

One World or Many Worlds?

On Intercultural Understanding

I

Let me begin this chapter by citing two stories, one from *Zhuangzi* and the other from my own experience:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were taking a leisurely walk along the dam of the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, "The white fish are swimming at ease. This is the happiness of the fish."

"You are not fish," said Huizi. "How do you know its happiness?"

"You are not I," said Zhuangzi. "How do you know that I do not know the happiness of the fish?"

Huizi said, "Of course I do not know, since I am not you. But you are not the fish, and it is perfectly clear that you do not know the happiness of the fish."

"Let us get at the bottom of the matter," said Zhuangzi.

"When you asked how I knew the happiness of the fish, you already knew that I knew the happiness of the fish but asked how. I knew it along the river."¹

Many years ago I came to Freiburg for my doctoral study. I attended a Heidegger seminar offered by the late Professor Werner Marx. He was talking about the problem of understanding in paragraph 32 of *Sein und Zeit*. At one point, he turned to me and suddenly asked, in German, "How can we understand each other?" I hesitated for a moment and answered in my newly acquired and still inadequate third language: "Because we are in the same world." Upon hearing my response, Prof. Marx said: "But this is not a very good answer." He then turned away and continued his discussion on Heidegger's thought.

My answer was definitely naive and not philosophical enough. However, is it true that the only universal ground for any intercultural understanding begins with this simple fact: we are in the "same world."

¹ *Chuang Tzu*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan, in: *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 209-210.

Indeed, Werner Marx and I were two very different persons, he was an elderly German Jew and I was a young Hong Kong Chinese. He was a famous professor of philosophy whereas I was only a beginner. We were living in completely different worlds. The only thing that made me come to Freiburg from thousands of miles away was the subject matter of his seminar: Heidegger's philosophy. If my answer was not good enough, it was not because my answer was wrong but it was too simple. The complicated problem of the condition of the possibility for intercultural understanding was beyond my comprehension. There is only one world but we live in different worlds. Zhuangzi did not really answer the challenge of Huizi, who demanded an epistemological account of the claim that he knew the happiness of the fish. There can never be a conclusive logical proof for the understanding of another person's feeling, let alone of the white fish. Zhuangzi "knew" because he felt the "happiness" of the white fish together with his own happiness as well as Huizi's while they were walking leisurely along the same river. Zhuangzi, Huizi and the white fish are in the same world. Therefore in a certain sense they are the same. This is why Zhuangzi "knew" the happiness of the white fish and at the same time "knew" that Huizi "knew" that he knew the happiness of the fish. On the other hand, they were living in completely different worlds. Zhuangzi was not Huizi and certainly not the fish. They could not understand each other in an absolute sense.² The question here is not about logical argumentation but the intuitive sharing of feelings.

I think the problem of interculturality is exactly the problem of this paradox: are we in one and the same world or are we, in the final analysis, in different worlds? If the latter is true, then intercultural understanding and communication is at best only wishful thinking of a benevolent nature, a hope that there is a genuine mutual and equal understanding between cultures, or at worst, a disguised cultural hegemony of one culture over another. I am of the opinion that, although our contemporary world is globalized through economics, politics and technology, we are far from living in the same world. Of course we have categorically renounced cultural imperialism. We recognize the urgency for a genuine intercultural understanding and have indeed tried in many ways to overcome the difficulties. Yet I see

² The theme of the second chapter of *Chuang Tzu*, "Chi-Wu Lun," is devoted to the relativization of all things and all arguments. From the standpoint of *Dao*, all differences are trivial and should be considered as One.

that there are still some insurmountable problems in these efforts and the question lies in the very concept of interculturality. There are at least two levels of the problem. One is the level of the pre-theoretical and pre-scientific everyday lifeworld, the other is the philosophical level. These two levels are interconnected. I shall begin first with the intercultural problem of philosophical communication, and in particular with the alleged West-East dialogue in Heidegger's thought.

II

It is a well-publicized fact that Heidegger had a keen interest in East Asian thought, especially in Daoism via Laozi and Zhuangzi.³ Heinrich Petzet told us that after Heidegger had given a public lecture "On the Essence of Truth" in Bremen 1930, he heard the story of the happiness of the fish in Zhuangzi with great interest.⁴ Being present at that occasion, Petzet observed: "With his interpretation of this story Heidegger is unexpectedly getting through better than with his difficult lecture, which for many people still remains obscure. Whoever is still in the dark about the essence of truth, reflection on this Chinese tale will show him Heidegger's position on it."⁵ Otto Pöggeler, on the other hand, comments on the significance of this episode in the light of the problem of intersubjectivity. Being-with (*Mitsein*) is an existential of Dasein, upon which the pre-theoretical understanding of other Daseins' Being is grounded. The Zhuangzi story may have an implication of the universal sympathy which joins all the things of nature. Zhuangzi and the fish and the rest of mankind embrace each other within "nature," which is primordially not considered as something present-at-hand or ready-to-hand.⁶ Aside from this story, however, Zhuangzi is mentioned

³ For a most elaborated discussion on the relationship between Heidegger and Daoism, see Graham Parkes, "Thought on the Way: Being and Time via Lao-Chuang," and Otto Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tzu." Both articles in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987. For a more recent discussion, see Reinhard May, *Ex Oriente Lux: Heideggers Werk unter Ostasiatischem Einfluss*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989.

⁴ See Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Auf einen Stern zugehen*, Frankfurt: Societäts-Verlag, 1983, p. 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*; this passage is translated by Graham Parkes, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁶ See Otto Pöggeler, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

nowhere in Heidegger's writings. The interpretation of the relationship between Heidegger and Zhuangzi, I think, is purely circumstantial.

On the other hand, Heidegger's interest in Laozi appears to have been genuine. Even though Heidegger had contact with Japanese philosophers as early as the 1920s and must have known Zen Buddhism since then, there have been very few discussions of any ideas of Zen Buddhism in all his published writings.⁷ Heidegger is firmly rooted in the Western tradition initiated by the ancient Greeks. And no reference other than from this tradition is made in his writings, perhaps except from Laozi, a classical Chinese text. Laozi and the concept of Dao are mentioned in "The Principle of Identity" and in "On the Way to Language."⁸ On both occasions the Dao, considered as a most primordial concept in thinking, is compared with the Greek Logos and the idea of the Way (*der Weg*).

The reference to the Chinese Dao in Heidegger's texts is certainly an open recognition of its importance. Its significance is further amplified by the story of a translation of the *Daodejing*. In an article written after Heidegger's death, Paul Shih-yi Hsiao claimed that he, together with Heidegger, translated eight chapters of *Daodejing* in the summer of 1946.⁹ This story and the subsequent references to the Dao in Heidegger's writings are considered very important because it might show that Heidegger made a genuine effort to go beyond the Western philosophical tradition to the depth of the Chinese thought.¹⁰ Hence a true West-Eastern dialogue is made possible. According to Pöggeler: "Heidegger has provided a significant stimulus for such a dialogue; and

⁷ See Graham Parkes, "Heidegger and Japanese Thought: How Much Did He Know and When Did He Know It?," in: *Martin Heidegger: Critical Assessments*, vol. IV, ed. Christopher Macann, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁸ See Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1957, p. 25; *Identity and Difference*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 36, and *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1959, p. 198; *On the Way to Language*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 92.

⁹ Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, "Heidegger and Our Translation of the Tao Te Ching," in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-101.

¹⁰ Otto Pöggeler takes Hsiao's report very seriously as an important evidence not only for Heidegger's attempt for a West-East dialogue but also for his philosophical development. "Heidegger's attempt to translate Lao-tzu constituted an important step on the way along which his thinking was proceeding." Otto Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tzu," in: *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

yet the task to which he applied himself has not been accomplished, but is being handed down to us as something open-ended.”¹¹

Why is Heidegger’s interest in Daoism so important? It is because never before has a Western philosopher of the magnitude of Heidegger taken serious interest in and a positive attitude towards Eastern thought. Leibniz did indeed have a positive interest in classical Chinese philosophy, especially the *Yi-jing* (The Book of Changes) and the cosmological thinking of the Neo-Confucianism.¹² However, at the time of Leibniz very few original texts were available and the academic environment was far inferior to that of Heidegger’s time.¹³ Obviously there was no guest professor from the East to discuss philosophy with Leibniz. Since Leibniz, there has been a continuous reception process of Chinese culture by European thinkers. Herder, Kant, Goethe, von Humboldt and finally Hegel have interpreted Chinese thought from various aspects. Yet these interpretations were far from sympathetic, they were in fact extremely critical and sometimes derogatory.¹⁴

Only in the 20th century did negative attitudes begin to change.¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, in his book *Great Philosophers*, demonstrated a cosmic view on the wisdom of Mankind as a whole. Most of the important

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹² Through the writings of the Jesuits in China in the 17th century, Leibniz acquired the knowledge and translation of Chinese philosophical texts. For a very good discussion on Leibniz’s relation to China, see David E. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1977.

¹³ See Graham Parkes, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ For a concise description of the interpretation of Chinese culture by the Europeans, see Florian Vetsch, *Martin Heideggers Angang der interkulturellen Auseinandersetzung*, Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1992, in particular pp. 33-43. Quoting one sonnet by Humboldt, *China*, Vetsch comments (p. 40): “Dieses Sonnett (von Humboldt) versammelt die angeführten Wertschätzungen Chinas durch die Europäer: Bilderschrift als bloße Kuriosität, Entwicklungslosigkeit, Wahrheitsferne, Kunstlosigkeit [...]” See also Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West,” in: *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1988), pp. 108-131.

¹⁵ It has long been asserted by Western philosophers and social scientists that the European superiority over China and the East since the 18th century lies in the particular conception of rationality which was responsible for the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, leading to modernization and capitalism. Such view has only lately been challenged by the Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody; see his recent book: *The East in the West*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

philosophers of the West and the East are discussed in this book.¹⁶ Confucius and Laozi together with Socrates, Jesus and Buddha are considered as the primal founders of human civilization. Nevertheless, there is a lack of philosophical profundity in understanding the various philosophical traditions. Jaspers did not attempt to integrate non-Western thought into his own. In the case of Heidegger, there is a significantly different meaning in his contact with Chinese thought. If Heidegger's philosophy of Being is not just another school of thought alongside traditional philosophies, he has nevertheless turned back to the very core of Western philosophy and has re-thought the meaning of philosophy to the extent that the whole Western philosophical tradition is phenomenologically "destroyed" in the light of the *Seinsfrage*, and Heidegger's thought has become another "beginning" in philosophy. And if Laozi and the idea of the Dao show affinity to Heidegger's thought, then Daoism, one of the oldest philosophies in China, which has never been taken seriously and considered positively by Western philosophers, might be resurrected owing to the "greatness" of Heidegger. And if Dao and Logos disclose the same truth of man in relation to Being, then there is a common philosophical ground between West and East.

I have serious doubts about this thesis. I believe that the relation between Heidegger and Daoism has been over-interpreted and exaggerated. There are at least two important faults in Paul Hsiao's story. Researchers have searched the entire corpus of Heidegger's Nachlass and tried in vain to find any trace of the alleged translation of eight chapters from the *Daodejing*.¹⁷ If these chapters really existed and if they are not extant in Heidegger's Nachlass, there should be another copy in the hands of Paul Hsiao. After all, Hsiao should be the chief translator because only he knew the Chinese language. It is unreasonable for Hsiao not to keep a copy of the translation he did together

¹⁶ See Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, London: Hart-Davis, 1962.

¹⁷ I asked Prof. Dr. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, the chief editor of Heidegger's collected works, regarding the existence of these chapters on two occasions when I visited Freiburg in 1989 and 1993. The answers in both cases were emphatically negative. Pöggeler supplies one more fact: "Heidegger's translations of Lao-tzu have not yet been identified in the Nachlass." Heinrich Wiegand Petzet in: *Auf einen Stern zugehen: Begegnung mit Martin Heidegger 1929-76*, Frankfurt: Societäts-Verlag, 1983, p. 191, gives a translation of chapter 47 of the *Daodejing* which Heidegger sent to Ernst Jünger; Petzet assumes that the translation is Heidegger's but it is in fact by Jan Ulenbrook. See Otto Pöggeler, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

with the most important philosopher to date.¹⁸ However, there is nothing of this kind in Hsiao's possession. More importantly, Hsiao's claim that only eight chapters were translated bears no indication as to precisely which chapters of the *Daodejing* these were. There are only eighty-one short chapters in the whole book. With a total of only some five thousand characters in the Chinese text, it is hard to believe that Hsiao, who himself translated the *Daodejing* into Italian,¹⁹ was unable to recall the exact eight chapters. All in all, I have a strong suspicion that the whole translation story is merely a fabrication.

Indeed, it is true that Heidegger took a great interest in Laozi. I do believe the discussion on the philosophy of Laozi between Hsiao and Heidegger did occur in the summer of 1946. Yet I do not think there could be any translation work done in the true sense. Being completely ignorant of the Chinese language, Heidegger could never have translated the Chinese original text into German. All he could have done was to comment and interpret Hsiao's German version of the *Daodejing*. Hans Georg Gadamer, answering Graham Parkes's question as to why there were so few mentions of Daoism in Heidegger's published texts, said: "[...] a scholar of Heidegger's generation and caliber would be reluctant to write anything about a philosophy if he were unable to read the relevant texts in the original language."²⁰

Translation was for Heidegger never a simple task of rendering the original text into another language. In *What is called Thinking* he said: "But every translation is already an interpretation (*Auslegung*). Every interpretation must have first of all entered into what is said, into the subject matter it expresses."²¹ In *Being and Time* interpretation is grounded in the existential constitution of Dasein's understanding. "An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."²² The three fore-structures of understanding, fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception set the ground for all interpretation and in turn are the hermeneutical basis for translation in general. Hence translation is not only grounded in the existential possibility of

¹⁸ See Paul Hsiao's remark: "Heidegger's Lao-tzu translation with me would cause a sensation in the world of philosophy." Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁰ Graham Parkes, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, p. 174.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, pp. 191-192.

Dasein, but also in the essence of thinking and language.²³ In discussing the translation of Parmenides, Heidegger stresses that there is no objective rendition without any presupposition and prejudice. There is only one way of approaching a thinker from a tradition other than one's own. "Without regard to later philosophy and its achievements in interpreting this thinker, we shall try to listen to the saying, so to speak, in the first bloom of the words."²⁴ Heidegger would be very careful in translating Parmenides or Heraclitus by listening to the Greek language. Hence it would be completely untypical of Heidegger if he ever were to attempt to "translate" Laozi without attending to the original Chinese words. Obviously Heidegger was fully aware of the profound problem involved in the understanding of the East Asian language. In *On the Way to Language* Heidegger said:

The prospect of the thinking that labors to answer to the nature of language is still veiled, in all its vastness. This is why I do not yet see whether what I am trying to think of as the nature of language is *also* adequate for the nature of the Eastasian language; whether in the end—which would also be the beginning—a nature of language can reach the thinking experience, a nature which would offer the assurance that European-Western saying and Eastasian saying will enter into dialogue such that in it there sings something that wells up from a single source.²⁵

It remains unknown whether there is one single source from which all languages emerge. However, Heidegger recognizes that the gap between the two different "Houses of Being," i.e., the Eastasian and Western languages, is not easy to bridge. Heidegger is pessimistic about any possible dialogue: "If man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we Europeans presumably dwell in an entirely different house than Eastasian man [...] And so, a dialogue from house to house remains nearly impossible."²⁶ To be sure, Heidegger must have learned from and been moved by the reading and

²³ For a detailed discussion on the problem of translation in the light of Heidegger, see Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, "Übersetzung als philosophisches Problem," in Dietrich Papenfuss und Otto Pöggeler, eds., *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers*, vol. III, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, p. 176.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

discussion of classical Chinese philosophy. It may even be said that the later Heidegger was inspired somewhat by the Dao thinking, which plays a certain role in his philosophical development. However, the conjecture of the influence of Daoism upon Heidegger ends here. All the reports about the relationship between Heidegger and Daoism show that Heidegger only knows at best some translated fragments of Laozi and Zhuangzi. These fragments, which Heidegger did not know in the original text, are incomparable to the ancient Greek fragments of Anaximander, Parmenides or Heraclitus, which are the essential influences on his thought. Heidegger remains all his life an entirely “abendländischer” thinker, a Western philosopher determined by the thought of Greek antiquity. In his famous 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger remarked without hesitation that his thinking had nothing to do with Eastern thought. He said:

My conviction is that only in the same place where the modern technical world took its origin can we also prepare a conversion of it. In other words, this cannot happen by taking over Zen-Buddhism or other Eastern experiences of the world. For this conversion of thought we need the help of the European tradition and a new appropriation of it. Thought will be transformed only through thought that has the same origin and determination.²⁷

The thinking experience of the nature of language is but the philosophical meditation on Being. Hence Heidegger’s thinking about the nature of language is already determined by the very conception of the philosophy within which Being is the only true theme. In *What is philosophy?* Heidegger maintains that Philosophy is “the philosophia”: it is Greek in origin. The whole Western philosophical tradition, from the Pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle through Descartes, Kant and Hegel, is “a co-responence (*Entsprechen*) which discusses the appeal of the Being of being.”²⁸ Accordingly, there is no philosophy outside the Western tradition.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us,” trans. William J. Richardson, in Thomas Sheehan, ed., *Heidegger—The Man and the Thinker*, Chicago: Precedent Publishing Inc., 1981, p. 62.

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, London: Vision Press, 1956, p. 97.

This is clearly an open pronouncement of Eurocentrism. Surely Heidegger is not the first Western philosopher to have made such a statement. Compared with his predecessors, Heidegger is much more sympathetic and positive towards Chinese philosophy.²⁹ Hegel, in contrast to Heidegger, found little meaning in Eastern thought. The central issue of Hegel's philosophy is rationality. According to him, only Western philosophy has achieved the actualization of reason. For Hegel, Chinese and Indian thought are not qualified to be called philosophy, as they remain in the childhood of rationality. After surveying Chinese culture in *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel pronounced his judgement on China categorically: "This is the character of the Chinese people in its various aspects. Its distinguishing feature is, that everything which belongs to Spirit—unconstrained morality, in practice and theory, Heart, inward Religion, Science and Art properly so-called—is alien to it."³⁰ Accordingly, the ideas of freedom and subjectivity have no place in Chinese culture. Philosophy as the self-realization of reason is completely beyond the understanding of the Chinese mind.³¹ Husserl, on the other hand, insists that only the theoretical attitude, the *theoria*, constitutes the very meaning of philosophy. The crisis of European humanity, as he expounded it in the Vienna Lecture of 1935, lies in the "seeming collapse of rationalism." The reason for the collapse is not the problem of rationality itself but "only in its exteriorization, its

²⁹ For a recent discussion of Eurocentrism in modern philosophy and especially within the phenomenological movement, see Hwa Yol Jung, "Phenomenology, the Question of Rationality and the Basic Grammar of Inter-cultural Texts," in *The Logic of the Living Present* [Analecta Husserliana XLVI], ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, pp. 169-178.

³⁰ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, Buffalo, N.J.: Prometheus Books, 1991, p. 138. For a discussion on Hegel's understanding of Chinese philosophy, see Young Kun Kim, "Hegel's criticism of Chinese Philosophy," in: *Philosophy East and West*, 28 (1978), pp. 173-180.

³¹ Hegel's totally negative judgment on the oriental world, China and India in particular, can be seen as the zenith of eurocentrism in the 19th century. However, eurocentrism is an extremely complex phenomenon. See Vassilis Lambropoulos's recent study: *The Rise of Eurocentrism*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. In this study, eurocentrism is seen as a result of the dialectic tension between Hellenism and Hebraism in the modern period. Hellenism is championed by the German idealism and is consequently regarded as the only source of philosophy. Logocentrism is necessarily connected to eurocentrism.

absorption in ‘naturalism’ and ‘objectivism’.³² The other danger is the confusion of the Western philosophical tradition with other traditions and thereby forgetting the most important difference. In the vogue of today’s comparative philosophy, Husserl’s idea deserves careful reflection:

Today we possess all sorts of studies on Indian, Chinese, and other philosophies, studies that place these philosophies on the same level with Greek philosophy, considering them merely as different historical formulations of one and the same cultural idea. Of course, there is not lacking something in common. Still one must not allow intentional depths to be covered over by what is merely morphologically common and be blind to the most essential differences of principle. [...] Only with the Greeks, however, do we find a universal (‘cosmological’) vital interest in the essentially new form of a purely ‘theoretical’ attitude [...] And it is a mistake for some brought up in the scientific modes of thought initiated in Greece and progressively developed in modern times to speak of Indian and Chinese philosophy (astronomy, mathematics) and thus to interpret India, Babylonia, and China in a European way.³³

The “logocentrism” and “Eurocentrism” of Hegel and Husserl might well be a kind of Western arrogance as well as an ignorance of Eastasian culture. Contemporary philosophers of our post-modern era would unanimously denounce this philosophical “provincialism.” In the process of deconstructing Western metaphysics, Jacques Derrida spoke of “the violent relationship of the whole of the West to its other, whether a ‘linguistic’ relationship (where very quickly the question of the limits of everything leading back to the question of the meaning of Being arises), or ethnological, economic, political, military, relationships, etc.”³⁴ Apparently Derrida is apologetic of the triumph of the Westernization in the past few centuries. Indeed our present world is the result of the great transformation by the West. Our everyday life

³² Edmund Husserl. “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man,” in: *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p.191.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.164 and p.171.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp.134-35.

world is determined by the technological, social, political and commercial constitution originated in the West. Whether our world is referred to as modern or post-modern, it is still a Western concept. Critique of logocentrism and Eurocentrism is surely a genuine self-reflection of Western philosophers. However, criticizing European provincialism is one thing, whereas going beyond this “Euro-center” and entering into a true open dialogue with other cultures is another. One of the most essential conditions for such dialogue is of course the ability to understand the language. Yet there are very few Western philosophers and in particular very few phenomenologists who have mastered Eastasian languages.³⁵ Perhaps there is no need to do so because logocentrism and Eurocentricism are still today the center from which philosophy, phenomenology included, is disseminated to other cultures. The Eastasians are still in the phase of reception. We are still learning “greedily” from the West. We are too eager to apply and employ Western philosophical concepts and paradigms to interpret our own philosophy. There have been hundreds of Chinese translations and books on Western philosophy. However, Tanabe’s self-questioning in front of Heidegger many years ago still has its validity not only for the Japanese but is equally relevant to us Chinese: “Why it was that we Japanese did not call back to mind the venerable beginnings of our own thinking, instead of chasing ever more greedily after the latest news in European philosophy.”³⁶

Why do we chase after the latest development of Western philosophy? One of the main reasons is, I think, that most of us have unreflectively agreed with the conclusions of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger: Philosophy is *philosophia* and its essential principles are determined by the idea of rationality, *theoria* or Being. Whoever does philosophy today reaffirms this idea of *philosophia*. Chinese philosophy, if it can be considered at all as philosophy, has to be scrutinized under Western philosophical perspectives: Chinese philosophy is analyzed in the light of the problems of epistemology, metaphysics or ethics. If the result of the analysis is to be publicized and considered on an “intercultural” level, in other words, on an international level, it must be presented in a language other than Chinese, preferably in English.

³⁵ One notable exception is perhaps the Swiss phenomenologist Iso Kern, who has spent years in China in order to master the language and the philosophy.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 37.

III

We must not forget what Husserl said earlier about “the most essential differences of principle.” The problem of the hitherto West-East or East-West philosophical dialogue is one-sidedness: the Western idea of philosophy, however diversified it may be in various schools and in the history of philosophy, is the guiding principle of this dialogue. In reality there is only monologue within Western culture. We have assumed the existence of something called Chinese philosophy, which is not theoretical and systematic in nature but nevertheless comparable to Western philosophy. The problem is: Is there a common idea of philosophy for the Chinese and the West? Lao Sze-Kwang (1927-2012), an eminent Chinese philosopher, asserts that there is no common conception of philosophy between the West and the Chinese. The modern Chinese term for philosophy, *zhexue*, is a historically new invention of the latter part of the 19th century. This term was virtually unknown to Chinese scholars before the 19th century. If we take the representative writings of those classified today as Chinese philosophers, such as Mencius or Wang Yangming, “we find almost nothing in common with philosophical writings of the European or American traditions. The basic interest, the way of formulation, and the criterion of significance in such classical Chinese works are all quite different.”³⁷

If there is nothing in common between Chinese “philosophy” and Western philosophy, then there is nothing to share between them. Obviously it is not the intention of Lao to arrive at this conclusion. His concern is the problem of communication between philosophical communities in different traditions. However, he points out immediately that there is no common idea of philosophy even within the Western philosophical tradition. A definition of philosophy is impossible, according to Lao, because “we cannot find the logical differentia capable of covering the subject matter of all kinds of philosophical thought which are informative at the same time.”³⁸ Few great philosophers would agree among themselves as to what philosophy in the end is. The only way to have a concept of philosophy is to avoid looking at common theoretical contents of various philosophies, Chinese “philosophies” included, and seeking out the essential characteristics of philosophy as

³⁷ Lao Sze-Kwang, “On Understanding Chinese Philosophy: An Inquiry and a Proposal,” in Robert Allinson, ed., *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 265.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

a particular kind of human activity. Lao said: “Philosophy can be characterized by the special feature of philosophical thinking (which distinguished itself from other kinds of thinking), while not defined by a subject-matter.”³⁹ Lao calls this special feature: “reflective thinking.” He elaborates:

We engage in philosophical thinking only when we reflect upon our own activities. This is obvious in epistemological and ethical studies. Metaphysics and cosmology are also reflective in the sense that what is attempted is the imposition of some unity upon the empirical image of the world. Even analysts, when they examine language and meaning, are also engaged in reflective thinking, although they do not like this term.⁴⁰

Reflective thinking is not only confined to professional philosophical activities, it also includes everyday pretheoretical and preconceptual thinking. Lao’s purpose is to formulate an open concept of philosophy that can accommodate different philosophical traditions without excluding or imposing any. Philosophy as reflective thinking has no complete list of subject matters. Philosophical theories or particular philosophies emerge when reflective thinking over certain problems produces linguistic formulation. The significance of any particular philosophy depends on the problems it claims to solve. Hence the original problems of this particular philosophy are to be examined in order to justify its meaning and purpose. “The only justification for denying a particular philosophy is the evidence that the problems it deals with have no relevance to real life.”⁴¹ But there is no sense in asking for the significance of reflective thinking itself, since it has no content of its own. It functions as the ultimate horizon from which all thematic philosophical articulations arise. Lao calls this concept of philosophy a proposal. The main objective is to “help improve communication between different philosophical traditions and secure a better understanding of the history of philosophical thought.”⁴² The major obstacle for such communication is a closed concept of philosophy. It means that all criteria of truth and meaning are already predetermined within the parameters and the subject matter of a particular

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

philosophy.⁴³ Seen from this perspective, Chinese philosophy is a reflective thinking different from that of the Western philosophical tradition. Its basic characteristic is “orientative” rather than cognitive or theoretical. As Lao explains, “When we say that some philosophy is orientative, we mean that this philosophy intends to effect some change in the self or in the world.”⁴⁴ Hence “self-transformation” and “transformation of the world,” according to Lao, are two basic functions of philosophy in the Chinese tradition. If we accept this “proposal” of an open concept of philosophy by Lao and at the same time agree with him that Chinese philosophy is orientative in essence, then the difference between Chinese and Western philosophy can be seen in a new light. Both are reflective thinking on our activities, but because of different historical situations, both have encountered different problems. For the West, philosophy is determined by cognitive interest and is therefore guided by the idea of *theoria*, whereas Chinese philosophy is essentially governed by a practical motive, hence it is orientative in character. There is no sense in reducing or superimposing one upon the other. They both are philosophy in the truest sense yet they are different philosophies.

IV

What can we learn from Lao’s proposal of the open concept of Philosophy as well as from Heidegger’s interest in Laozi in relation to our original problem of intercultural understanding? I do think that either philosopher has pointed to the core of the problem. Indeed there is only one common world which is the condition of the possibility for any intercultural understanding. However, there are at least two important and difficult problems between worlds, especially between philosophical worlds, namely the problem of the idea of philosophy and the problem of the essence of language.

In contrast to the theoretical and philosophical level, the intercultural understanding in the everyday life-world apparently does not present any serious problem. On most occasions in everyday life, intercultural understanding or misunderstanding operates in an ontic

⁴³ According to Lao, most important Western philosophical systems are closed philosophies. The philosophy of Plato, Kant, Wittgenstein and even Heidegger are demonstrated as examples. See *Ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

pre-theoretical way. Discrepancies are either bracketed or dissolved into one's own meaning structures. We think we have understood strangers of another culture if their linguistic or non-linguistic expressions are consistent with our own operating meaning horizon. We regard something as meaningful, as edible, or as clean when it corresponds to our preconceived criteria of what is meaningful, edible or clean. In short, the content and structures of our life-world are the paramount reality from which everything is judged and measured.⁴⁵ If anything that is not compatible with our paramount reality then it is either meaningless or does not exist at all. Then we say in a courteous manner: "Oh yes, it is very interesting, but it doesn't concern me [...]."

On a theoretical level, there is a demand for the clarification of the possibility of intercultural understanding, not only between philosophical worlds but also between everyday life-worlds. If we are aware of the danger of cultural prejudice and imposition, then we have to base our understanding on an open concept of the world similar to what Lao Sze-Kwang has proposed for philosophy. The phenomenological analysis of the life-world by Edmund Husserl in *The Crisis* has offered, I think, the first universal idea of the world that transcends cultural boundaries. The world is no longer seen as an object of consciousness nor the summation of all objects encountered in experience. The world, or precisely the life-world, with all its immediate and original givenness is the ultimate horizon for all experience, prescientific or scientific. However, this horizontal concept of the life-world is empty. The concrete contents of the life-world are the products of cultural and historical processes. In other words, the phenomenology of the life-world offers us only a formal concept of the world. It discloses the universal structures of our original experiences which are forgotten or covered in our everyday natural attitude and in particular our scientific attitude. On the other hand, Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of the world in *Being and Time* has taken the worldliness of Dasein into focus. The world is seen as the disclosed horizon of the totality of meanings and references. Based on the phenomenological world-analysis of Husserl and Heidegger, Klaus Held further develops this problem into the question of intercultural understanding. He regards

⁴⁵ For the idea of paramount reality and the operation of the structure of everyday life-world, see Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, esp. chapter 2: The Stratification of the Life-World.

Heidegger's phenomenology of basic attunement (*Grundgestimmtheit*) as providing the basis on which the problem of intercultural understanding can be solved. He explains:

We can talk to each other about the things with which we intentionally come into contact within the world. The ground for the possibility of talking to one another as well as intercultural understanding lies in the prelinguistic togetherness of one world, which transcends all particular cultural horizons. The basic attunement (*Grundgestimmtheit*) of the human Dasein discloses this one world and explains the reason why people from different language games of cultural traditions can achieve reciprocal understanding.⁴⁶

It is clearly the great achievement of phenomenology to lay bare the ground for the possibility of one common world, and thereby to secure the basis for intercultural understanding. We are in one world, therefore we can understand each other. However, this does not mean that we have already understood each other in reality. The phenomenological world analysis only paves the way for intercultural understanding, as there are more tasks and problems lying ahead. Heidegger's interest in Eastasian philosophy remains, in spite of all his sincerity, only a superficial one if he cannot penetrate into the original texts. Translation should be seen as an introduction to the thinking of other cultures, and hence unfolds the horizon for intercultural understanding, but at the same time it opens the possibility of misunderstanding when alien thinking is interpreted and judged through one's own cultural horizon and conceptual schema. This is why Hegel and Husserl have their negative prejudice against Chinese philosophy. There is no simple comparison between Chinese and Western philosophy. As Lao Sze-Kwang has pointed out, there are many fundamental differences in the meaning of basic concepts of the two cultures. Concepts like "philosophy," "culture," "cosmos," "time-space," "man," "virtue," etc. cannot simply be rendered into a different cultural conceptual system without a careful differentiation in meaning being made. We should enact a re-appropriation of our own cultural and

⁴⁶ Klaus Held, "Europa und die interkulturelle Verständigung. Ein Entwurf im Anschluß an Heideggers Phänomenologie der Grundstimmungen," in: *Heidegger und Europa*, ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander, Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1993, p. 93. (my translation)

historical world as well as a sympathetic appropriation of other cultures in order to understand concretely what they mean. Through this re-appropriation and appropriation, an open attitude of intercultural understanding could be achieved. Concerning the problem of culture and intercultural understanding, I think the conclusion of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro's *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* may amplify my idea and deserves our careful attention. I quote in full:

Cultures may be said to be the realized contents of the historical world, which is individual-qua-universal and universal-qua-individual determination. Cultures, of course, are plural. They cannot be reduced to unity, for when they lose their specificity they cease to be cultures. But the process of development of a unique culture from the standpoint of unique culture cannot be a merely abstract advance in an individual direction. That would amount to the negation of culture. A true world culture will be formed only by various cultures preserving their own respective viewpoints, but simultaneously developing themselves through the mediation of the world. In that respect, first deeply considering the individual ground of each culture, we must clarify on what basis and in what relation to other cultures each individual culture stands. How do Eastern and Western Culture differ in their roots? What significance does Japanese culture have in Eastern culture? Its strong points are at once its weak points. We can learn the path along which we should truly advance only as we both deeply fathom our own depths and attain to a profound understanding of other cultures.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Nishida Kitaro, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, trans. David Dilworth, Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970, p. 254.