Intercultural Philosophy: A Reconstruction and Reimagining

Interview with Eric S. Nelson

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It is not common to specialize in Western philosophy and non-Western philosophy, in your case Chinese philosophy, at the same time. You did your Ph.D. on German thought and continental philosophy, and still publish work in this field. How did your interest in Chinese philosophy start, and would you say it's more an interest than an expertise? You've written books and many articles on Chinese philosophy and its historical relation with Western philosophy, what role has non-Western thought played in your career?

Thank you for the invitation and your interest in my research. I'm happy to be here to discuss it with you. Those are vital questions for me, and hopefully, they'll be of interest to the audience as well. I have a background in German studies and Asian studies as well as philosophy as an undergraduate. I studied Chinese and Indian thought extensively as an undergraduate, and even worked with languages. In graduate school, I had to focus on one area, and my department was primarily only interested in Western philosophy. There was only a little Asian philosophy outside of philosophy in religious studies. I didn't really have an opportunity to integrate my interest in Asian thought into my work then. But immediately after I graduated I was offered the chance to teach a course in Asian philosophy as one of my options, since I had to teach a lot of different classes as a visiting lecturer. I agreed and it went well, and this renewed my interest. I continued to work on my language skills, especially classical Chinese.

That's the background and the reason why I was motivated to study non-Western forms of philosophy, if we can call them that, which I believe we should. These traditions have compelling ways of looking at the human condition and philosophical issues that are from different perspectives than we find in Western philosophy. There's a certain tendency in which Western philosophers tend to project and reproduce their own structures of thought when they encounter ideas

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from the Islamic, Indian, and East Asian worlds. It functions in this case as a form of self-referentiality and the self-reproduction of a hegemonic paradigm that has been criticised as a variety of Orientalism. What interested me was precisely what is distinctive and unique in these discourses, and what cannot be easily assimilated into the Western-European model of philosophising. That's what I've tried to emphasise in my research, whether I'm working on only Chinese philosophical sources or on intercultural projects. While I'm doing that, I'm also continuing my interest in European thought, especially in German, Jewish and French thought, which I enjoy working on as well. It makes philosophy more challenging for me, because I have to keep track of many more things than a lot of my colleagues, but I also find it personally stimulating and truer to the vocation of philosophy.

From this point, we can come to the definition of philosophy (φιλοσοφία) and its intercultural understanding. Since the emergence of the modern Western idea of philosophy, the meaning of philosophy has been limited to Western thought and gained a more ideological sense regarding non-Western people and cultures, traditions, thoughts, and so on. This definition is still being used, as can be seen from philosophy departments, their curricula, and public perceptions. I would like to ask about this definition and its history. How was this ethnocentric definition of philosophy born?

That's an excellent question. It's a complicated one, so I hope I can try to give a brief enough answer in this interview. First, if we return to the now almost mythological Greek origins of philosophy, we do see traces of encounters with non-Greek and non-European thought. We can already use this term, understood as an expression at that time, since early Greek thought had a certain discourse opposing Europe and Asia that Heidegger dwells on. The very distinction between Europe and Asia begins with the Greeks to a certain extent, in their conflicts with Persia. At the same time, if we look at the origin of the idea of philosophy, if we look at the speech of Diotima of Mantinea that Plato portrays as inspiring Socrates, or if we consider early Greek debates concerning the scope and extent of philosophy, whether it's a purely Greek practice or whether it includes non-Greek discourses as well, we can see that there is a pluralistic or intercultural milieu that shapes the origins and development of Greek philosophy. Even the most resolute Eurocentric thinker should acknowledge that the figure of Diotima is a figure of the foreign, for example, bringing unfamiliar near-Eastern wisdom to Socrates in the form of a revelation of the good. Plato is said to have been inspired by Egyptian thought and the Sceptics by Indian thought. Throughout the history of early Greek philosophy, as we see in Diogenes Laërtius, for example, there is a record

of a long debate in Greek philosophy about whether philosophy can only be a Greek intellectual discourse, or whether the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Persians have something similar to philosophy as well, even though they don't use that specific expression "philosophy" but speak of wisdom. Among the ancient Greek thinkers, both positions are found. For some Greeks, philosophy was specifically a Greek practice. It identified a Greek form of life in ways that could not be associated with other cultures. But others said no, what the Egyptians, for example, the Egyptian priests and intellectuals, are doing is parallel to what we're doing. This is philosophy as well. The very debate over whether philosophy is identified with one culture or with a multiplicity of cultures is an early one with Greek thought. And it only becomes more complicated in the Hellenistic period when Greek thought interacted with thought from the Near East to South Asia, as well. In terms of the formation of the idea of philosophy as exclusively European, there was initially a Greek idea of philosophy as potentially only Greek, but this itself was contested in Antiquity.

In the formation of the modern period, there were new encounters between Europe and the so-called non-European world in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Americas. Initially we see that people did not have this idea that philosophy was exclusively European. For example, one figure I've looked at closely is Leibniz. He's happy to say that there's Islamic philosophy, Chinese philosophy, and so on. He has no commitment to state that philosophy is only Greek or European in character, even though he privileges the latter in some ways. A radical shift happens from the 18th through the early 19th century. At the beginning of the 18th century, scholars still speak of philosophy in a broader way, where philosophy is still wisdom aiming at being a science. Even if it's not science *per se*, that's the intention. And different traditions of wisdom are trying to obtain insights into the nature of our life, the universe, God and so forth. But by the end of the 18th century, philosophy is identified with only one tradition, that transmitted from ancient Greece, which is one element of the formation of a Eurocentric ideology. The other element is the project of modernity itself. In modernity, the idea of a systematic science of reason is identified as a uniquely modern European achievement. Systematic science and freedom have at best only a preliminary form, even in previous European cultures. By the time we arrive at Hegel the realization of philosophy is only partial, even in Greek thought, in Hegel's view, as they love wisdom rather than possess science. Hegel examines Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Jewish philosophy, and considers them fragmentary and incomplete. In his opinion they are not yet philosophy in the real, genuine, realized sense of the word, because only philosophy as a systematic science of reason is truly philosophy. Philosophy as a Greco-European transmission is one element in the construction of

Eurocentrism, and the other is this self-proclaimed realization of Europe as the realization of reason in history. This paradigm is at work not only in Hegel, but throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. We'll talk about it later in Husserl, as well. Even though he's no friend of Hegel's thought, they share a similar structure in how the idea of Europe is conceived in relationship to history and the exclusivity of modern European philosophy as a systematic science.

In terms of East Asia, it's true that if you go to any philosophy programme in East Asia today, they make a distinction between philosophy—which is European, Western philosophy—and the traditional forms of thought. Most universities in Korea, Japan, and China have this distinction built into the structure of their programmes. New students and teachers are often encouraged to stick to one or the other. People hired in Chinese philosophy, for example, in Beijing, are encouraged to focus on Chinese philosophy. And those who are hired to do Western thought are encouraged to Western thought. This divide is deeply entrenched. It globally structures present-day philosophy departments and philosophical publishing throughout the world, and this is a deformation of what philosophy should be. Philosophy has been increasingly specialized since the 19th century, where researchers focus on a specific set of issues or problems set in a limited context, whether it's the philosophy of language or Kant scholarship. Due to that focus on specialization, philosophers have lost the ability to work across different schools, transmissions, and cultures. It's a problem within European philosophical discourses insofar as these distinct groups likewise don't talk to one another. Continental and analytic philosophies are often construed as if they could never communicate with each other. But we have the problem of communicating across even more distant cultures and languages when we introduce Chinese philosophy. I believe a more pluralistic dialogical understanding of philosophy can begin to challenge this situation. In addition, there are structural problems that require radical structural changes in the very institutions and practices of philosophy.

This definition of philosophy supposes that there is a continuous Western identity from the Greeks to the moderns, and also that it mostly denies all possible entanglements, interconnections and interactions in history. How can we understand philosophy as opposed to these ideological constructions and illusions? In short, what is philosophy?

This is a key dimension to the Eurocentric understanding of philosophy. Another is, as you just alluded to, the definition of modernity. This concerns the prejudice that there is one continuous tradition. It assumes that we share an unbroken

transmission from the Pre-Socratic thinkers and Plato to now. There's a particular way of understanding tradition that plays a problematic role. Although I appreciate Gadamer's insights into tradition, the notion of tradition as this transmission from Greece to modernity is highly problematic because it does not want to perceive all the discontinuities, all the breaks and dialogical transformations that shape this history and don't merely expand the same horizon. So when I study hermeneutics, I prefer Dilthey because he better appreciates historical plurality and generational change. Dilthey offers a much more complex notion of tradition than found in Gadamer. There's a conflicting plurality of transmissions from generation to generation, as each generation adopts and transfigures them in ways that produce intervals (*Abstände*) that cannot be easily fused into one horizon or reduced to the continuity of one tradition.

Likewise, the critiques of tradition, beginning with Heidegger, and on into Derrida and Richard Rorty, presuppose what I described in my 2017 book as a form of negative Eurocentrism. They share the same flawed presupposition of identity as the communitarian or traditionalist model. On the one hand, they critique the metaphysical, onto-theological, and logocentric tradition of Western ontology. So that's good. I'm sympathetic to their diagnosis, and it helped inspire my research. That's why I often return to Heidegger, despite his many problems, because I find it fruitful for confronting the present and its history. This radical critique of that tradition is itself reifying of that tradition, because all three figures conclude that philosophy is only a European tradition, beginning with the pre-Socratic moment and concluding with globalized European modernity. That's why I spent a lot of time in *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* critiquing this Heideggerian model of the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy that still shapes contemporary thought. I'm sympathetic to Heidegger's project of destructuring the history of metaphysics and encountering the experiential sources of concepts and arguments. However, Heidegger himself undermines this strategy by positing the exclusivity and unity of tradition in critiquing it. Consequently, you can deconstruct but not overcome this tradition in Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty, and philosophy remains a European category. One problematic side of Heidegger is this understanding of the history of being, which I examined in my 2017 work. Still, Heidegger should be appreciated for indicating ways of critiquing Western onto-theology and opening dialogues with varieties of Asian thinking that we should take even further. In that way, I find Heidegger an ambiguous, problematic, and yet highly significant philosopher for our time.

What is the attitude of Heidegger toward non-Western philosophies? In some of his texts there are some mentions of Daoist philosophy, but does it find a place in his overall philosophy?

First, Heidegger often doesn't mention his interactions and sources. It's typical of him to develop an idea in dialogue and confrontation with another discourse or thinker, then not speak of it again. Husserl, Dilthey, Natorp, and others played pivotal roles in the formation of *Being and Time* and faded into the background in the published work. It's characteristic of Heidegger to develop his thoughts in interaction with others that drop away in his final analysis. That's his style of writing and analysis. He's not pursuing "mere" historiography of philosophy in his own mind. He's doing phenomenology. Even if there's an occasion for the genesis of his insight, he presents the insight in a phenomenological way. That's my best explanation for that practice.

Secondly, we often see how earlier references and sources drop out over time. "The Essence of Truth" seems to have all these Daoist resonances in it. Readers have speculated about this. The first version has now been published and it explicitly mention Daoism. There are ways we can reconstruct this semi-hidden dialogue that he had in the emergence of his own analyses. This is what I undertake in *Heidegger and Dao*. There are a variety of reasons why he does this with the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. First, he wants to directly encounter phenomena and explicate them from themselves, and thus leaves behind the genesis of his arguments. Second, if he doesn't know the original language sources he's reluctant to speak about them at length. He's willing to talk about early Greek philosophy because he assumes his Greek is adequate. He's unwilling to engage with Chinese philosophy more extensively since he doesn't feel he can encounter the sources and what they're trying to say. Despite the accusation of arrogance, Heidegger does have a sense of deference and humility. When it comes to intercultural dialogue and sources that he cannot read in the original, he expresses a humility about whether he can adequately understand and communicate the ideas. On the one hand, it seems unhelpful if this limits communication. On the other hand, it's worthwhile to recognize the limits of interpretation and communication. Remarkably, at one point he tried to learn Chinese sufficiently to read the *Daodejing* and translate it together with a Chinese scholar. In the closing years of the Second World War, he met with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, the Chinese scholar who audited his lecture courses, and they pursued translating the *Daodejing* together. Even though this translation did not survive, analyses based on that translation do survive in his writings after 1943.

Can also I ask about your new book about *Heidegger and Dao*? Can you mention what you want to do in this book?

Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought is undeniably critical of Heidegger's model of the history of being as overly monolithic. Heidegger relies on selective key moments of the "great thinkers" and ignores the exceptions to his narrative, the intercultural elements—such as the role of Islamic philosophy—and ostensibly minor figures where radical shifts also occurred. This model doesn't acknowledge either the internal variety or the external entanglements of European philosophical traditions (as there is no one history or tradition). Heidegger's reductive model of the history of being is woefully inadequate and in need of critical intercultural transformation. There are insights we can gain through Heidegger's encounters and dialogues that move him beyond this limited definition of philosophy as Greek-Occidental. His engagement and learning from Daoism, Buddhism, and Japanese thought reflect what is best in Heidegger's thinking. In this book, *Heidegger and Dao: Things, Nothingness, Freedom*, I'm more appreciative of how Heidegger is willing to learn from and adopt from Daoist sources from as early as 1919 and he remains in dialogue with these sources at crucial points throughout his life. I trace how these engagements shape the course of his own thinking concerning the thing, nothingness and the clearing, freedom and releasement. In the book, I reconstruct the historical context of Heidegger's engagement with Daoism and Buddhism and the philosophical issues involved. I trace how they shape his own thinking about a certain set of key pivotal issues. Most extraordinarily, there is a radical shift in his own thinking in 1942-1943 correlated an intensive engagement with the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. It is a quasi or partial Daoist turn in his thinking that helps him confront pivotal problems of his thinking during the Nazi era. This Daoist encounter launches the later stage of his thinking. Without this Daoist wisdom, which he doesn't dare call philosophy, we would not have the later Heidegger. Still, we need to be critical readers of the philosophers we interpret. When I consider Husserl, Levinas, Heidegger, or Adorno, I attempt to balance their better aspirations with their failures and unresolved problems that are now questions for us and our reading. This means that the history of philosophy is simultaneously a reimagining and a dialogue. We shouldn't be beholden in a devotional way. We ought to be encouraged to critique, transform, and reimagine their words and aspirations. This is what I do with elements from Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Heidegger. The historical contextualization and reconstruction lead to a reimaging of how we might interact with things, enregioning environments, and the world in ways that could help address the ecological and environmental crises that we're currently facing.

How was the term φιλοσοφία translated into Chinese and Japanese? Before the translation of the term into these languages, how did they express their love of wisdom, and their pursuit of truth? Is the term "philosophy" a univocal condition to "philosophize"?

That's another intriguing question. Even within these cultural contexts, there are denials that what they were pursuing was philosophy. Sometimes they say it's not philosophy in a negative Eurocentric way. But others argue it is a wisdom superior to philosophy. Traditional Chinese wisdom is not philosophy because it's superior in how it interacts with and encompasses the world in contrast to European philosophy. So there are internal debates about adopting this expression. The notion that the Chinese had before the introduction of the modern Western notion of philosophy was expressed in several ways: the study of the Way (*Dao* 道), the study of patterning principle (*li* 理) that structures the world, or the study of one's own heart-mind (*xin* 心) that encompasses the cosmos. From antiquity to the last dynasty, there were various forms of argumentation and reasoning about the self, nature, ethics, and politics. I think we should call this philosophy if philosophy is a self-reflective practice and a self-examining way of thinking that shapes a form of life. If philosophy is understood existentially rather than merely doctrinally, it begins when one begins to reflectively examine and question one's own and the human condition. This existential definition of how philosophy originates signifies that philosophy begins in a sense of wonder and crisis that leads to questioning. We can find this moment of self-reflection and self-questioning in any culture, as people face existential questions about what they're doing, why they are there, what it all means, and whether it has a value or purpose. There's a kind of universality to philosophy through the existential particularity of the human condition, in the questions that we face on a daily basis when they call forth more than a habitual or customary response. Therefore, philosophy does have a reference to questioning and the inquiry that begins with our own self. In this sense, philosophy is found throughout the global religious and so-called wisdom traditions. For instance, religious sources such as Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job question the notions of God, justice, and the meaning of cyclic nature. This gives philosophy a critical tone for me. I don't think ordinary unexamined opinions and the national mindset of peoples is philosophy. Some people talk as if philosophy is merely the mindset or the opinions of a group of people. For them, Chinese philosophy refers to how ordinary Chinese people typically think, as if they had one group mind. Description and categorization are, at their best and most complex, anthropology or sociology and, at their worst and most banal, cultural reification and essentialism. Philosophy happened in traditional China analogous to how it occurred in Greece: in questioning the order of nature and through examining oneself. We see

Zhuangzi and Confucius posing penetrating questions about the cosmos and how to live. Confucius asks questions concerning the best way to live in a distinctive way that parallels the Socratic question of how one should best live. You have these powerful forms of self-reflection that turn to reflection and discourse, which are then suitable to being explored in existential and philosophical ways.

The modern Chinese term for Western philosophy is "wisdom studies" (*zhexue* 哲學). It retains the Greek reference to wisdom, and expresses that philosophy is a learning of wisdom. When we see philosophy merely as a specialist or technical study, then we lose the sense of aspiring to wisdom and self-examination. Academic Western philosophy, despite its appeal to Greek origins, is far more distant to what philosophy signifies than ancient Indian, Chinese, or Egyptian antiquity, as individuals reflectively encountered their own condition. This is philosophy's genuine aspiration.

In your book, *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*, you focus on the alterity and non-identity of the material others by dealing with two philosophers from two different movements, Adorno and Levinas. What brings these two figures into the same pot? The book also offers a form of hermeneutics for the contemporary environmental and political situation regarding ethics, religion, nature, and history. We would like to hear about the great project of your book and your critical inquiry into these philosophers through the notion of "nourishing life", which you also used in your book *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*.

I've worked extensively on Levinas in the context of phenomenology and Adorno in the context of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. I show how they each offer significant albeit underappreciated strategies for confronting contemporary ethical and political problems I seek to radicalize the figures of their thought. In many ways, I'm offering a reconstruction and reimaging of the practical side of that thought. I'd say the materialist side of Levinas and the ethical side of Adorno brings them into greater proximity and allows us to reimagine and critique contemporary ethical and political philosophy and its aporias, and specifically in Habermas and Honneth. I'm generally in alignment with that political sensibility, but they overly limit the social-political to intersubjective symmetrical relations of communicative action or recognition as a basis of equality. This is problematic, since we should acknowledge the asymmetrical structures of responsibility as Levinas elucidates, but also the asymmetrical ethical relations we have with non-human beings such as animals, plants, ecosystems, and environments, as I discuss in part one of this book and in my book *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy*.

I think the notion of non-identity or alterity connected with asymmetry can give us a more powerful ethical and political model to face a broader array of social problems within humanity, and also how humans interact with their environment, other species, and the natural world. That theme unites my books on Adorno and Levinas and Heidegger and Daoism. It's a pivotal concept in my 2020 *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy* and *Heidegger and Daoism*. They each concern in their specific way a damaged life *vis-à-vis* a nourishing life. We live, to adopt Adorno's well-known expression, damaged lives in modernity. As a return to past forms of life is not a convincing option, and such projects have their own destructive dialectic in modernity, we need to reimagine what modernity and rationality can be and renew for ourselves how humans and their natural worlds interact. This is where early Daoism is helpful. The *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* offer a less anthropocentric and more participatory conception of what it is to be human within the world. Humans are co-participants in nourishing or damaging life. We participate in intersubjective social relations, as Habermas and Honneth emphasize, but we also participate in natural relations with things, animals, and local and global environments. Because we are relational participants, there's an ethos of how we dwell and interact with things in nourishing life. The ethos of things, which Heidegger adopted from Daoism, is crucial to answering the more destructive sides of the dialectic of enlightenment and modernity. Naturally, we cannot easily return, as people like to say, to a so-called "primitive state". This is not what early Daoism is advocating. Rather, it's about what kinds of comportment we have in relationship to our activity and technology, in relation to the things and environments. As participants in life, do we nourish or damage life? Nourishing life is often not the focus of philosophical interpretations of Daoism. They focus on the other key concepts of non- or responsive action (*wuwei* 無為), often in a depoliticizing way, and nature as auto- or sympoietic self-ordering (*ziran* 自然). However, you only arrive at a holistic picture when you see how *wuwei* and *ziran* entail acting in a more responsive and resonant way with things and environments as part of the process of nourishing life. The point of this is a receptive action, resonant doing, with the autopoietic self-ordering of things and systems to nourish common life. We should begin to see ourselves as participants in nourishing the life of things, and not only in relations of intersubjective recognition. Early Daoism, or what I describe as the "ziranist" tendencies in these sources, indicates a different sensibility about how we comport ourselves as thoroughly relational beings who find freedom in relation. Daoism had, no doubt, a radically different historical context and interest than our own. Yet we can still adopt these exemplars and models from the past to confront and reimagine our own situation and the current environmental devastation and climate crisis that we're facing as humans with their own species-being, who exist within a broader relational nexus that Marx described as metabolic.

Your book *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life* focuses on the philosophy of nature in Chinese philosophy to shed light on the contemporary environmental crisis. For a proper account, you avoid many popular impressions about Daoism and the environment. Rather than simply finding a remedy for the contemporary problem in a non-Western form of philosophy, you offer a broad and critical understanding of Daoism on this matter by engaging in a phenomenological way with the Daoist philosophers. Do you want to mention your hermeneutical strategies for reading Daoist texts in the context of a contemporary crisis?

What motivated me in part is the popular misunderstanding that Daoism is intrinsically ecological in a simplistic and ideological way. For example, some speak of Daoism as a green philosophy, even green religion, and Chinese culture as intrinsically green and environmental. This is an ideological discourse promoted by the Chinese government to bolster Chinese identity. We should be suspicious of ideological deployments of historic philosophies as tools for the prevailing ideological purposes of different regimes and movements. This concern also applies to pure multiculturalism, which is simultaneously naïve and cynical. It suggests that whatever a culture does is legitimate, since it sets its own standards, and it is ethnocentric or racist to judge or criticize. This is a distortion that betrays people as participants in their own form of life. Many people, quite rightly, want to be critical of their governments and the traditions that have been transmitted to them. Should the Chinese people not question the Chinese government because it is taken to determines what it means to be Chinese? Can others not question their government because of culture and tradition? I find this a conservative definition of culture that redefines it into static identities that must be obeyed. My sense of multiculturalism is that it needs a less apologetic and a more intercultural and critical role that encourages individuals to be participants in and reflectively appropriate their own traditions. If a Chinese person wants to question whether Chinese culture intrinsically has a certain set of characteristics that are complimentary to the current government, they can do so without offending some cultural essence. That's the background concern of some of those statements concerning the need to be careful about apologetic and ideological uses of ideas we might otherwise advocate. Multiculturalism can critically challenge the *status quo* in given cultures and it betrays itself when it justifies the *status quo* in other cultures. When cultures are used in the opposite way to legitimate regimes, we should be encouraged to question them. This is why we should not just take green Daoism as a value in and of itself, because it has this ideological aura and use around it. My reconstruction and reimagining of early Daoism has to examine both its historical context as well as our own situation. I consider these differ-

ent varieties of Daoist and related distinctive philosophies such as Egoism and Legalism. They reveal how there are different models of ethically and politically co-relating with things and nature. They each have distinctive modalities with different implications for our present epoch. If you look at the Huanglao and more legalistic side of these discourses, you might conclude that the only way to resolve the ecological crisis would be to have an ecototalitarian green leviathan to regulate things so that everything would be done for the sake of the environment according to administrative and legal directives. Such a model is problematic. The *Daodejing* describes how the more that law and power are utilized, the more the people will resist, and the Way will wither. In addition to the anarchic autopoietic or sympoietic—which name the same process in Daoism—self-ordering of the *Daodejing*, there is the problem analysed by Max Weber: power leads to the entrenchment of bureaucracy and corruption. The path of power is neither a realistic nor an appealing way to resolve present ecological problems.

Instead, we need to aspire to or approximate a more ecological anarchic-participatory democratic process in which people are mobilized from their own motivations. Because the only way humanity survives as a species is through its own self-ordering motivations and activities; that is, from our own insight to act in a different way that is less destructive and more nourishing in relation to the environment and each other. In Daoist transmissions, there is an anarchistic tendency emphasizing self-ordering and self-organization. The systems of nature are mutually self-organizing, which calls for reverence, respect, and sharing with them in the nurturing of life. According to this model, human societies can maximize self-ordering, or they can fall into disorder by relying on coercive means. We see certain passages in the *Daodejing* and their outright "anarchistic" thinkers in the post-Han period. They consider how the best form of rule would be either a ruler who allows the people to order themselves, or the people order themselves without a ruler. I use such passages as a critical model for contemporary bio- and eco-politics. In our contemporary setting, given issues of economic and social complexity and the abuses of unchecked power, we might not be pure anarchists. It would be overwhelming for people to self-organize everything even with a developed ethos of mutual aid. A second-best approximation would be to maximize the participatory and deliberative potential of the public and social institutions in a democratic manner. Freedom as mutual self-ordering could be potentially more responsive not only to other humans, but also to natural environments and things. After a survey of different perspectives and arguments, I adopt a Lao-Zhuang ziranist model of nurturing life and then consider its implications for our contemporary situation. In that way, the notion of nourishing life from Daoism intersects with nourishing damaged life in the Adorno and Levinas and the Heidegger and Daoism books.

You propose the intercultural reinterpretation of philosophy. In which ways does intercultural philosophy treat notions of universality and relativism? In many discourses of Western philosophy, we are warned about a threat and risk of relativism or historicism if we attempt to think of philosophy outside of these discourses and Western history. On the other hand, in recent decades, inspired by the decolonization movement, some scholars in the humanities have become suspicious of all claims of universalism, even if they don't support any version of relativism. How can we think of the intercultural understanding of philosophy without any appeal to the dichotomic language of universalism and relativism? Is universality a univocal term or can we discern its different forms?

It appears to me that this is conceived in an exclusive, one-sided way where we must be either universalist or particularist. Both sides have these real dangers because we want to embrace the local, the particular, and the different in and of itself. But this can be reified in forms of ethnocentrism, nationalism, and fundamentalism. We should be a reflective and critical particularist rather than uncritically embracing whatever particularity we find ourselves within. I wouldn't want to, on the other hand, appeal to the universal in an abstract or unmediated way, because that too is part of our current dilemma. We can think of the universal in an abstract and reductive way and thus lose the capacity to responsively recognize differences that matter in a locality and situation. Universality must also be thought of in a self-critical way without subsuming everything into a generalized concept or systematic totality.

The question is how do we develop a discourse that's not committed to one-dimensional universalism or particularism? This intercultural model that I advocate addresses precisely this: we have to examine how the universal is never purely universal but is embodied in a concrete entangled situation. Existence is more complex than the conceptualist and universalist thinker would like to acknowledge. Still, we should recognize a certain value or worthiness in the aspiration towards universality. For example, one postcolonial or decolonial critique of human rights is that cosmopolitanism and human rights were associated with legitimating European colonialism and expansion. This is undeniably true. We must critique human rights insofar as they are conceptually and historically complicit with colonialism. But there's a danger here. Certain ideologies and regimes conclude that human rights must be eliminated as a form of foreign coercion. Then there's a problem on the other side, as oppressed peoples in every nation appeal to human rights, often as their last resort. Because these rights have a problematic use in the past, does that entail that we must disregard them altogether as intrinsically bad? Or do we want to interculturally rethink human rights in a way where we can still conclude that individual and social rights are important for people across different cultures? Even if how these rights are enacted and embodied in any given national

community will vary. There still should be a sense of a respect for the person, for the protester who wants to assert their freedom to say how society should be. In that sense, human rights have to be rethought in a more critical, less Eurocentric way, where it's not just this empty or ideological universal, but it has this critical function in relationship to particularity at the same time. Often this sense can be generated through a certain immanent critique. If you look at protest movements across the globe, they appeal to notions of rights, freedom, and equality to confront the current situation. We don't want to dismiss the thirst for more universal aspirations that various peoples have to critically confront ongoing injustices. This does not mean governments should invade other countries in the name of human rights, which is another ideological use. In that sense, we should be critical of both the universal and the particular.

Adorno notes how any given concept, no matter how worthwhile it might be in itself, has ideological uses. Freedom is a basic critical norm, and yet it is also an ideologically exploited term. It can be used to justify existing regimes. Nevertheless, even though it has this hegemonic ideological sense, it also has a critical sense to it. So even amidst an ideology of freedom, freedom can be reactivated or reimagined in ways that speaks to the freedom that repressed and oppressed individuals want to express. In that sense, I think we need to look at these concepts as multivalent. It depends on the systems in which they are enacted. They have a critical potential along with their ideological deployment. If we simply conclude that they are only ideology and power, then we lose the capacity to reflectively critique and change our situation.

The issue of understanding and encountering the other is one of the central concerns of intercultural philosophy, maybe of all human endeavour of thinking. With regard to intercultural philosophy, one can find different ways of dealing with the other. For example, some philosophers attribute almost an absolute alterity to non-Western philosophies, such as François Jullien's view of China. Or some others find in non-Western philosophies an alternative possibility and a means for decentring or deconstructing the Western idea of reason and history without a proper attempt of understanding them, but by a kind of marginalization of them. What are the fair and proper ways to understand other traditions of thought? Where does the critique take place in the encounter with the other?

Even the notion of absolute alterity can be heavily reified. It can take on an ideological character. Even though I appreciate and rely on this notion of alterity from Levinas and Derrida, we should think about it in more ambiguous and critical ways, because the absolute alterity of the other can itself function as another rei-

fied piece of identity, whether in religion or culture. One example is the notion of God and people in certain conservative readings of Levinas. If we're thinking of cultures in the sense of the absolute alterity of a different culture then it becomes a fixation, because we're not absolutely other than each other, but different in myriad intersecting ways. We still have possibilities of communication, understanding, and coming into agreements and engaging in common actions. The notion of absolute alterity is pivotal in my own work to critique notions of identity. I'm deeply appreciative of this strategy. But when it becomes an end in itself, to state that everything is different and there's no communication, then we end up in a bad relativism where everything is isolated in its particularity. Nothing is related to anything else or relatable through communication or imagination. The notion of absolute alterity then ends instead of opening encounter and communication. It ends up with a fragmented world where each culture has its own self-enclosed identity, but cannot genuinely communicate with others, and cannot examine and critique itself. That's an overly conservative outcome. The notion of alterity is itself a European concept that Jullien uses to think about China as the other of Europe. This notion of absolute alterity cannot be found in classical Chinese texts. They have their own, often binary and interactive ways of thinking of differences, and so absolute otherness is an overly European model to conceptualize this. Instead of thinking about absolute alterity, or identity as opposed to difference, we should think about alterity in relationship to entanglements. Entanglement is a concept I adopt from history, since we are relationally entangled with others in the world. The key is to trace how we are entangled with others in our differences and affinities and in different perspectives in shared structures. In the world today we have this global neoliberal market and state system that links us all together. Simply appealing to absolute alterity does nothing to confront the real situation of the neoliberal economic domination seen across the world today, despite differences in culture. The same logic of the market and the state relations determines Chinese, Turkish, or American politics. A more critical notion of alterity is needed. That's precisely what I develop in my 2020 Levinas and Adorno book: how we can use alterity in a critical way rather than endlessly fixating it. That's why I'm critical of certain readings of Levinas, Derrida, and even Adorno. Alterity, *différance*, and non-identity become an empty rhetoric without diagnostic consequences. Žižek states that Levinas is the most radical philosopher conceivable in his rhetoric, but this absolute alterity has no actual impact or relevance. That's an unfair criticism of Levinas, but it does make a point that we shouldn't reify alterity in ways that we can no longer engage in practices and forms of communication with others. This is pivotal to radicalizing the notion of alterity, not by making it more rhetorically radical and speculative, but by bringing it back to confront real human relations and relations between humans and non-humans.

Basically, to borrow Adorno's term again, the logic of identification must be interrupted, not only for its own sake, but to try to initiate a change in how we do things, how we experience ourselves, and how we engage in practices. A certain suspicion I have concerning the discourse of absolute alterity is its ideological use. In East Asia today, many people are not so much worried about Eurocentrism as much as Sinocentrism for various social and political reasons. This is not due to Eurocentrism or the absolute alterity of China, but to the current situation. We clearly need a notion of alterity that can move across different cultures and also challenge them, when necessary, when people feel that a certain ideology, culture, or political actor has become too powerful or to justify expanding ambitions. In this sense, we should be vigilant with both sides of the dialectic of alterity and identification and premature assertions of identity. Although this language stems from Adorno, Heidegger states something analogous when he engages with his Japanese interlocutors. When he reads Nishida and Nishitani, he's sympathetic to these Japanese thinkers and simultaneously worried about how they simply identify with European thinkers, including Hegel and his own thought. A process of identification too eagerly moves across cultures. It is premature and loses the sense of difference and thus potential for genuine dialogue between Japanese and German thinking. This gesture of anticipation rather than identification leads some to accuse Heidegger of undermining dialogue and communication. His warning is well taken, as we should be reticent before the other and careful how dialogue proceeds, since agreement cannot simply be assumed beforehand. A Sino-Japanese concept such as "*dao*" does not mean the same thing as the German word "*Weg*". They have radically different linguistic and experiential fields of relational significance. We always have to take this into account as well. Dialogue transitions across differences without presupposing one horizon. A given pair of words or ideas have affinities and differences at the same time. Even though Heidegger has other problems, this is a pertinent warning to avoid premature identification. Still, we shouldn't conclude that Germans and Japanese can never communicate. The other side of the criticism of Heidegger, which I explore in *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought*, is how Heidegger moves between opening and closing off communicative possibilities. He says that we do not truly communicate between the German sense of "*Sein*" and the Chinese sense of "*dao*". An overinterpretation asserts a multicultural essentialism of the impossibility of genuine conversation. This is incorrect, as Heidegger says we can with reticence and patience anticipate and prepare for the event of communication. Yet we can't assume that this communication is already decided. If we read Heidegger in that way, it serves as a critical reminder of how to engage in intercultural communication.

As a continuation of my earlier question, how does intercultural hermeneutics differ from other hermeneutical strategies of the 20th century? Can intercultural hermeneutics help us to reorient "Western" hermeneutics in a way towards culturally appropriate and philosophically adequate hermeneutics?

That's an excellent question. That's one of my key questions as well because of my passion for 19th-century hermeneutics. There are crucial insights in the works of Schleiermacher and Dilthey that are lost in Heidegger, Gadamer, and their students. For example, Heidegger and Gadamer have a much more communitarian sense of meaning and how it functions in contrast to the relational individualism of 19th-century German liberalism from Wilhelm von Humboldt and Schleiermacher to Dilthey. First, Schleiermacher and Dilthey recognize the importance of tradition and community in the formation of meaning, but they are more attuned to differences and individuality in communication. That's why questions of one's self-reflective starting point and method are essential to this 19th-century discourse that Gadamer finds so alien. This question means that we cannot assume that we directly understand the other through the collective reality of culture, society, or tradition. When we fail to understand our immediate neighbour, despite sharing all these collective truths, how then do we go about understanding? How do we reflectively check whether our understanding is appropriate or not? These are pertinent questions to ask, even if we disagree with the psychological models that Schleiermacher and Dilthey used. My understanding of hermeneutics is consequently quite different from how it is presently used based on Heidegger and Gadamer. Nineteenth-century hermeneutics is more concerned with individual self-understanding from the first-person perspective, the dialogical second-person relation, and with criticism as part of self-formation (*Selbstbildung*) and liberal reform in ways that were later underappreciated. Schleiermacher and Dilthey each connected the practice of hermeneutics, and hermeneutics is primarily a practice, with criticism. These are linked such that interpretation must self-reflectively consider the differences between the position of the text and one's own positionality. It thus tries to contest the presentism of identity and fusion. In this context, hermeneutics is already intercultural even within a supposedly identical culture and tradition. It's a key task of hermeneutics because not only between cultures, but even within our own culture, we face misunderstanding and misinterpretation all the time, as all of us experience in everyday life. Schleiermacher makes the pivotal statement that we should assume that misunderstanding is the norm. Gadamer criticizes this, as if we immediately understand each other since we share the same tradition. Schleiermacher's point reflects reality. If I meet other English-speaking people from my own era and locality, I don't immediately understand them. We share a similar background, but that background

does not guarantee mutual understanding and recognition. Indeed, I have met people from radically different cultures and shared a deeper understanding in the encounter and interaction itself. This is why we should be suspicious of the priority of the social that undervalues these deeply individual reciprocal moments that happen despite tradition. This relates to Levinas's insistence that there is a direct asymmetrical encounter with the Other that cannot be reduced to a social category such as tradition. Monolithic ideas of the presuppositions of understanding, rationality in Habermas and tradition in Gadamer, prevent understanding more than they nourish it. My emphasis on the intercultural character of hermeneutics is a crucial correction. We don't need to share a tradition or form of reason to communicate, we only need to engage in communication with all its difficulties and challenges. Obviously, we communicate through languages. Somehow, we understand across different perspectives and languages and don't need to fuse our horizons to communicate. Rather, we speak given the means that we have in the situation. Genuinely understanding the Other is a question within a given community. Even the most standardized conformist community faces issues of misinterpretation and miscommunication. It's more typical that we must contest the ordinary shared understanding to have a genuine encounter and understanding. The radical intercultural moment of interpretation is much richer and more complicated given the diversity of structures at play. It requires more work to realize what we are communicating about in that situation and yet understanding still occurs. Intra- and intercultural communication involve common problems of how to understand. We cannot assume that this is automatically predetermined or given even though they are socially reproduced through the lifeworld. Still, there's the potential to ask what we are doing, what we are understanding in ordinary unreflective activities. This concerns not only understanding the Other, but also understanding oneself in this relation.

How do you see the future of intercultural philosophy? Do you think that it remains a necessary task for contemporary philosophizing?

I would say yes: communication is a necessary task. Dialogue is needed both within and between cultures. I'm not fixated on an absolute distinction between intra- and intercultural philosophizing since that is another reification of self and Other. Asymmetrical differences arise across a relational continuum or spectrum of intervals that can neither be collapsed into identity or difference. Misunderstanding, miscommunication, problems of translation and interpretation are inevitable, and this situation is what it means to communicate. Perfect mutual understanding would not require language or hermeneutics. Philosophers need to

critically engage and analyse their own presuppositions and prejudices, or their own claims and arguments in relationship to others. Any monolithic idea of a tradition, culture, or society that assumes that all is already known and decided betrays the questionability at the heart of philosophical inquiry. The distinctiveness of philosophy consists in entering this questionability and examining are own presuppositions. Scepticism is closer to the truth of philosophy than any dogmatism. Socrates didn't assert that one should live how everyone else in a tradition is currently living. He asked himself and others to engage in self-examination. Confucius likewise has this existential philosophical moment. He affirms appropriately following the right ritual life and ethical norms. But he reflects on how this enacts the good to arrive at this model. That's a prototypical philosophical movement. It's part of the existential condition of philosophy to pursue questions about ourselves, and to do so in a communicative way with others in dialogue, argument, and even disagreement. All of these are elements of the philosophical vocation to maintain its critical roles in examining its historical and present situations.

Thank you so much.