made the passage from one language to the other the object of choice. A common example of this difficulty is the rendering of abstract concepts like Dao (道), which encompasses meanings ranging from *way* and *logic* to *truth* and *natural law*.

These two historical examples highlight the challenges posed by translations as a means of communication, but also their potential, revealing how traditions are reshaped through dialogue. In these processes, the risk of violence always exists: »The objective of comparative philosophy is communication between cultures, but communication can occur in different contexts: exchange or confrontation. The spread of Indian Buddhism in China belongs to peaceful cultural exchange. However, there were conflicts between ideologies in the process (under the Song

and the Ming, the Neo-Confucians would hunt down heresies and defend the orthodox Neo-Confucian tradition). Conversely, the entry of modern Western culture into China was marked by conflict, even though there was ultimately a cultural exchange.«²²

Comparative, intercultural, and transcultural philosophies are indispensable for understanding other traditions. However, essentialist comparisons that impose rigid interpretative frameworks on different cultures risk reinforcing stereotypes rather than fostering genuine communication. In this sense, Waldenfels' reflections on the complexity of encountering the Other contribute to developing an intercultural philosophy that is aware of the risk and integrates it into the process. This approach ensures that a philosophy that aims to facilitate communication – in search of a further universal – remains a dynamic process. Waldenfels' perspective here resonates with excerpts from Chinese classics and how they deal with violence.

2. GOING BACK TO CHINESE CLASSICS

If we engage with another tradition only through conceptual reflection, without returning to the concrete Classics matrix that gave it a *fold*, we must accept that our conclusions are likely to be rather superficial. Jesuit works and Chen Shaoming's research are primarily based on reading Chinese Classics. In the latter's case, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Mencius* constitute the roots of his thinking. These two Classics provide insights into different possible ways of responding to violence.

2.1 ENFORCING BOUNDARIES AND (EM)PATHY TO CONTAIN VIOLENCE²³

According to Waldenfels, disrespect for boundaries is the first sign of violence (see 1.1 and 1.2). A similar observation is made in the *Mencius*. At the beginning of the *Mencius*, several rulers come to Mencius and ask how to govern their countries well (*Mencius* 1A1 and 1A5), to make them flourish and become strong-

19 This paragraph relies heavily on Chen: *Comparative Philosophy from the Perspective of Chinese*, 23–36.

20 Cf. Wang: *The liberation of the Object*, 117–118.

21 Cf. Chen: *Analogical Interpretation and Beyond*, 101–110.

22 Chen: *Comparative Philosophy from the Perspective of Chinese*, 29.

23 This paragraph relies on Chen Shaoming's article, »Between Benevolence and justice«, 32–40.

er, conquer their neighbours and unify China. Mencius' answer is that they should develop a benevolent government (*renzheng* 仁政). When asked about the structures and the institutions one should promote to implement such a government, Mencius highlights the importance of boundaries: »Your prince is about to practice a benevolent government (仁政), he chose you and put you in charge of the office, (you/he) must put forth great effort. That benevolent government must start with the setting of boundaries to fields (自经界始). If the boundaries are not defined correctly, the Jingdi system will not be equal, and the salary will not be equal.«²⁴ In this section, the dialogue is concerned with how to allocate resources in a just and benevolent way.²⁵ Mencius invites sovereigns to curb their desires (*Mencius* 1A7 and 1B5). The first step in respecting justice and promoting benevolence lies in the question of boundaries: »That is why despots and corrupt officials tend to neglect setting boundaries [...] Although the land of Teng is narrow and small, it has enough to support nobles (gentlemen) and enough to support country people. If there are no nobles, no one (can) rule over the country people, and if there are no country people, no one can feed the nobles.«²⁶

In adopting a just tax system, which is a question of allocating resources and establishing a proper system of boundaries, the rulers will create trust and conditions in which the people can prosper (*Mencius* 1A3). There is something similar in intercultural encounters. The problem with rulers is that most of the time they disconnect their actions from their consequences. They lack the ability to empathise with the sufferings of their people. According to Mencius, the seed of empathy lies latent within every individual (*Mencius*

2A6), but it has to be triggered. This is what Mencius is trying to do by inviting the Xuan of Qi to reflect on his behaviour:

The king said, »What must one's Virtue be like in order to become a true king?« Mencius said, »One who protects the people becomes a true king, and no one is able to stop him.« »Could someone like me protect the people?« »He could.« »How do you know that I could?« »I have heard Hu He say that while the king was seated in the upper part of the hall someone led an ox past the hall below [in the courtyard]. On seeing this, the king asked where the ox was going and was told that it was being taken to serve as a blood sacrifice in the consecration of a bell. The king said: »Spare it. I cannot bear its trembling, like one who, though blameless, is being led to the execution ground«. Asked whether in that case the consecration of the bell should be dispensed with, the king said: »How can it be dispensed with? Substitute a sheep instead.« Did this actually happen?« »It did.« Mencius said, »With such a heart-mind one has what it takes to become a true king.«²⁷

In this passage, the king demonstrates compassion (*Ceyinzhixin* 惻隱之心), even though his decision was morally imperfect. Mencius interpreted this as proof of the king's latent benevolence, which, if properly cultivated, could be extended to just governance.²⁸ The text continues with Mencius seeking to awaken rulers' moral awareness by exposing their indirect complicity in social injustice. Through a dialogue, Mencius reframes rulers' decisions in ways that highlight their ethical consequences. For example, Mencius equates bad governance with killing people (*Mencius* 1A3, 1A4). In his opinion, political leaders bear indirect moral responsibility for systemic injustices; by making rulers see the suffering they cause, Mencius encourages them to act justly. It is his belief that those who engage in wrongdoing retain some moral awareness, even if it is buried beneath self-interest (*Mencius*

²⁴ *Mencius* 3A3. For the quotations of Chinese texts, in this article, I rely on the versions presented by David Sturgeon (Ed.), 2011, *Chinese Text Project*, <https://ctext.org>. For the *Mencius*, I complete and correct thanks to Irène Bloom's translation. For the *Zhuangzi*, thanks to Brook Ziporin's translation.

²⁵ Cf. Vendé: *Mencius and Plato About Land Repartition*, 203–225.

²⁶ *Mencius* 3A3.

²⁷ *Mencius* 1A7.

²⁸ Cf. also Wong: *Growing Virtue*, 23–57.

1B5). The challenge is to retrieve the desire to act benevolently like a true king towards his people.

In that sense, for Mencius, shame (*xiuchizhixin* 羞耻之心) is the first weapon in combatting the moral corruption that stifles the intrinsic desire to be a true king. Individuals and rulers can restrain harmful actions and promote ethical governance by cultivating their sense of shame. When people recognise their moral failings, they regulate their actions. However, if shame fails, society must enforce justice through legislation and sanctions.

The ideas explored above echo Waldenfels' comments on the pathic dimension of the experience of the Alien.²⁹ A passive reconnecting with the common ground of existence is a condition of any logos, i.e., a discourse with a pretension to be universal. In that sense, avoiding violence in intercultural exchanges presupposes a capacity to limit oneself and let oneself be passively affected by the presence of the other: it calls for a state of free-floating.³⁰ When he analyses the *Zhuangzi*, Billeter reflects on this form of mental self-mastery, which helps him describe the experience of mastery of practices like calligraphy.

2.2 PRESERVING UNIQUENESS AGAINST CULTURAL VIOLENCE

For Billeter, human beings can have several regimes of activities. Routine activities often cover the consciousness of our relationship with ourselves and others in daily life. But in reality, our intentionality is not always *full* and relies on a form of emptiness (this echoes what Waldenfels analyses in Merleau-Ponty's description of the void, see 1.1). The notion of *activité propre* helps to describe how we relate to ourselves in these different regimes of activities.³¹ In the *Zhuangzi*,

the story of the Butcher Ding, which represents the process of learning to butcher an ox, illustrates these different regimes:

The cook was carving up an ox for King Hui of Liang. Wherever his hand smacked it, wherever his shoulder leaned into it, wherever his foot braced it, wherever his knee pressed it, the thwacking tones of flesh falling from bone would echo, the knife would whizz through with its resonant thwing, each stroke ringing out the perfect note, [...]. The king said, »Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!« The cook put down his knife and said, »What I love is the *Course*, something that advances beyond mere skill. When I first started cutting up oxen, all I looked at for three years was oxen, and yet still I was unable to see all there was to see in an ox. But now I encounter it with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus, the promptings of the spirit begin to flow. I depend on Heaven's unwrought perforations and strike the larger gaps, following along with the broader hollows. I go by.[...].«³²

This story can be understood as an implicit criticism of Mencius. Indeed, for the butcher, it is not about developing empathy with the Other, nor about naming and channelling emotions, but about integrating one's human activity in the least energy-intensive way possible, which is another manner of nourishing life: this a pathic presence to life. It involves learning the ideal of non-action (*wuwei* 無為), which emphasises performing actions that yield naturally without force. According to Moeller, this story illustrates the inherent violence in civilisation-building, a process that Confucianism justifies by emphasising self-cultivation, enforcing ritual (*li* 禮), and promoting hierarchical social roles.³³ By imposing a moralisation of emotions through learning, Confucianism violently enforces its

29 Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 32: »The pathos, [...] confronts us with a surplus which can never be entirely consumed. It is something which must be designated as sense and goalless because it tears open the nets of sense, interrupts the system of rules, and thus decontextualizes the event.«

30 Cf. Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 68.

31 Cf. Billeter: *Études sur Tchouang-tse*, 202f.

32 *Zhuangzi* ch. 3.

33 Cf. Moeller: *Kill stories*.

views on a reality that always transcends the forms that culture seems to impose upon it.

As Jana Rošker explains, Classical texts like the *Zhuangzi* strongly affirm the uniqueness of each living being. If we seek to engage with others peacefully, recognising that we are all unique and inhabit different worlds becomes necessary for establishing meaningful contacts.³⁴ In this sense, the opening of the *Zhuangzi* with Kun-Peng serves as a plea for accepting the limits of discourses of knowledge on the Other and for recognising the singularity of each living being.

The *Zhuangzi* as a text emphasises how humans relate to »things«, including others. In that sense, the *Zhuangzi* sharply critiques discourses that seek only to prove their point rather than embracing the dynamic reality that life has to offer if we can look beyond categorising the Other.³⁵ According to Moeller, there is even a narrative genre within the *Zhuangzi* that he refers to as »kill stories«, which aim to criticise the tendency to categorise. These stories portray the deaths of untamed beings in the march towards civilisation, often symbolising a critique of the violence that Confucianism inflicts when attempting to domesticate living beings and impose the order of a civilised society. These stories follow a typical plot: a being that exists freely and harmoniously in nature is subjected to the control of social structures, leading to its destruction. Moeller compares Zhuangzi's critique to Nietzsche's and Freud's genealogies of morality and civilisation. Just as Nietzsche unmasked Christian morality as a tool for domination and Freud analysed the unease created by cultural repression, Zhuangzi's kill stories illustrate the coercive and destructive nature of the Confucian order. This critique echoes Waldenfels' observations on forgetting, upon meeting the Other, the common material we are all made of, and instead forcing it into categories (see above 1.2).

According to Moeller, while kill stories diagnose the pathologies of civilisation, survival stories in the

Zhuangzi present strategies for navigating and resisting oppressive social structures. Another famous story involving an Ox can be seen as a direct critical commentary of the *Mencius* text discussed in 2.1: »The king [of Chu] wanted to have Zhuangzi [as his minister] and sent him a message of invitation. Zhuangzi replied to the messenger, ›Have you seen, Sir, a sacrificial ox? It is robed with ornamental embroidery and fed on fresh grass and beans. But when it is led into the grand ancestral temple [to be slaughtered], though it wished to be (again) a solitary calf, would that be possible for it?‹.«³⁶

By drawing on the narrative motif developed by the *Mencius*, the *Zhuangzi* encourages a different relationship with social responsibility and one's self. Preserving one's self (one's uniqueness) is more important than maintaining social harmony by conforming to social roles or rituals. For Taoists, instead of imposing roles on others – which occurs in intercultural exchanges, even though rituals or etiquette are a tool to prevent violence from a Confucian perspective – there is a passive embrace of Otherness that better suits the situation. However, adopting this position carries a risk: the danger of restricting oneself from action when an injustice is present and blindly trusting in spontaneous regulatory mechanisms, which may be no less violent than social regulations.

2.3 PHENOMENOLOGY AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

In the two previous paragraphs, I have explored texts from the Chinese Classics, using Waldenfels' *Phenomenology of the Alien* as a starting point. However, both the Confucian approach (managing violence through empathy and etiquette) and the Taoist approach (managing violence by honouring the uniqueness of each element without forcing them to enter into a system) can be reread in the light of the results that the encounter between two philosophical traditions has already produced. I mentioned above the creativity of Jesuit translations in the 17th century and the effort of scholars at the end of the 19th century, both of which

34 Cf. Rošker: *Literatur und Philosophie im Zhuangzi*.

35 Cf. Chen: *Men, Events and Things in the Classical, World*, 69f.

36 *Zhuangzi* ch. 32.

predate the emergence of phenomenology. Beyond the polemics, of which I am naturally aware, Iso Kern's thought offers another possible reading of Chinese philosophy, which itself is read and considered by Chinese philosophers.

In his review of Iso Kern's *Phenomenology of Mind-Heart*, Chen Shaoming highlights how Kern bridges the gap between Western phenomenology and the Confucian and Buddhist traditions. He insists on the significance of Kern's phenomenological approach in revitalising Chinese philosophy and its potential dialogue with Western traditions – as for Chen Shaoming, his first aim is to create dynamic communication.³⁷ Kern's methodology certainly diverges from the usual comparative philosophy. Instead of merely identifying similarities between Western and Chinese thought, in the manner of Billeter, Kern employs phenomenology as an analytical tool to uncover deeper structures within Chinese texts. As Chen notes, Kern's »choice to focus on the method rather than the points of view indicates [his] understanding of philosophy. The value of a philosophy does not necessarily lie in the rightness and wrongness in the general cognitive sense, but in the depth and shallowness in revealing the significance of the relevant topic«³⁸. This assertion underscores Kern's commitment to methodological analysis rather than a synthesis imposed on texts.

Kern's understanding of intellectual history is exemplified in his study of Matteo Ricci's encounter with Buddhism in his paper *On the Relationship Between Matteo Ricci and Buddhism*. According to Kern, Ricci's rejection of Buddhism was not only a tactical manoeuvre. Instead, he attributes Ricci's stance to his theological convictions. For Kern, Ricci represents a European tradition that understands the relationship between things and their causes in the theoretical field in continuity with practical concerns. This insight demonstrates Kern's ability to reconstruct historical

debates within their contexts rather than imposing anachronistic interpretations.

Another aspect of Kern's work, academic history, involves tracing the evolution of key concepts in Chinese philosophy through the application of Mencius' hermeneutical rules. For example, in his study on Wang Yangming, Kern analyses the transformation of the concept of *good knowledge* (*liangzhi* 良知). Through meticulous reading, Kern uncovers the dual meaning of the notion, revealing its moral and epistemological dimensions.³⁹ He then defines self-knowledge as consciousness involved in every activity: mental and locomotive. By doing so, he creates a bridge between Wang Yangming's Philosophy with Phenomenology's reflections on the voluntary and involuntary.

Unlike the many comparative studies that reduce Chinese thought to Western frameworks, Kern's approach is bidirectional. This perspective critiques the tendency to statically equate Chinese concepts with their Western counterparts. His »comparison is not a one-way explanation, that is, it is not the thinking pattern that places the object on one side and the method on the other, but the mutual elucidation between China and the West«⁴⁰. According to Chen Shaoming, this perspective aligns with Feng Youlan's vision of philosophical dialogue as a process of mutual illumination or, to use Waldenfels' terms, mutual estrangement.⁴¹ Another example of Kern's method can be found in his paper *Mencius, Adam Smith and Husserl on Sympathy and Truly Good Knowledge*. He then scrutinises Mencius' notion of empathy, particularly the famous example of »seeing a child about to fall into a well« (Mencius 2A6), marvelling at how it resonates through time and cultures. According to Kern, this quasi-universal phenomenon requires a phenomenological inquiry into the nature of moral emotions (which echoes Waldenfels' thoughts, see 1.1 and 1.2).

Chen concludes his review by observing that we start either from China or from the West, and our aim

37 Cf. Chen: *Comparative Philosophy from the Perspective of Chinese*.

38 Chen: *Chinese Philosophy from Abroad*, 181.

39 Cf. Kern: *Das Wichtigste im Leben*.

40 Chen: *Chinese Philosophy from Abroad*, 185.

41 Cf. Waldenfels: *Phenomenology of the Alien*, 84.

should be not to compare both traditions statically, but to correctly use the resources offered by each one to answer contemporary issues: »the ultimate goal is not to transform the learning of the [genuine] mind-heart in China into a phenomenological theory, but to make the phenomenological insight serve the learning of the [genuine] mind-heart.«⁴² This assertion highlights that neither phenomenology nor Chinese philosophy is to be defended as an orthodoxy, but rather, each must be appreciated for the methods and angles it offers which help us to understand contemporary situations that are in-between traditions. In that sense, Kern's methodology and Waldenfels' rigorous developments counter two prevailing tendencies in Chinese philosophy: historical reconstruction and analogical interpretation. While historical studies preserve the textual tradition, they risk isolating classical thought

from contemporary philosophical discourse. Analogical interpretation, however, often reduces Chinese philosophy to a mere counterpart of Western concepts. By contrast, Waldenfels' and Kern's phenomenological approach invites us to engage with Chinese thought on its own terms while situating it within a global philosophical dialogue. Ultimately, these phenomenological works exemplify how philosophical analysis can revitalise classical traditions. By grounding inquiries in lived experience, they ensure that traditional resources remain relevant to contemporary concerns. This demonstrates that »understanding life and the world through the reflection of conscious experience is an important way worth learning«⁴³. This methodological synthesis, rooted in Chinese and Western traditions, offers a model for future philosophical inquiry.

42 Chen: *Chinese Philosophy from Abroad*, 191.

43 Ibid., 192.

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