

Being Between: Comparative and Transcultural Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay argues that *comparative* and *transcultural* philosophy are interdependent, and so opting for only one of the two is an impossibility. The *comparative* approach persists as long as we distinguish identities and make differences. As long as people do not speak only one language, the need to move between different languages and to translate, and thus the need to relate and compare different possibilities of philosophical articulation, will remain. Any attempt to free oneself from the problem of cultural identity is doomed to failure, as it leads to further entrapment in the very same problem. *Comparative* philosophy works with more or less fixed identities, *transcultural* philosophy transforms them and thereby creates new identities. Those two approaches combined constitute what I call *intercultural* philosophy.

In this essay I try to explain the relation between comparative and transcultural philosophy by connecting François Jullien’s “comparative” and Martin Heidegger’s “transcultural” understanding of “Being” (*Sein*) and “Between” (*Zwischen*). In part 1 I argue that by turning *Between* and *Being* into opposing paradigms of Chinese and Greek thinking, respectively, Jullien causes both to become more or less fixed representatives of different cultural identities within a comparative framework: Greek thinking ossifies into traditional metaphysics, and Chinese thinking ossifies into the non-metaphysical thinking of immanence. Part 2 argues that Heidegger takes a decisively different direction. He explores the *Between* *in* *Being*, and even makes an attempt to think of *Being as* *Between*. Heidegger’s invocation of “Greekdom” is undoubtedly Eurocentric. But, ironically, Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” is less Eurocentric than Jullien’s “Chinese thinking”, because he discovers the “Chinese” *Between* in the midst of “Greek” *Being*. Part 3 touches upon the task of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms. While modern Chinese philosophers frequently speak about Chinese philosophy in European terms, Heidegger’s work points to the possibility of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms. Because Jullien and Heidegger both connect Greek and Chinese thought, it seems to me that the discussion of their different approaches is helpful in clarifying perspectives for intercultural philosophy between China and Europe.

Keywords: Being, Between, comparative, transcultural, intercultural, ontology, breath-energy (*qi* 氣), identity, Martin Heidegger, François Jullien

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Biti vmes: primerjalna in transkulturna filozofija

Izvleček

Pričujoči članek izhaja iz vzajemne odvisnosti *primerjalne* in *transkulturne* filozofije ter tako pokaže, da je nemogoče odločiti se zgolj za eno od obeh alternativ. *Primerjalna* izhodišča so uporabna samo, dokler priznavamo obstoj identitet in jih med seboj razločujemo. Potreba po prehajanju med različnimi jeziki, po prevajanju in upoštevanju ter vzajemnem primerjanju različnih možnosti filozofske artikulacije bo obstala tako dolgo, dokler ljudje govorimo več kot samo en jezik. Vsak poskus osvoboditve izpod jarma kulturne identitete se bo izjalovil, saj lahko privede kvečjemu do še hujsih zapletov v zgoraj opisani problem. *Primerjalna* filozofija obravnava bolj ali manj fiksne identitete, medtem ko jih *transkulturna* filozofija transformira in s tem ustvarja nove. Kombinacija obeh navedenih pristopov ustvarja to, čemur pravim *medkulturna* filozofija.

V članku poskušam razložiti odnos med primerjalno in transkulturno filozofijo na primeru povezave med Jullienovim in Heideggerjevim razumevanjem »Biti« in »Vmesnosti«, pri čemer uporablja prvi »primerjalni«, slednji pa »transkulturni« pristop. V prvem delu prikažem, da Jullien, s tem ko interpretira Vmesnost in Bit kot dve vzajemno nasprotujoči si paradigmi kitajske oziroma grške miselnosti, postavi obe paradigmi v vlogo bolj ali manj fiksnih predstavnikov različnih kulturnih identitet znotraj primerjalnega okvira. Grška miselnost okosteni v tradicionalno metafiziko, kitajska pa v nemetafizično miselnost imanence. V drugem delu prikažem, da je Heideggerjev pristop popolnoma drugačen. On namreč raziskuje Vmesnost *znotraj* Biti in poskuša celo misliti Bit kot Vmesnost. Heideggerjev poziv h »grškosti« je nedvomno evrocentričen. A pri tem je ironično dejstvo, da je Heideggerjeva »grška misel« manj evrocentrična od Jullienove »kitajske misli«, saj Jullien umešča »kitajsko« Vmesnost v samo središče »grške« Biti. Tretji del pa obravnava razumevanje evropske filozofije skozi kitajsko terminologijo. Ker oba, tako Jullien kot tudi Heidegger, povezujeta grško in kitajsko miselnost, menim, da je diskusija o njunih pristopih lahko koristna za razjasnitev določenih perspektiv v ustvarjanju kitajske in evropske medkulturne filozofije.

Ključne besede: Bit, Vmesnost, primerjalno, transkulturno, medkulturno, ontologija, dihalna energija (*qi* 氣), identiteta, Martin Heidegger, François Jullien

Being (Greece) or Between (China)

François Jullien sees himself as a philosopher, Hellenist, and Sinologist. To overcome the musealizing tendency of separating the modern world from classical antiquity, he initiates an intellectual movement *between* "Greek philosophy" and "Chinese thinking". He repeatedly notes that he began "to learn Chinese in order to be able to read Greek better" (Jullien 2012, 13). The title of one interview even reads: "A Greek's Detour through China" (Jullien 1998). He hopes to revive ancient Greek philosophy in contemporary Europe by going on a detour through ancient China, and by constructing a productive "gap" (*écart*) between the two

(Heubel 2021, 33–110). He thus wants to preclude unproductive and fruitless “comparison”. Jullien has persistently pursued this idea of gaining a new and better understanding of Greek philosophy via a “detour” through China, producing several related works.

What is striking about Jullien’s attitude is the strong affirmation of his “Greek” identity, and he obviously does not consider himself as “Chinese”. The gap between China and Europe, which Jullien introduces as an intercultural strategy, amounts to confirming and renewing the constitutive meaning of Plato and Aristotle for “us”, even though what this “us” denotes remains an open question. Jullien’s understanding of “dia-log”, which plays with the double meaning of the Greek *διά* as “apart, divided” and “through”, “through and through”, corresponds to intercultural betweenness. The emphasis is, however, on the first aspect; for the conversation *between* cultures to become possible, two cultures must first “split in two”, thereby creating a “gap” between them, so that the interpreter can then move freely between the two sides. I take this to be a one-sided understanding either of the Greek *διά* or of the Chinese *between* (*jiān* 間, 閒), which Jullien employs to redefine the concept of *inter*-culturality (Jullien 2012, 69). Instead, I propose taking the *comparative* and the *transcultural* combined as constitutive of the *intercultural*. Their relation can be conceived of as that between the river banks and the one flowing body of water that together constitute a river (the images of the “door” or of the “Way” are also applicable). The intercultural can be understood as a paradoxical *between* (inter-) that entails the comparative split in two *and* the transcultural creation of oneness. The river is, so to say, neither dualistic nor monistic, or both dualistic and monistic.

The philosophical significance of Jullien’s discourse on betweenness becomes more evident if one considers its relationship to “European philosophy”, especially to the “discourse on being” or “ontology”. Jullien writes:

For one sees why “European philosophy” has not concerned itself with the “between” [*l’entre*]: the between is that which necessarily—or fatefully—escapes the question of being from which philosophy has articulated itself since the Greeks. Because the “between” escapes the destiny that constitutes “being” and the question of one’s own and property, the between is thus beyond the reach of the “discourse on being”, that is, ontology. I say, “the between is that which ...”, but strictly speaking, the “between” is not “that which ...”, substantial, substantive, and already ontological. The “between” has no “*per se*”, cannot exist by itself; actually, the “between” “is” not. At least it is without qualities. So how can we talk about it? (Jullien 2012, 51)

The relation between Greek Being and Chinese Between is thus understood as a defining question of *inter*-cultural philosophy. And Jullien answers this question by unfolding a comparative framework that systematically splits and contrasts “Being” and “Between”.

According to Jullien, the Between “is” that which “necessarily”, even “fatefully”, escapes the question of Being. Strictly speaking, it is not even possible to say whether it “is” or whether it “is not”: the Between “is” neither Being (*Sein*) nor Nothing (*Nichts*), it cannot be an “ontological” concept. Consequently, a Greco-European philosophy of Being—which Jullien identifies with philosophy as such—and a Chinese thinking of Between are opposed to one another. While in Greece Being has been thought, in China—necessarily and fatefully—the Between has been thought. The use of “the between” (*l'entre*, *Zwischen*) as a noun testifies to how alien the Between still is as a concept in contemporary philosophy, although it can at least be traced back to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

Jullien argues that the thinking of the Between was developed in China through the awareness of “breathing” (Jullien 2012, 52), which found expression in a complex “doctrine of breath-energy” (*qìlùn* 氣論):

In Chinese thought, what we reify as the “real” is what we call “real” in words like breath, flow (flux) and breathing (*qì*: “energy” is still too Greek) and the “between” is—or rather “serves” as—that from/through which all emergence (*avènement*) takes place and unfolds. (ibid., 54)

Here Jullien considers “energy” to be “too Greek”, although elsewhere he translates *qì* 氣 as “breath-energy” (*souffle-énergie*) (Jullien 2003, 201). It is also worth noting that this translation is itself hybrid, because it combines the Chinese concept of “breath” (*qì*) and the word “energy” borrowed from Greek, but at the same time creates a distance between them with the use of a hyphen. Such a “gap” (*écart*) is already a promising approach to philosophically determine the Between, but one that Jullien prefers not to take. Instead, he sharply contrasts Being (Greece) and Between (China):

It is true that we cannot think the “between”. For the “between” has no “being”. That is the reason why this thought has eluded us for so long. Because the Greeks thought of “being” in the sense of being—that is, in the sense of destiny and quality (which is why they dreaded the un-determined), they were unable to think of the “between”, which is neither one nor the other, where each is covered by the other, removed from itself and its “peculiarity”. [...] For the “between”, which is neither one nor the

other, has no self, no essence, nothing of its own. More precisely: the “between” is not. (Jullien 2016, 39; 2017, 41)

From the perspective of Jullien’s contrast between European ontology and Chinese process thinking, the possibility of an ontology of the Between must appear absurd. In the context of an ontology that insists on the traditional division of being (Parmenides) and becoming (Heraclitus), such an “ontology” is indeed unthinkable. Nonetheless, one of the most important developments in 20th-century European philosophy consisted exactly in thinking the possibility of an ontology of the Between, an ontology that is neither one of being nor one of becoming. The possibility of an *ontology of the Between* (*Ontologie des Zwischen*) already heralds the possibility of an *ontology of breath-energy*, which is excluded from Jullien’s comparative framework. The emergence of an ontology of the Between makes the transition from a comparative to a transcultural approach necessary.

Being as Between

The extent to which 20th-century European philosophy has undermined the distinction between the (European) philosophy of Being and the (Chinese) thinking of the Between is evident in Martin Heidegger’s new way of conceiving ontology, in which the Between (*Zwischen*) emerges as a major philosophical concept. While for Jullien the Between remains irrevocably fixed in the realm of the “non-ontological” (Jullien 2012, 52; see also Jullien 2003, 135–36, 146), Heidegger’s way of thought links Being and Between, and thereby opens up the possibility of thinking the Between ontologically. Heidegger and Jullien both develop the Between within a discourse that connects antiquity and modernity, East and West. But while Jullien wants to keep Greek antiquity free of the thinking of the Between, and focuses on the question of why Greek philosophy ignored or even excluded its importance, Heidegger takes a decisively different direction: he explores the Between *in* Being and even makes an attempt to think of Being *as* Between. Most of the time he does this within the context of classical Greek literature, that is without explicitly referring to “Chinese” sources.

How Heidegger thinks Being as Between is a complicated question which I can only outline briefly here. As is well known, Heidegger’s approach to a pre-Socratic, pre-metaphysical understanding of Being revolves around the relation between “going up” (*Aufgehen*) and “going down” (*Untergehen*), ascending and descending, rising and setting, appearance and disappearance, concealment and unconcealment, lighting and darkening. He is mainly concerned with flowing transitions,

not with fixed states. Instead of emphasizing the sharp contrast between light and darkness or day and night, he is looking for a language that allows intermediate stages to be described, a language that turns its attention to transitional phases that are often hardly noticeable. He tries, so to speak, to think of Being from the transitional betweenness of sunrise and sunset, dawn and dusk. “Nature” lives in those transitions, breathes and changes as something that “rises” and “comes to light”. In his interpretations of a few selected pre-Socratic fragments, Heidegger sets himself the task of thinking Being by the way of “nature” understood in this way. In a 1936 lecture entitled “Europe and German Philosophy”, he already offers an outline of motifs which were then elaborated in detail and developed further in his major lectures on Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Anaximander during the 1940s: “The Greek basic word for Being is φύσις. We usually translate it as ‘nature’ [...] and that is why the first Greek thinkers are still called ‘natural philosophers’ today. This is all a misconception.” (Heidegger 1993, 35) He emphasizes how “for the Greeks, Being and truth (φύσις [*physis*] and ἀ-λήθεια [*alētheia*]) are one”, insofar as both carry within them the relationship of ascending into “appearing” and descending by “stepping back into concealment” (ibid., 36). In the 1942 lectures on Hölderlin’s hymn *Der Ister*, Heidegger also called this the “counter-turning of Being itself” (*Gegenwendigkeit des Seins selbst*) (Heidegger 1984, 95). The word that in the context of classical Chinese philosophy comes closest to this understanding of *physis* (φύσις) is *qi* 氣, the “natural” breath-energy.¹

Regardless of whether this way of thinking has been inspired or even influenced by Daoist thought, it reveals the *transcultural* potential of Heidegger’s work. Heidegger’s studies of pre-Socratic thinkers from the 1940s show that “deontologizing” the Greek discourse of Being does not necessitate a detour via the Chinese discourse of the Between. While Jullien’s justification for his philosophical detour through Chinese thought and culture is exactly that it opens up this kind of “deontologization” as a possibility of thinking, Heidegger unfolds the Between *within* the Greek “discourse on being”. He achieves this by introducing a cut between pre-Socratic and post-Socratic thinking and by distinguishing between the pre-Socratic “counter-turning of being itself” and the “metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche” (Heidegger 1979, 98). Thus Heidegger’s perspective is—counter-intuitively—more creative.

For Jullien, “Greek philosophy” is precisely defined by a mode of traditional metaphysics which Heidegger’s reflections on the “inception of Occidental thinking” try to overthrow. While Heidegger emphasizes the inner connectedness between

1 We might even suggest that Heidegger is not only not to blame for his “forgetfulness of air” (Irigaray 1983) but, on the contrary, has taken important steps towards a “philosophy of breath” that emerged in his reinterpretations of φύσις and ἀ-λήθεια.

pre-Socratic “vital [essential] thinking” (*wesentliches Denken*) and the metaphysical philosophy that developed in the wake of Plato and Aristotle, Jullien’s hermeneutics of contrast excludes the possibility to transculturally rethink an aspect of Heidegger’s “Greekdom” that is profoundly paradoxical. When he consciously enters into conversation with East Asia, his discourse remains strongly attached to comparative stereotypes. However, the more he tries to “think the Greeks in Greek terms”, the more “Chinese” his thinking becomes. In other words, when Heidegger tries to think more Greek than the Greeks, his way of thinking comes particularly close to a “Chinese thinking” expressed in the Daoist writings of Lǎozǐ and Zhuāngzǐ. Gadamer ironically describes one of Heidegger’s interpretations as “somewhat Chinese” (Gadamer 1987, 291). But this interpretation strangely ceases to sound incomprehensible and foreign as soon as it is really perceived and read as “Chinese”, that is, from the perspective of a “Chinese thinking” which in Jullien’s case is contrasted to “Greek thinking” in a comparative way.

Seen in this light, efforts to trace and prove the influence of East Asian, and especially Daoist sources on Heidegger’s thinking only scratch the surface, because they try to assign unambiguous identities, as if it were clear what “Chinese” or “Daoist” thinking is. It is through the *transcultural entanglement* of “Chinese” and ‘Greek’ sources that we arrive at a new, more fluid, although still comparative understanding of those two different paradigms of thinking. From this perspective we may ask the far-reaching and intriguing question of why Heidegger’s thinking becomes particularly “Chinese” when it wants to be particularly “Greek”? Why and how does Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” *turn* into “Chinese thinking”? This question opens up a way of transcultural thinking whose paradoxical “counter-turning” (*Gegenwendigkeit*) radically upsets and disturbs the ordinary perception of both Chinese and Greek thinking. Heidegger has always masterfully thought against himself. It is therefore perhaps quite appropriate to think in this counter-turning way with Heidegger against Heidegger. He suspected, more radically than other 20th-century philosophers, that the necessary conversation with “Asia” would be a long journey along winding and hardly accessible pathways.

Heidegger’s lecture entitled “Europe and German Philosophy” wraps his thoughts on “saving Europe” in a sometimes aggressive rhetoric in which Europe and Asia are strongly opposed to one another. In this context he speaks of “saving the European peoples from the Asian” (Heidegger 1993, 32). In his 1959 lecture entitled “Hölderlin’s Heaven and Earth”, however, he takes up Paul Valéry’s reflections on the European “crisis of the spirit”. When asked whether Europe will become “what it really is, that is, a small cape of the Asian continent”, Heidegger answers: “Perhaps Europe has already become what it is: a mere cape [...]”. And he asks further: “Does Europe, as this cape and brain, first have to become the land of an

evening [*Abendland*], from which another morning of world destiny prepares its rise?” (Heidegger 1981, 176–77)

Here we find again the language of going up and going down, of falling and rising, now in the horizon of great historical-philosophical speculations: Does Europe, as an “Occidental singularity”, first have to set and fall like the sun, disappearing in the evening, in order to rise again? Is it necessary to reflect on the “beginning of Occidental thinking” and to prepare an “other morning”, an “other beginning” in a way that assumes that Europe must first open itself up to “the few other great beginnings” in order to become Europe again? Does Europe first have to recognize that it is a “small cape of the Asian continent” in order to arrive at an identity that would be a *European non-identity*? Does Europe have to become “Asian” in order to become “European”? In any case, Heidegger, probably more than any other European philosopher of the 20th century, had a keen sense of the idea that Europe had (and has) to open itself towards the East in order to rediscover its own identity.

In his writings, Jullien does not refrain from historical-philosophical speculations about the relationship between China and Europe. These, however, take a distinctly anti-Heideggerian turn in their strong defence of Platonic metaphysics, thereby expressing a decisively *comparative* stance with regard to the relation of Being and Between that systematically excludes the possibility of their *transcultural* mixing or intercourse. Jullien claims: “The gap opens the between” (*l'écart ouvre l'entre*; Jullien 2012, 49). It is, however, clear that his understanding of the “gap” separating Being and Between actually excludes the philosophical potential of this conceptual relation. On the other hand, the “gap” that Heidegger opens between pre-Socratic and Platonic thought allows a creative tension between the two, which he made fruitful for the revolutionary transformation of his new ontology. Structurally, Heidegger’s gap, which is internal to Greek philosophy, is similar to the gap that Jullien has constructed between Greek philosophy and Chinese thought.

Heidegger’s attempts to link Being and Between are developed above all in his extensive and very detailed commentaries to a small number of selected pre-Socratic fragments. Hermeneutically, he moves in tiny steps, the respective weight of which is difficult to estimate. Jullien’s distinction between Being (Greece) and Between (China), however, unintentionally helps us understand how huge the step is that Heidegger takes by uncovering the traces of a pre-Socratic way of thinking in which Being was thought of as Between: Heidegger discovers the “Chinese” Between in the midst of “Greek” Being. Seen from this transcultural perspective, pre-Socratic thinking is closer to classical Chinese thinking than post-Socratic,

Platonic metaphysics. The paradigmatic turn from pre-Socratic thinking—which is “not yet metaphysical” as Heidegger puts it—to post-Socratic thinking thus corresponds to the relationship that Jullien describes between non-metaphysical Chinese and metaphysical Greek thinking. In any case, Heidegger’s studies on the “beginning of Occidental thinking” bring to light that “Chinese” Between and “Greek” Being do not have to be distant and foreign to each other, but can come close to one another, and very close indeed. From this perspective, it seems absurd to sharply juxtapose a Chinese thinking of Between and a Greek philosophy of Being, and even base a whole model of intercultural philosophy upon that distinction. Jullien’s *l’entre* can be read as an intercultural elaboration of Heidegger’s *Zwischen*. However, by turning Between and Being into opposing paradigms of Chinese and Greek thinking, respectively, Jullien causes both to become ossified: Greek thinking ossifies into traditional metaphysics, while Chinese thinking ossifies into the non-metaphysical thinking of immanence (Heubel 2021, 111–39).

These reflections offer a glimpse into the transcultural entanglement of Heidegger’s reinterpretation of pre-Socratic thought, which is still largely unexplored insofar as it connects Chinese, Greek, and German philosophical sources in a highly experimental and surprising way. Heidegger’s invocation of “Greeksdom” is certainly Eurocentric. Some of Heidegger’s statements undoubtedly support such a reading. But ironically Heidegger’s “Greece” is much less Eurocentric than Jullien’s, because Heidegger’s “Greek thinking” appears to be more Chinese than what Jullien calls “Chinese thinking”.

Speaking about European Philosophy in Chinese Terms

The potential of moving philosophically between China and Europe is connected with the mixing of Being and Between, with the possibility of *Being Between*. In contrast, Jullien’s identification of philosophy with the philosophy of Being in the metaphysical sense renders such a movement (*Be-wegung*) impossible. Moreover, to bind European philosophy to such an ontology is a conservative move, insofar as philosophy thus defined was challenged throughout the 20th-century. Jullien emphasizes the “gap” between European philosophy of Being and Chinese thinking of Between, but he is also well aware that it is precisely this tendency towards the “deontologization” of philosophy in Europe and the criticism of traditional metaphysics which makes the Chinese Between and the philosophy of breath-energy connected to it appealing in the European context. Jullien simultaneously attempts to take two positions, whose compatibility he cannot adequately explain. He seems at times to appear as a defender of a (European) philosophy of Being, and then

again as an advocate of a (Chinese) thinking of Between. Both perspectives are actually repeatedly mixed up in his writings. He refuses, however, to methodically and conceptually acknowledge this transcultural mixing. As he writes, “[...] the Greeks therefore had to neglect the in-between of flow (*l’entre-deux du flux*) and the indistinctness of transition [...]” (Jullien 2012, 57). Twentieth-century European philosophy has already paid due attention to these traditionally (supposedly) neglected aspects. While Jullien recognizes the importance of betweenness in modern European discourse, he remains fixed to his philosophical identity as a “Greek”. In this sense, Jullien’s philosophical practice tends to become *transcultural*, but his basic methodological assumptions remain fixed in a *comparative* framework. His philosophy is thus more creative than his comparative strategy can explain.

Because of the asymmetry of the modern philosophical communication between China and Europe, we often discuss the question of using “Western” terminology to interpret Chinese texts, or the demand to speak about Chinese philosophy in its own terms. But how about the possibility of using “Eastern” terminology to discuss classical European philosophy, or speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms? I think this is exactly what Heidegger tried to do, although in a very preliminary and experimental way. While, on the Chinese side, we are familiar with various attempts at the Sinicization of Kantianism, Hegelianism, Marxism, or even Heideggerianism, Heidegger tried to reverse the direction and to do something that may be called the Germanification or Europeanization of Daoism. The Heideggerian response to *Sino-Marxism* is *Euro-Daoism*. While modern Chinese philosophers frequently speak about Chinese philosophy in European terms, Heidegger’s work points to the possibility of speaking about European philosophy in Chinese terms.

Although Heidegger stated that the main concern of his thinking is the “question of Being”, there are strong indications that he turned this question into the “question of the Way”. The “Way” (*der Weg*) is obviously one of the keywords of his “way of thought” (*Denkweg*) since the 1940s, and he famously chose the saying “Ways not works” (*Wege, nicht Werke*) as the motto for his collected writings. Heidegger’s paradoxical Europeanization of Daoism by the way of returning to pre-Socratic thought is driven by a philosophical movement (*Be-wegung*) that is deeply transcultural. He clearly goes beyond comparison and vigorously defies the logic of identity and difference which guides comparative philosophy. But at the same time, he follows along the lines of renewing contemporary German philosophy by rereading and returning to ancient Greek texts. Without his strong attachment to this tradition of identity formation and *Bildung*, Heidegger would not have been able to transform our understanding of ancient Greek philosophy in a revolutionary, “Chinese” way.

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