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# Inner Transcendence and “Beyond”: The Debate in Chinese Philosophy

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**Abstract:** The topic of “inner transcendence” has been an issue of considerable debate in Chinese philosophy. The purpose of this study is to indicate the main developments of the debate, beginning with the proposal itself in the hands of Mou Zongsan. From there, I move to some of the key elaborations on the proposal, specifically in terms of historical narratives, metaphysical predilections, the suggestion that one can through self-cultivation transcend one’s own limitations, and the effort to extend the concept to “heaven and humanity combine into one.” The section following deals with the growing criticisms of the proposal: it was a defensive and strategic move by non-mainland philosophers; the use of Western philosophical categories risked obscuring and even distorting the Confucian – and thus Chinese – tradition, which has no need for concepts such as transcendence; and the context of the “wild 90s,” in which the proposal gained some traction on the mainland. The concluding section indicates briefly the direction of Chinese philosophical debates over the last decade or so in developing terms that arise from the Chinese tradition.

Since the 1960s, there has been an ongoing debate in Chinese philosophy concerning the applicability of otherwise of the concept of immanent or “inner transcendence [ 内在超越 *neizaichaoyue*” Drawing on Western philosophical frameworks, a number of non-mainland philosophers proposed in the 1960s and 1970s that Chinese culture and philosophy should be seen in terms of an ontological transcendence – embodied in terms such as “heaven [ 天 *tiān*” and the “way [ 道 *dào*” – that is immanent in human and social life. This proposal found quite a number who sought to defend the concept of inner transcendence, along with those who tried to elaborate further features. For a time, “inner transcendence” became the assumed descriptor of Chinese philosophy, not

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merely in terms of Confucianism, but also including Daoism and sinified Buddhism. At the same time, there were also critics of the very possibility of using the oxymoron of “inner transcendence” to speak of Chinese philosophy. Over time, these voices became more numerous, especially among mainland philosophers. Alongside the criticisms, they also began to elaborate terms and concepts that arise from the Chinese tradition: “heaven and humanity combine as one [天人合一 *tianren heyi*]” was a beginning, but we also find substantive deliberations on “life-life [生生 *shengsheng*]” “household [家 *jiā*]” “intimacy [亲亲 *qinqin*]” and others.

The following study is structured as follows. I begin with the initial proposal of “inner transcendence,” focusing on Mou Zongsan, who was based on Taiwan Island and later the British colony of Hong Kong before its long overdue return to the mainland in 1997. The next section deals with the various defences and elaborations of the proposal, especially in terms of historical narratives, metaphysical predilections, and the sense that one can through self-cultivation transcend one’s own limitations. I also include here a discussion of the effort to extend the concept to “heaven and humanity combine into one,” but note that this effort is already an implicit move beyond “inner transcendence.” The third section concerns the mounting criticisms of the concept, before a concluding overview of developments in the deployment of genuinely Chinese philosophical terms over the last couple of decades.

Before proceeding, some terminological clarity is needed. At a linguistic level, the word in English and Western languages more generally derives from Latin “transcendere,” meaning to surpass, cross over, and transgress boundaries. In Chinese, the character 越 *yue* has an overlapping semantic field, including getting past, jumping over, exceeding, overstepping, and going through. Many are the potential combinations with other characters, including 超越 *chaoyue* which is usually translated as “transcend,” but it should be noted that the term has positive and negative meanings, perhaps best captured in the differences between transcend and transgress. We need to be wary of leaping immediately from

linguistic terminology to philosophical terms for in Western philosophy “transcendence” refers to ontological transcendence. In other words, it concerns the order of being (ontological), and may include Plato’s forms, Kant’s efforts to distinguish between transcendent and transcendental, and the Western distinction between transcendence and immanence (even where a radical emphasis on the latter is found, this is done within the framework). Inescapably entwined with philosophy in Western contexts is the theological and metaphysical meaning. In this case, the realm of ontological transcendence turns on God and the empirically unknowable heaven. As the influential definition of Ames puts it, “strict philosophical or theological transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case.”

### Inner Transcendence: The Proposal

The locus classicus for the concept of “inner transcendence” is the work of the philosopher, Mou Zongsan (1909-1995). A prolific writer, whose collected works fill 33 volumes, Mou summed up a key tenet of his effort to rework the Confucian tradition as follows:

The Dao of heaven is high above, and has the meaning of transcendence. When the Dao of heaven is concentrated within a person, it is also inherent in human nature, and then the Dao

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- 2 So Ren Jiantao, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence: Religious Faith, Moral Belief, and the Question of Order.” *Social Sciences in China* 2012.7: 38. Unfortunately, this is precisely what Gao Wei does in his spirited defence of inner transcendence in Chinese philosophy; see Gao Wei, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence.’” *Journal of Higher Education* 2021.4: 14–23. Citations follow the convention of Chinese names, with the family name first, followed by the personal name, without a comma between them.
  - 3 Roger Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), 212. See also David Hall and Roger Ames. *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 13. Beyond my remit here is the age-old theological struggle between grace, as the necessary action of God in the world, and human works, operating on the assumption that the believer yearns for the other side and strives for heaven. Related is the tension between heaven “above” and heaven “on earth,” although the latter category assumes that God enables such a process and the heaven realised on “earth” is the manifestation of the ontologically superior heaven “from above.”

of heaven is within [ 内在 *neizai* (**immanent**). Therefore, we may use Kant's favoured words and say that the Dao of heaven is **transcendent** on the one hand and within [ *neizai* on the other (**immanent** and **transcendent** are opposites). The Dao of heaven is both transcendent and within [ *neizai* and this can be said to have both religious and moral significance: religion attaches importance to transcendence, while morality attaches importance to what is within [ *neizai*

Allow me to exegete this frequently quoted text. To begin with, the reference to Kant is telling, as are the frequent uses of English philosophical terms. I have used bold type to indicate where Mou uses English terms in the quotation translated above. Mou was thoroughly versed in and indeed a proponent of Kantian philosophy in a Chinese context. Or rather, he argued that a reinvigorated Confucianism would be able to respond to and amend the defects in Kantian and Western philosophy more generally, and indeed provide a valuable resource for the West in its already obvious decline. Although he was adept at German (he translated some of Kant's works into Chinese), his published texts frequently use philosophical terminology from one of the cultural relics of the British Empire – English – to indicate the specific meaning of the Chinese terms used. Thus, in the text quoted above, 超越 *chaoyue* is identified in parentheses as “transcendent” and 内在 *neizai* which I have rendered more literally as “within,” is identified with “immanent.”

Further, the emphasis is on drawing transcendence down into this immanent world. Mou suggests that the typical Western opposition between ontological transcendence and immanence is actually inherent in human nature. For Mou, this is not merely a core feature of Chinese (Confucian) philosophy, but a better proposition per se. The apparently mysterious “Dao of heaven” is thoroughly inner ( 内在 *neizai*) or immanent. To continue the spatial metaphor, Mou Zongsan also emphasised the need for Chinese philosophy and culture to rise up to a robust form of transcendence:

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4 Mou Zongsan, *The Specific Quality of China's Philosophy* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1997), 21. This work was originally published in 1963. All translations are by the author of this article.

If China’s cultural life, inherited and developed by Confucianism, is only the ethics and morality of this common (secular) world, without the dimension of transcendence, without the affirmation of a transcendent [超越 *chaoyu*] moral and spiritual entity, without the affirmation of the reality of divinity [神性 *shenxing*] and a source of value, then Confucianism does not become its cultural life, and the Chinese nation will not become a nation with a cultural life.

For Mou, Chinese culture needs to overcome the perceived lack of transcendence, for without such transcendence cultural life has no meaning or purpose. The type of transcendence he has in mind is embodied above all in a “divinity [神性 *shenxing*]” from which moral value derives. Here Mou reveals that he adheres to a more esoteric Confucianism, seeking a “metaphysics of morals [道德的形而上学 *daode de xingershangxue*]

Finally, a word on Kant. Mou Zongsan develops and frames his proposal for inner transcendence by working through Kant’s philosophy, specifically the “transcendental [先验的 *xianyandexue*]” as the internal structures of the mind that can be actualised in experience. There is no need here to go through the detailed steps by which he does so, except to point out that it is the “moral law within” that Mou sought to extract from Kant.<sup>7</sup> This immersion in one of the main figures of German idealism has not only made Mou’s work more amenable to some English-language studies<sup>8</sup> but it also indicates the problems of trying to articulate what became a modern phase of Neo-Confucianism – Mou is regarded as one the main founders of this phase – through and as a response to Western

5 Mou Zongsan, “Humanism and Religion.” In Mou Zongsan , *The Knowledge of Life* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005), 63-70, 63. The essay was initially published in 1955.

6 Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence’ in Chinese Culture.” *Journal of Higher Education* 2021.4: 18.

7 Xu Tao, “‘Inner Transcendence’ and the ‘Unity of Heaven and Humanity’ from the Perspectives of Chinese and Western Philosophy.” *Academic Monthly* 2016.6: 167.

8 For example, Sébastien Billioud, *Thinking through Confucian Modernity: A Study of Mou Zongsan’s Moral Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), Serina Chan, *The Thought of Mou Zongsan* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Jason Clower, *The Unlikely Buddhologist: Tiantai Buddhism in the New Confucianism of Mou Zongsan* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

philosophical frameworks. I will return to these problems after dealing with the debates around the proposal of inner transcendence.

### Defence and Elaboration

The texts from which I quoted above were initially published in 1963 and 1955, during Mou Zongsan's most productive and creative period while teaching in Hong Kong (then still an undemocratic colony of the faded British Empire). Mou has certainly had his defenders, not least because the divisive and outspoken Mou cultivated a number of disciples who had been his students. Their influence had the effect of rendering "inner transcendence" as an assumed category of Chinese philosophy. But there were also critics, some explicit and some seeking to move the scholarly discussion beyond the category of "inner transcendence." In this section, I deal with some of the main defensive moves, albeit more in terms of elaboration on other aspects: the development of grand historical narratives; the enhancement of the idealist and metaphysical bent of the proposal; the process of overcoming – and thus transcending – one's limitations through self-cultivation; and an emphasis on "heaven and humanity combine into one."

In terms of so-called historical narratives, the (US-based) Yu Yingshi located the origins of a commonly shared transcendence in the cultures that arose during the "Axial Age" of the first millennium BCE.<sup>9</sup> However, the paths taken in cultural developments since that time have been

9 Du Weiming, *Prospects for the Third Development Period of Confucianism* (Taipei: Lianjing Publishing Company, 1989), 340. Han Zhen, and Zhang Weiwei. *Contemporary Value Systems in China* (trans. Zhao Chaoyong. China Insights. Singapore: Springer, 2018), 14–15.

10 A precursor may be found with Qian Mu, who proposed that the nomadic and aggressively commercial culture of the West led to an extroverted "hostility between heaven and humanity," with strong oppositions between humanity and nature, subject and object, and transcendence and immanence. By contrast, agricultural societies have developed the "unity of heaven and humanity," with the integration of nature and humanity, inside and outside, and no distinction between subject and object. The result: "the supreme spirit of Western culture is the extroverted religious spirit, and the spirit of Chinese culture is the inner moral spirit." Qian Mu, "The Righteousness of the Study of Culture." In *Collected Works of Qian Mu* (Taipei: Lianjing Publishing Company, 1998, Vol. 37:1–228), 60. The book was originally published in 1952.

quite distinct. Western countries, for example, developed a stark “outer transcendence [ 外在超越 waizaichaoyue]” putting all of the emphasis on a philosophical first mover or God who determines the known world. By contrast, Chinese culture developed an “inner transcendence” and had no need for an organised system of religious institutions to make contact with the “City of God.” Instead, while Chinese culture affirms a “transcendent source of value,” it “does not make any special effort to construct another perfect metaphysical world to determine values, and then use this world to reflect and promote the actual human world.”<sup>11</sup> Here we may detect a somewhat different sense of “transcendence” to the ontological version found in Western philosophy: the emphasis is on basic cultural principles rather than the philosophical-theological connotations of the term in the Western tradition.

At the same time, there was an emphasis – especially by those outside mainland China – that was distinctly metaphysical. Mou Zongsan attributed to the “Dao of heaven [ 天道 tiandao]” a quasi-religious status, while Du Weiming suggests that from its earliest days Confucianism has had profound religious connotations and significance in terms of an “ultimate concern.”<sup>12</sup> Further, Tang Junyi’s idealist tendencies emphasised the metaphysical dimension of “天 tian”. Tang’s *The Spiritual Value of Chinese Culture* deploys an initial historical move (see above), in the sense that all cultures have an original form of transcendence, but that the Chinese tradition led to the development of inner self-creation and transcendence. No matter how immanent it may be, inherent in human nature and life, for Tang the transcendent element of “天 tian” was very much a metaphysical entity: this moral entity was seen to transcend all human society and the world we know, while at the same time infusing it all.

11 Yu Yingshi, *Confucian Ethics and Business Spirit* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2004), 8. See also, Yu Yingshi, *The Path of Inner Transcendence* (Beijing: China Radio Film and Television Press, 1992), 12. And Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence’,” 16–18.

12 Du Weiming, *On the Religiosity of Confucianism – A Modern Interpretation of the “Doctrine of the Mean”* (trans. Duan Dezhi. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1999).

13 Tang Junyi, *The Spiritual Value of Chinese Culture* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press,



There has also been an emphasis on self-cultivation so as to refine virtue and seek a more perfected life. While the nature and knowledge of life (生命 shengming) is seen as the distinguishing feature of Chinese philosophy,<sup>14</sup> this life is not a given: one must engage in “cultivating one’s moral character [修身 xiushen]” “self cultivation [自我修养 ziwexiuyang]” and “learning for the sake of self-improvement [为己之学 weiji zhixue]:<sup>15</sup> While the whole process may be immanent to relational human existence, the transcendent aspect is to overcome self-limitation so as to achieve a more ideal state of existence. Or, as Gao Wei puts it, with an emphasis on the educational nature of Chinese philosophy, “inner transcendence is the effort and aspiration to transcend the finitude of the present world and achieve spiritual freedom.”<sup>16</sup> This may be called a transcendence out of and through immanence, but one wonders why the language of transcendence needs to be used at all. While the influence of Buddhism seems strong here, I remain puzzled as to why the concepts of self-cultivation and self-improvement are not more than adequate.

Finally, there was a move that can be seen as both an effort at elaboration and an effort to move towards terms from the Chinese philosophical tradition: “heaven and humanity combine into one [天人合一 tianren heyi]” often translated as the “unity of heaven and humanity.” The connotations of this four-character saying are notable, such as “nature and humanity merge into one,” or “humanity is an integral part of nature.” Among the many scholars who emphasise this category, let me give

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2006). Originally published in 1953.

- 14 Mou Zongsan, *The Knowledge of Life* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005). This work was originally published in 1970. Guo Xiaojun, “On the Ethical Spirit in Confucian Philosophy – From the Perspective of ‘Internal Transcendence.’” *Jiangsu Social Science* 2016.6: 31–33.
- 15 This four-character phrase is traced back to *The Analects*, where Confucius observes: “‘In ancient times people learned for the sake of self-improvement [为己之学]; nowadays people learn for show.’ Confucius, *Lunyu jinyi – The Analects of Confucius* (Chinese-English Bilingual Edition), trans. Yang Bojun, Wu Shuping, Pan Fu’en and Wen Shaoxia. Jinan: Qilu shushe chuban gongsi, 1993): 14.24.
- 16 Guo, “On the Ethical Spirit in Confucian Philosophy,” 33.
- 17 Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence,’” 21.

the example of the mainland philosopher, Tang Yijia (1927-2014), who sought to bring Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism – the three great traditions in China – into discussions over “inner transcendence.”<sup>18</sup> However, for Tang Yijia “inner transcendence” was more of a convenient label. Even though he used such terminology, we can see in his work a greater effort to identify distinct Chinese philosophical terms. It is here that the “unity of heaven and humanity” comes into play. This unity determines two other categories: “thought and action combine into one” and “sentiment and scene combine into one.”<sup>19</sup> These three concern the topics of truth (life), goodness (ethics), and beauty (aesthetics), and here we find the great emphasis on ethics and moral philosophy. It is for this reason, argued Tang, that scholars are socially engaged, with a strong sense of social responsibility and historical mission.

To sum up the argument thus far: we have seen how Mou Zongsan tried to find a philosophical footing for Chinese philosophy by using the Western-derived concept of “inner transcendence.” Further, I examined a number of proposals that sought to develop what for many became an assumed position, specifically in terms of: a historical narrative with common origins in transcendence and divergent paths over the millennia; metaphysical predilections by some non-mainland philosophers; an effort to emphasise the transcending of one’s own limitations for the sake of a better life; and the effort to connect inner transcendence with “heaven and humanity combine into one.”

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18 Tang Yijia, *Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and the Problem of Inner Transcendence* (Nanchang: Jiangxi People’s Press, 1991).

19 Tang Yijia, “On the Problem of the Category System of Traditional Chinese Philosophy.” *Social Sciences in China* 1981.5: 157–72. See also Gan Chunsong: “the unity of heaven and man is the schema of traditional Chinese thought, with which are built the Chinese views of the universe and values. In spite of that, the unity of heaven and man or harmony of heaven and man is not an endeavor to construct a form of thought in order to dissolve contradictions, but conversely, is an effort aimed at revealing the tension resulting from balancing the conflict and equilibrium between heaven and man.” Gan Chunsong. *A Concise Reader of Chinese Culture* (trans. Yu Shiyi. China Insights. Singapore: Springer, 2019), 162.

## Criticisms

Despite the apparent consensus for a time that “inner transcendence” functioned as a shorthand for Chinese philosophy, questions have been raised over the years concerning the proposal. These criticisms include: the logical inconsistency, and even oxymoron, in the proposal itself; the misunderstanding of Kant’s “transcendental” in Mou Zongsan’s work; the misreading of Confucian thought; the strategically defensive move of the initial proposal, with the need to find a way to defend Chinese philosophy in Western terms; and the fact that Western philosophical frameworks of transcendent-immanent are neither applicable nor useful for understanding Confucian and Chinese philosophy?<sup>20</sup> I will pick up some of these and introduce further factors.

The first is a contextual question. Many of the major proponents of what became known as modern Neo-Confucianism were non-mainland scholars. As young scholars or even students, they fled with the Goumindang (National Party) forces under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek) to the island of Taiwan, or to the British colony of Hong Kong: Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Fang Dongmei, Yu Yingshi, and Du Weiming – the latter two moving on to spend their working lives in the USA. Further, there is very little engagement with Marxist philosophy in their work. Indeed, some went so far as to suggest that the Confucian philosophical tradition was diverted with the Manzu (Manchu) – and thus non-Han – Qing Dynasty, and deviated even further with the founding of the New China in 1949.

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20 Zheng Jiadong, “‘Transcendence’ and ‘Inner Transcendence’ – Mou Zongsan and Kant.” *Social Sciences in China* 2001.4: 43-53. Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence.” Shen Shunfu, “Existence and Transcendence: On the Basic Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy.” *Academic* 2015.1: 156–58. Xu, “‘Inner Transcendence’ and the ‘Unity of Heaven and Humanity’,” 168. Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence’,” 17–18.

21 Mou Zongsan was perhaps the most extreme example: a vociferous anti-communist and Han nationalist, he saw his work as opening a third phase of Confucian flourishing. The first was from the time of Confucius to the Han Dynasty, the second was the Neo-Confucianism (in response to Buddhism) of the Song and Ming Dynasties, and third began in the second half of the twentieth century.

The second point of criticism sees the proposal of “inner transcendence” as both defensive and strategic. Let me put it this way: as China began to emerge from the century of humiliation, from the First Opium War of 1840 to 1949, philosophers – among many others – were seeking ways to rejuvenate Chinese philosophy and culture. While mainland philosophy took the path of dialectical and historical materialism (Marxist philosophy), this would not really begin to bear fruit until the reform and opening-up that began in 1978. By contrast, the non-mainland philosophers turned primarily towards the Confucian tradition. In doing so, they temporarily took the lead in Chinese philosophy.

Crucially, they did so by deploying Western philosophy, by which they meant German idealism. They all studied this material in depth, especially Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. Confucian philosophy was reframed in these terms. Why? As Ren Jiantou has argued<sup>22</sup> this was a defensive move. Having been under attack from Western philosophers at least since Hegel, with many opining that China does not have “philosophy,” and feeling under even more pressure in the 1940s and 1950s due to Western “culture shock,”<sup>23</sup> these non-mainland philosophers turned to German idealism. The purpose: to show not only that Chinese philosophy is indeed a form of philosophy, but even more that it is able to solve intractable problems in Western philosophy itself and perhaps even “save” 救. A core concept was that of “inner transcendence.” For Ren Jiantao, the cost was too high: by entering the discourse of Western philosophy, and especially its entwinement with theology, these Neo-Confucians ended up distorting Chinese culture and philosophy.

This type of defence was undertaken under the comprehensive pressure of Christianity or Western culture, which inevitably

22 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence.”

23 I would add that the proposal of “inner transcendence” should not be seen merely as a response to Western philosophical and culture pressure. It was also a response to the establishment of the New China in 1949, and then the tumultuous decade of 1966-1976 (“Cultural Revolution”), when all that was Confucian was condemned. The burden of “saving” Confucius was perceived to fall on the shoulders of the non-mainland philosophers.

24 Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence,’” 20–21.

meant a strategic analytic choice so as to avoid the pressure of cultural comparison. When this strategic choice occupies the core position in analysing the specific value of Confucianism or of Chinese culture, the distinct value Confucianism or Chinese culture may appear to be obscured.

Or, as he puts it more strongly later in the same study, the very concept of “inner transcendence” ends up distorting Confucianism. At the time of writing, Ren’s long and influential study marked an early step in the move away from deploying Western philosophical terms and seeking terms that arise from the Chinese tradition itself.

All of this brings us to the third problem: using Western philosophical concepts such as transcendence and immanence for Confucian, and indeed Chinese, philosophy. As we have seen, Ren Jiantao argued that the use of such terms obscures and distorts Confucian thought. He goes on to observe: “Confucianism seeks neither transcendence in the (Western) philosophical sense nor transcendence in the (Christian) religious sense.”<sup>27</sup> In its interconnected realms of individual disposition and socio-political concerns, Confucianism was and is concerned with the moral nature of human beings and their self-cultivation. The pursuit of virtue in this framework has no need of transcendence. For Shen Shunfu, early Chinese philosophy was not framed in terms of transcendence and immanence. While there may have been some strands that tended in this direction during the Neo-Confucian thought of the Song and Ming dynasties, even this was criticised at the time. For Shen, “immanent transcendence” is an absurd way of speaking about Confucianism: “It is unscientific to simply say that Chinese philosophy has immanence, transcendence or inner transcendence.”<sup>28</sup> Further, Roger Ames has for many years agreed, pointing out that this should not be seen as a lack; rather, Confucianism

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25 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence,” 31.

26 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence,” 42.

27 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence,” 39.

28 Shen, “Existence and Transcendence,” 159.

simply does not need a transcendent entity. The reason is that a plethora of problematic oppositions flow from this Western position: subject-object, agent-action, mind-body, nature-nurture, and so on. For what Ames calls the “relationally constituted person,” this conception of person does not appeal to “superordinate, substantive categories such as ‘soul’, ‘self’, ‘will’, ‘faculties’, ‘nature’, ‘mind’, ‘character’, and so on.” Instead, such a person is embodied within the “social activity of thinking and feeling within the manifold of relations that constitutes family, community, and the natural environment ... a configuration of concrete, dynamic, and constitutive relations rather than an individuated substance defined by some subsisting agency.”<sup>30</sup>

Criticisms have also been directed at the metaphysical and quasi-religious tendencies of some of the modern Neo-Confucians, such as Mou Zongsan, Du Weiming, and Tang Junyi. In response, scholars point to an early de-metaphysicalising move in Confucian thought. Confucius famously observed: “To devote oneself to the people’s just cause, and, while respecting spiritual beings [ 鬼神 *guishen*] to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom.”<sup>31</sup> The spirits and gods – the fuller meaning of 鬼神 *guishen* – should be kept “at a distance [ 远 *yuan*],” so as to focus on human relations. As Mou Zhongjian puts it, Confucius put “heaven” aside and was concerned with “benevolence [ 仁 *ren*],” – better translated as “two-person mindedness”<sup>32</sup> – so as to identify the source of virtue. Thus, “Confucius transferred the value source of social morality and ethics into people’s hearts by promoting benevolence through rites, and turned the heteronomous focus of religious rites into autonomous self-discipline.”<sup>33</sup>

29 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 212. This position by Ames is misinterpreted by Gao Wei as in some way a lack or deficiency. Gao, “On the Contemporary Educational Value of ‘Inner Transcendence’,” 14–15.

30 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 213.

31 Confucius, *Lunyu jinyi – The Analects of Confucius*, 6.22.

32 Sun Pinghua, *Human Rights Protection System in China* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 4–5.

33 Mou Zhongjian and Zhang Jian, *A General History of Chinese Religion* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2000), 172.

However, as Xu Tao argues, this de-metaphysicalising move actually began earlier: during the early days of the Zhou Dynasty in the 11th century BCE, what Xu calls a depersonalising of “heaven [天 tiān]” had already begun.<sup>34</sup> Or, as Ren Jiantao puts it, Chinese culture from its earliest moments experienced a profound enlightenment concerning the “heavenly way [天道 tiāndào]” focusing on human affairs and thus cutting off the path of shaping the spirit of Chinese culture in terms of religion. So we find that over time heaven came to be seen more in terms of a general principle and moral entity, with the latter embodied within human nature. While Daoism was concerned more with the principle or root of the world, Confucianism saw heaven as a model of social order focused on morality and ethics: both the inner moral statutes (仁 rén, or “two-person mindedness”) and outer social order (礼 lǐ, “ritual”) are intimately connected. Through the mutual interaction of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, heaven as principle and as a moral entity were eventually fused into one.<sup>36</sup>

What, then, are we to make of the idea that the moral cultivation of Confucianism seeks to break through one’s self-limitations so as to produce a more virtuous person and society? As we saw earlier, Guo Xiaojun and Gao Wei have argued in this vein. Here Ren Jiantao provides a succinct answer concerning the relation between present reality and the

34 Xu, “‘Inner Transcendence’ and the ‘Unity of Heaven and Humanity,’” 169. See also Mou and Zhang, *Zhongguo zongjiao tongshi*, 8. In a little more detail: while one finds references in the earliest layers of the *Book of Songs* to a “God on High [上帝 shàngdì]” – taken over from the earlier Shang dynasty – these began to fade already with the Duke of Zhou, who stressed a shift from the ignorance and superstition of the earlier ideas inherited from the Shang to a focus on “valuing and emphasising human affairs.” See Gu Kansheng and Yu Degang, “On Zhou Gong’s Philosophy of the ‘Mandate of Heaven’ and its Influence on Later Generations.” *Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 14.1: 43–50. The Duke of Zhou (周公 Zhougong) was held up by Confucius as the ideal public servant: the duke carried out his duties in an exemplary manner until the underage regent and his nephew, King Cheng, could assume the throne, and at that moment the duke stepped back from his role as regent.

35 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence,” 45.

36 One may ask whether a moral principle is some form of transcendence, since this seems to have been the assumption of at least Yu Yingshi. However, as noted earlier, this is by no means necessary, since even the notion of a transcendent principle faces the problems of the transcendent-immanent structure.

pursuit of ideals: “the fundamental way for Confucianism to resolve this confrontation is immediate, temporal, direct, and internal, but it does not seek philosophical or religious ‘transcendent’ goals.” A pertinent example: the purpose of “looking up at the heavenly bodies” is to “look down and investigate the features of the human world” so as to “know the reasons for darkness and light.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, there is no worship of heavenly bodies or transcendent ideals, but simply concerns with improvements in the known world of human existence.

Finally, what are we to make of the fact that “inner transcendence” became an assumed position among many, even on the mainland? A major reason concerns what may be called the “wild 90s.” This was a time when the contradictions of the reform and opening-up began to become apparent. At an economic level, there was a growing gap between rich and poor (people as well as regions), conditions for workers deteriorated, environmental pollution became apparent, the gap between city and countryside widened, and the CPC lost contact with the masses, as revealed in deep corruption, lack of knowledge of Marxism even among leading cadres, and loss of trust and confidence in the CPC.<sup>39</sup> During this time, it was felt that the moral compass was awry and all manner of proposals were put forward. A leading proposal came from non-mainland Neo-Confucians, who seemed to provide a way for China to regain its footing through its own tradition. Much has, of course, changed since that time: the new era that began in 2012 has addressed many of these aforementioned problems and there is much greater clarity concerning the direction in which China is headed, and with that clarity has come significance confidence and trust. Concurrently, the criticisms of “inner transcendence” began to mount and new proposals arose concerning what are regarded as more appropriate terms from the Chinese tradition.

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37 Ren, “Inner Transcendence and Outer Transcendence,” 40.

38 Han and Zhang, *Contemporary Value System*, 14–15.

39 Zan Jiansen, “The Basic Social Contradiction and Comprehensively Deepening Reform.” *Theoretical Exploration* 2015.4: 42–45, 43.



### Conclusion: From “Inner Transcendence” to “Shengsheng”

As we have seen, the criticisms have certainly grown over the years, although the concept still has its defenders. I have emphasised the more substantial criticisms: the proposal by non-mainland philosophers turned out to be defensive and strategic, but it fell into the trap of deploying Western philosophical categories in order to defend the philosophical credentials of Chinese philosophy. The problem here is that such categories risk obscuring and distorting the Confucian – and thus Chinese – philosophical legacy, which simply has no need of categories such as transcendence and immanence. The metaphysical and even quasi-religious tendencies of some of the proponents certainly did not help their cause. I also suggested that the idea did have some traction on the mainland in the context of theoretical and cultural disarray of the “wild 90s,” with some spillover into the first decade of the next century, although I also pointed out this period is by now well in the past.

Looking back over this material concerning “inner transcendence,” we can say that it has turned out to be a good example of what is known as “以西解中 yixi-jiezhong, using Western categories in an attempt to understand China<sup>40</sup> But a question remains: what categories are appropriate for understanding Chinese philosophy today? In this conclusion, I can only indicate these themes, for they require a full independent study (in many respects, the present study is a necessary precursor to such research).

In the last decade or so, there has been significant deliberation on the concept of 生生 shengsheng, which literally means “life-life” or “birth-birth,” and can perhaps be translated as “regeneration.”<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Western philosophical discourse and its concern with individual “being,” the repeat of the character 生 sheng indicates the basic reality of

40 Wang Haifeng, “The Realistic Character of Marxist Philosophy in Contemporary China – Reflections on Marxist Philosophical Research in the Past 40 Years of the Reform and Opening-Up.” *Philosophical Trends* 2018.10: 26.

41 At times, we find the fuller 生生不息 shengsheng buxi: continuous regeneration.

relatedness. Let me put it this way: what is the origin of humanity? A man and woman meet and a child results. There is no isolated and aggressive individual here, but a relational order of difference.<sup>42</sup> From this core category, a number of others flow, such as 家 jiā “home” and “household,” 亲亲 qīnqīn “intimacy,” and 尊尊 zūnzūn “respect.”<sup>43</sup> While the semantic field of each term is rich indeed, note again the paired characters, speaking of human interconnection and the integrated relationality of differential existence. Much of the material published in the last decade on these questions concerns how the ancient Confucian categories can be transformed in light of the rapid process of Chinese modernisation, and of course how they can be understood in light of the collective emphasis of sinified Marxist philosophy (which by now cannot be separated from Chinese philosophy but is an integral to philosophy on the mainland). Given that I am merely indicating the contours of a rich discussion in Chinese philosophy, I will not say more here, save to invoke once again the core Confucian category of 仁 rén. Earlier, I mentioned that although the term is usually translated as “benevolence,” the more literal translation as “two-person mindedness” indicates more clearly its emphasis: 人 rén a “person,” and 二 èr “two.”

42 Sun Xiangchen, “Being Unto Death and Continuous Regeneration – The Structure of Existence in Traditional Chinese Culture.” *Religion and Philosophy* 2014.3: 223–35. Sun Xiangchen, “Regeneration: Existence in the Context of Generations.” *Philosophical Research* 2018.9: 113–25. Shen, “Existence and Transcendence,” 152–54. Zhao Tingyang, *The Making and Becoming of China: Its Way of Historicity* (Beijing: China Citic Press, 2016), 100. Yao Zhongqiu, “The Relationality of the Theory of Regeneration: Constructing a Common Theoretical Foundation for the Social Sciences.” *Journal of Renmin University of China* 2021.5: 147–58.

43 Sun Xiangchen, *On Home: Individual and Intimacy* (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press, 2019). Sun Xiangchen “Home: Chinese Culture’s Closest Contemporary Form.” *Journal of the Central Institute of Socialism* 2020.5: 116–23. Yao, “The Relationality of the Theory of Regeneration,” 152–57.

44 This is by no means my own suggestion, for it comes from Zhang Pengchun (also known as P. C. Chang), who was China’s representative on and indeed vice-chair of the UN’s Human Rights Commission as it worked on what became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Playing a core role in seeking common ground among many different cultures and their representatives, Zhang persuaded the drafting committee to include “conscience” along with reason in the first article of the declaration. “Conscience” is here a translation of 仁 rén. Sun Pinghua, *Historic Achievement of a Common Standard: Pengchun Chang and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

The connection with the other terms mentioned in this concluding paragraph should be obvious.

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