An Introduction to Zoeontology

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Abstract
Zoeontology, or the study of living, is a philosophical system the author is constructing in the spirit of traditional Chinese philosophy. We see living as the central philosophical inquiry in the Chinese tradition, rather than being as in Western philosophy. Being is supposed to be eternal and death is a negation of being, but living consists of birth, growing, aging, and death. Hence in zoeontology, we see time as the rhythm of living, and space as the orientation in a living community. As a time-space system, a living subject interacts with the world from the perspective of the ego. Zoeontology is also a kind of subjective philosophy. Different living subjects interact with each other if their living rhythms parallel or overlap with each other. A child’s living process is internal to the parents’ living process, and hence there must be intimate and profound interactions between them. This is the beginning of a civil community. There is a dialectical relationship between civilization and nature. The purpose of human civilization is to civilize a natural living community, but it must obey the rules of nature. Human civilization is not meant to change nature, but to fulfil it.

Keywords: zoeontology, living, time-space system, subjective philosophy, civilization

Uvod v zoeontologijo

Izvleček

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tudi slediti pravilom narave. Ni mišljeno, da mora človeška civilizacija spreminjati naravo, ampak kvečjemu, da bi jo morala izpopolniti.

**Ključne besede:** zoeontology, življenje, časovno-prostorski sistem, subjektivna filozofija, civilizacija

Zoeontology (性命論), or the study of living, is a philosophical system I am attempting to construct in the spirit of traditional Chinese philosophy. Since 2018, amidst heated discussions about the main spirit of Chinese philosophy as well as its modern form (Ding 2018; 2020; Yang 2020), I have published several articles in Chinese on zoeontology (Wu, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; 2022). I am now writing a book on this system in Chinese, and am delighted to introduce its main ideas here in the following English text.

**Living as a Philosophical Question**

The central concern of zoeontology is to understand contemporary questions from a Chinese point of view. There have been rich philosophical ideas in China, but seldom have they been organized in a systematic way. The encounter with Western philosophy, especially in recent four decades, has taught Chinese philosophers to organize these ideas in at least three aspects. 1) the systematic form of Western philosophy has offered a model to organize philosophical ideas; 2) the central concerns of Western philosophy have stimulated Chinese philosophers to identify the major features of our own philosophy, especially those which are different from the major features of the Western traditions; 3) the major problems that modern Western philosophers have been struggling with are also important to Chinese philosophers. Both Western and Chinese philosophies have been concerned with similar central issues for human beings, but in different ways. While contemplating such pan-human questions from a Chinese point of view, we might offer some new insights on them for Western audiences in particular.

In the Western philosophical tradition ontology, or the study of being, is seen as the first philosophy. Shakespeare's famous line "to be or not to be, that is the question", could best describe the central concern of the major Western philosophers. The real concern of Hamlet, however, is whether he should live or not. From a Chinese perspective, we would say, "to live or not to live, that is the question", and this is exactly how the main Chinese translations of *Hamlet* render it, as it would

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1 A similar idea is seen in Roger Ames' Zoetology (forthcoming). I share quite a few ideas with Ames, but the term "zoeontology" fits what I describe here better, and this I will continue to use it.
be unreadable if we literally translated “to be” as 存在. There have been intensive debates about the Chinese counterpart of the term “being” in philosophical texts. “Being” seems to be so simple a word that we could use it to describe philosophical objects in any cultural tradition. But there is a long intellectual history behind this simple word which Chinese philosophy does not share, and how could we use a term without considering the rich cultural assumptions underlying it? Because there is no copula in Chinese there can be no exact counterpart of “being”. The major question of Chinese philosophy is not being, but living.

Although the term being seems suitable to describe everything in the world in everyday language, whether in Greek, English, or any modern European language, as a philosophical term originally discovered by Parmenides, being does not signify anything that exists in the world. It is eternal and unchangeable. Plato inherited and developed the Parmenidean understanding of being. In The Republic, he famously defined a philosopher as someone who studied “the being that is eternally and does not wander between generation and decaying” (ἐκείνης τῆς οὐσίας τῆς ἀei οὐσίας καὶ μὴ πλανομένης ὑπὸ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς) (Plato 2016, 485b2). For Plato, anything that generates, changes, and decays is becoming instead of being. Only the idea (εἶδος) really is, and everything else only exists in a rough sense. Aristotle, who defined a philosopher as one who studies being qua being (Aristotle 1979, 1005b24), made more compromises with the everyday use of the word and agreed that everything that exists is, and that being must change (ibid., 1012b28). As a philosophical inquiry, however, the primary concern of being qua being is form or actuality, which is neither generated nor destroyed (ibid., 1043b17), nor moveable (ibid., 1067b10). What is more, for him there must be a prime mover to make the world run, and this prime mover is an eternal being. Hence the idea of eternity or immovability is still inherent to his philosophical concern with being.

Although there have been great developments over its history, the study of eternity in a changing world is still inherent to the ontological concerns of Western philosophy. In Christian philosophy, the eternal being is understood as God Himself, who has created the whole world together with all the beings in it. The created beings only exist in a secondary sense, and only God exists in the true sense. Although God seems to be becoming less of a focus of concern in modern philosophy, and subjective philosophy is now the mainstream, the eternality of being also seems to be on the decline, and everything that exists can be said to be being. Hegel, who defined pure being as “without any determination”, almost equated it to nothing. (Hegel 2010, 59) This does not mean, however, a reduction of being, but a new understanding of its universality in a modern intellectual context. What Hegel really meant is not that being is not anything, but that being underlies everything. Being is so universal that any determination of it would destroy
this fundamental role (Tabak 2017, 42). As the highest form of being, the absolute spirit is also the full realization of being. Heidegger’s philosophy is a modern reflection of the long history of the Western metaphysics of being. His famous distinction between *das Sein* and *das Seiende* challenges the metaphysical understanding of being as a thing eternal and highest, while reserving its universality. According to Heidegger’s understanding, we could not see being as something eternal, immovable, or highest, even not as a thing, but something underlying everything existent and changing. Yet what is it that underlies everything but does not exist itself? Although Heidegger was fully aware of the philosophical dilemma in the ontological tradition, he still kept the idea of being.

In a certain sense, zoeontology is a continuation of Heidegger’s efforts in this regard. We will study living in a world full of different living subjects, without worrying about mixing up life and living. The distinction between living and life is close to Heidegger’s distinction between *das Sein* and *das Seiende*, but springs from a quite different intellectual history. By zoeontology, we want to remake our understanding of the world we live in and its history from a Chinese perspective.

Living, of course, is not a precise translation of being in philosophy as it is in *Hamlet*. The difference between living and being shows the central difference between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy. In mainstream Chinese philosophy, no idea of an eternal being is presumed, but living is posited as the primary concern of philosophical inquiry. There are several key characters in Chinese that are closely related to the idea of living. The first is 生, which, originally depicting grass breaking through the soil, means “to live”. The second is 性, roughly corresponding to “nature” in English, but since its etymological root is 生, its precise meaning is “the nature of life” or “the living nature”. It is quite probable that 性 was originally only another form of 生, and then got a more abstract meaning. The third one is 命, which has three basic meanings: “mandate”, “lifespan”, and “fortune”. Based on the primary meanings of these three characters, we have the words 生命 and 性命, both of which could be rendered as “life” in English. But 生命 is more about biological life, while 性命 emphasizes the philosophical significance of life. There is another important word 生生, repeating 生 to indicate the ongoing process of living, including giving birth, living a life, and the continuity of living between different generations. The nuances between these Chinese characters and terms could hardly be rendered to English precisely. For the sake of English readers I will use the simple English terms “life” for 生命, “living” for 性命 and 生生, “living nature” for 性, and “mandate”, “life”, “lifespan” or “fortune” depending on the context for 命, sometimes with the original Chinese text for clarity. Living, the central term in zoeontology, means not only to live biologically, but also the nature of life, fortune, and the internal relationship between a living subject and the cosmos.
A saying by Liu Kanggong (劉康公) recorded in *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳), often seen as one of the earliest philosophical texts in China, expresses the basic concern of zoeontology: “Endowed by the cosmos with precious life, human beings live to their fortune. They should take care to cultivate the principle of their behaviour and manner to build their own living fortune” (Ruan 2021, vol. 17, 1022). The famous opening sentence of *The Doctrine of Mean* (中庸) reads: “The mandate from Heaven makes living nature” (天命之謂性) (ibid., vol. 15, 2427). There are also several key statements in *The Book of Changes* (易經), “All lives live up to their own living nature” (各正性命) (ibid., vol. 1, 27), “The great virtue of the cosmos is living” (天地之大德曰生) (ibid., 543), and “The nature of change is living” (生生之謂易) (ibid., 491). All these quotes indicate that living is the central question in Chinese philosophy. It is almost common sense among Neo-Confucianists that their major teaching is zoeontology (性命之學), while Taoists also see zoeontology as their tradition’s most important teaching. Mencius made a famous distinction between living nature and life, which is very important to later teachings of zoeontology:

What the tongue tastes, what the eyes see, what the ears hear, what the nose smells, and what the body touches, are nature, but more likely for tune, and the gentlemen would not call them nature. The humanity between father and son, the justice between king and officials, the civility between host and guest, the wisdom of the wise, the sainthood for the heavenly way, are subject to fortune, but more likely nature, and the gentlemen would not call them fortune. (ibid., vol. 25, 679)

The five senses are faculties of the sensible life, but for Mencius they are too biological to be living nature. In contrast, the five virtues also depend on changing fortune, but they are the core of human nature, and should not be called fortune. Although Mencius had different attitudes toward the five senses and five virtues, he actually acknowledged that both are nature (性) as well as fortune (命), i.e., both are central issues in zoeontology. Virtues could not be without natural life, and human nature could not be completed without virtuous behaviours. This is a basic stance of zoeontology, although there is a fundamental tension between these two aspects.

An important difference between zoeontology and ontology is in the attitude toward life and death. Because the idea of being originates from eternity, and although modern philosophy does not insist on the eternity of authentic being any more, generation and destruction are usually not seen as parts of being. Heidegger

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2 All quotations are translated by me if not otherwise marked.
talks much about death not because death is an unavoidable part of being, but because it is the negation of being. Only with the absolute negation of being by death could one grasp the totality of \textit{Dasein}. This is a fundamental paradox of being, which could disclose the meaning of being in a powerful though cruel way (Heidegger 1966, 219). Heidegger’s understanding is a result of the rich history of Western understanding of being. Living is also seen as being, as implied by Hamlet, and hence death is understood as nonbeing, i.e., the negation of life. The opposition between life and death is equivalent to that between being and non-being, and has inspired great and exciting ideas. The fear of death, as shown by Heidegger, is not only essential to our understanding of \textit{Dasein}, but also the very drive for us to inquire deeply into the meaning of being and life.

From the perspective of zoeontology there is nothing eternal in the world, and everything is generated and will decay sooner or later. Death is bad and sorrowful, but should be encountered by everyone, because it is a part of living. We do not see living as something static or changeless, but a process including generation, growing up, aging, and dying, none of which are outside or a negation of life. Living is nothing else than alternation and a combination of \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}. As central terms in Chinese philosophy, I define \textit{yang} as the positive and thriving principle of living, and \textit{yin} as the negative and restraining principle of living. From generation to growing up, similar to spring and summer in a year, \textit{yang} is increased and \textit{yin} is decreased; while from aging to dying, similar to autumn and winter, \textit{yang} is decreased and \textit{yin} is increased. There would be no death without life, and death is an unavoidable stage of every life. Hence when we study living from a zoeontological perspective we do not see death as its negation, but as its last stage. In our lives it is only a false impression that we spend every day in the same way. Our experience of each day is different, because each day has its distinct meaning in our lives, just as each day is different in different seasons. It is very significant whether a day is in the first part, middle, or last part of our lives. It also matters whether it is an exciting day or a depressing day, which is the personal experience of \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}. Zoeontology should weigh all these different experiences carefully and philosophically.

Because of such a different perspective of living and death, we also have quite a different understanding of time and space in zoeontology. The philosophy of time and space is very important to the Western philosophical tradition, but there has not yet been a serious study of time and space in modern Chinese philosophy. A time-space philosophy will set the framework for zoeontology.

Because of the features mentioned above, zoeontology views nature and civilization from a special point of view. The relationship between nature and
civilization has always been an important philosophical issue, especially in today's world. In the Christian tradition, God is believed to transcend not only civilization but also nature, because He is the creator of everything in the world. Civilization is created by human beings, who can also make a future above nature. Subjective philosophy has been dominant in modern Western philosophy since Descartes, and human beings have given up the possibility of knowing the natural world since Kant. Although natural science is the ideology of modern times, it is not about nature as such, but nature as reconstructed by human knowledge. The objective natural world has been set aside as a thing-in-itself. Hence the true dominating power of the modern world is human knowledge. Now human science and technology have become so dominant that human nature itself is almost subdued, let alone the natural world outside us. In zoontology, however, there is not such a gap between nature and civilization. Behind zoontology there is not a monotheistic religion, and there is not a personified deity as the creator of the world. Nature as such is the most sacred thing from which everything springs. Human civilization is a kind of creation out of nature, but it is never above nature. We can describe, analyse, or even modify nature with our knowledge, but we can never surpass or remake it. The nature we know the best is our own lives. We can study our lives from different perspectives, but we can never grasp them in their entity or create a life from nothing. Cultures, languages, knowledges, technologies, politics, and religions are all human creations, and we cannot presume they could be equal to or even above nature. These creations could improve human life in certain ways, but they must run within the limits of nature, otherwise nature will punish us, sooner or later. A great spiritual crisis in the modern world is that some people assume that their beliefs are so sacred that they could pursue them at the price of other people's lives, and even the whole secular world. Self-deification has put the world into crisis several times. In zoontology we do not think that any human effort is sacred, and the only sacred thing is nature. Nature is not a substance, but the way every life lives. The world is a living community. For the sake of a better life, human beings should civilize this living community. Civilization is the way of life in this community, and the precondition of any living community is respect for living nature.

Having outlined these basic aspects in zoontology, now we will examine some important propositions in it: time-space as living rhythm, the zoontological subject, and the dialectics between nature and civilization.
Time and Space in Zoontology

Time-space philosophy is a key issue in both Western philosophy and science. The great debates about whether time is objective or subjective, whether it is lineal or cyclical, and the relationship between eternity and temporality, have been lively throughout the history of philosophy. Because of the development of relativity theory and quantum theory, the philosophy of time has seen much activity in the last century. As the difference between ontology and zoontology is about the idea of eternity, it is unavoidable that we should first discuss time-space philosophy in this context.

Seen from the perspective of zoontology, time is the living rhythm, and space is the orientation of a subject in a living community.

The Chinese character for time is 時, which, signifying where the sun orientates, originally meant “seasons”. The characters for spring and autumn have been discovered in the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells from the Shang dynasty, but not those for summer and winter. It is quite probable that people of the Shang dynasty divided the whole year to two seasons, spring for yang, and autumn for yin. This might also be the reason why Confucius entitled his historical book Spring and Autumn. Afterwards the two seasons were divided into four, and then the four seasons again were divided into eight solar terms, two for every season: the beginning of spring (立春), spring equinox (春分), the beginning of summer (立夏), summer solstice (夏至), the beginning of autumn (立秋), autumn equinox (秋分), the beginning of winter (立冬), and winter solstice (冬至). These eight solar terms were further divided into 24 solar terms. Finally, the 24 solar terms were divided into 72 phenological terms, with five days each. Time on a smaller scale is also divided in this way. The ancient Chinese regarded daytime as yang and the night as yin, and one whole day was divided into 12 parts in the same way that a year is divided into 12 months. This is quite different from the Western idea of time (χρόνος), which begins with the moment (καιρός), and the fundamental measurements for time are past, present, and the future. The contrast between a timeless eternity and the flowing of past, present and the future becomes a central question in Western philosophy. In Chinese tradition, however, time is nothing but the rhythm of living. The seasonal cycling between yang and yin is firstly divided into two periods, and gradually it is divided into shorter and shorter units, because the living process is understood with more and more precision. The living process is understood as the alternation of yin “and yang, and there are many possible combinations of the two basic principles. Since the Han Dynasty scholars have used the symbols in The Book of Changes to represent the calendar for this reason.

For a comprehensive picture of the philosophy of time in recent decades, see Oaklander (2008).
The same alteration between *yang* and *yin* is also seen in the philosophy of space. Hence there is a correspondence between time and space, as seen in a famous passage in *The Canon of Yao* in *The Book of History*, which I quote in full here despite its length:

Then Yao told the four brothers of Xi and He families to respectfully and cautiously follow the principle of Heaven to calculate the motive law of the sun, the moon and the stars, to work out the calendar, and then to respectfully and cautiously let the broad masses of the people know the seasons and their changes. He firstly sent Xi Zhong to Yanggu from which the sun rises to respectfully welcome the sun rise, to observe and determine the time of the sun while rising in the east. When the day is as long as night, a constellation of seven stars appears in the south in the evening. Yao ordered him to determine mid-spring according to these things. Because it must be the spring equinox, while the labouring people disperse in the fields, birds and beasts begin their breeding. Yao then sent Xi Shu to Jiaozi in the south to observe and determine the southward motive law of the sun, and respectfully meet the sun’s southward returning. Yao said that when the day was the longest, Mars of the constellation of the seven stars in the east appeared in the south. Yao wanted him to determine mid-summer according to what he had just said. Because it must be the summer solstice, while the labouring people lived in the higher places, the feathers and hair of birds and beasts became few and thin. And again Yao sent He Zhong to Meigu in the west, to respectfully send off the sunset, and to determine the time of the sun falling afterwards. Yao said when the day was as long as the night, the star Xu of the constellation of seven stars appeared in the sky of south. Yao wanted him to observe and determine mid-autumn according to these rules. Because it must be the autumn equinox, while the labouring people returned to live on the flat ground, birds and beasts began to change into their new coats. At last he further ordered He Shu to Youdu in the north to observe and distinguish the movement of the sun to the north. He said at this season the day was shortest, the star Mao of the White Tiger constellation of seven stars speared in the south in the evening. Yao wanted him to determine mid-winter according to what he observed. Because it must be the winter solstice, while the labouring people lived within the house, birds and beasts had their downy coats. Then Yao said to them, “Ah! You the brothers of Xi and He should know that a round year has 366 days, and you should add a leap month to complete four seasons and make it a year.” (Quoted from Luo Zhiye 2017, 141–43, with slight revisions by the author)
This is the first historical record of an official calendar in China, and it is the major achievement of the sage-king Yao. Here we can see the correspondence of four seasons and four directions: spring corresponds to the east, summer corresponds to the south, autumn corresponds to the west, and winter corresponds to the north. This implies certain level of astronomical knowledge, because we cannot determine the exact directions without a precise observation of the sun and stars. Similarly, we cannot decide on the time of the two equinoxes and two solstices without knowledge of the four directions. As recorded in The Canon of Yao, the four brothers of Xi and He determined the four seasons according to the four directions. There are similar ideas in other pre-Qin books. For example, it is written in He Guan Zi (騄冠子) that “when the Plough directs to the east, it is spring; when the Plough directs to the south, it is summer; when the Plough directs to the west, it is autumn; when the Plough directs to the north, it is winter” (Huang 2014, 70). A poem in The Book of Poetry (詩經) entitled “When Pegasus is in the middle of Heaven” (定之方中) reads, “When Pegasus is in the middle of Heaven, we build a noble palace; after the directions of the sun, we build a noble room” (Ruan 2021, vol. 3, 348). These quotations show that the drawing up of a calendar and the building of a city are closely interconnected. In the six books of The Nomos of Zhou (周禮), the opening sentence of each of the books reads, “when a king builds the capital, he should fix precisely different directions, measure the city and the countryside, and establish a bureaucratic system” (ibid., vol. 7, 15). Here the first task of a king is to fix directions. Because different directions correspond to different seasons, the king must use some astronomical knowledge to fix these directions. And hence the six ministries of the government are: the heaven ministry of personnel affairs, the earth ministry of revenue, the spring ministry of rites, the summer ministry of war, the autumn ministry of law, the winter ministry of construction. The fixing of directions in The Nomos of Zhou is closely related to the making of calendar in The Canon of Yao. Since Yao, the power of a Chinese monarch was symbolized as the power to make and publish the official calendar. Indeed, when Yao passed the throne to Shun he said: “Now it is up to you to decide on the calendar” (ibid., vol. 23, 475).

Space as understood in zoeontology is not the extension of matter, but a subject’s orientation in a living community. For a subject who is in the centre, like Yao who sent out the four brothers, four directions are not abstract spaces. Together with spring, the east symbolizes birth; together with summer, the south symbolizes growing up; together with autumn, the west symbolizes aging; together with winter, the north symbolizes death. Space is also the alternation and combination of yang and yin. Spring and summer are seasons in which yang dominates, and yin dominates in autumn and winter. Similarly, the east and south are directions in
which yang dominates, and yin dominates the west and north. A life extends itself in time and orientates itself in a living community.

Every life has its own living rhythm. A worm whose lifespan is only one day might see daytime as its spring and summer, and night as its autumn and winter. A great animal whose lifespan could last to hundreds of years would see us as such a worm, because one of its seasons could last to tens of years, far beyond our understanding (Wang 2012, 2). Even for different human beings, although their lifespans are very close to each other, they still have subtly different rhythms of life. Living experience is particular to everyone, and nobody could share it with others.

In the Taoist theory of self-cultivation, it is emphasized that everyone should find his own rhythm and grasp his own beginning. Time and space are subjective in the sense that everyone has his own lifespan and place in the community. It is also objective in two senses. Firstly, although everyone has his own time-space system, he cannot change it to whatever he wants. It is there and moves ahead whether he is aware of it or not. Secondly, the common time-space system in a civilized community is objective to any member, otherwise they could not communicate with each other. In order to civilize a living community, it is essential to make a public time measure, which is the calendar. This happened in all civilizations. The Greeks numbered years with the Olympics. The Romans regarded the building of Rome as the beginning of their calendar. The Christians regard the birth of Jesus Christ as a new beginning of human history. In China, when a new emperor was enthroned, the first thing was to set a new beginning of history, to show that a new era had begun. That is why calendars are so important in Chinese politics. There is also a common spatial system as shown in The Nomos of Zhou. For instance, a person in Guangdong, a province in southern China, sees provinces like Hunan, Zhejiang and Jiangxi as in north, but officially these provinces are all in the south. The city of Luoyang was a favourite capital in many dynasties because it is in the geographical middle of China.

In the zoelontological understanding of time, there is not a lineal history spanning from a beginning to an end, but there are always cycles between yin and yang. There will always be a new beginning when yang is vigorous, and there should be an end when yin dominates. This is how time circulates naturally. A regime is established, lasts for a period and then is overthrown, and this is quite similar to the natural circle.

But there is also a kind of lineal time, namely, the historical time established by human civilizations, which is beyond the cyclical time of any individual. Without civilization, human beings would live and die like any other creature. Living itself is significant, although everyone finally dies. The cosmos is a living community
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生生共同體), in which every life pursues its own way to live (各正性命). Human beings, however, are different from other lives and able to reflect rationally on their existence. They civilize their living community by establishing a common time-space system. A condition for civilization is that it must form a common living rhythm for everyone to live together. Although the common time-space system should be formed according to the natural cycle of yang and yin, there is still much left for human beings to do. For instance, it is a political matter to decide on the way to number years. Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty contributed a lot to the making of common time system. He created the reign title, which became the standard way to number years in Chinese history. He also organized a group of scholars, among whom was the great historian Sima Qian, to draw up Taichu Calendar (太初曆), the first calendar that can be verified in Chinese history. An official calendar makes lineal history possible. Although reign titles imitate the seasonal cycle in nature, people know that one reign title follows another, just as one dynasty follows another. Hence there is a sense of continuous history. The life of every individual is a cycle from life to death, and so is the reign of an emperor and a dynasty. Human civilization, however, is not satisfied with such repetitive cycles. People believe that human history composed by these cycles will continue forever. The Historical Records, the masterpiece composed by Sima Qian, is the first among 24 official historical books. The book was started by Sima Tan, Sima Qian’s father, after whose death Sima Qian took great efforts to complete this work, because he believed that his father and he would be immortal because of it. In later dynasties it was believed that every new dynasty should be responsible for compiling an official history of the previous dynasty. Writing history was thus seen as the most important way to civilize the nation.

The idea of immortality is very important among Chinese intellectuals. There is a famous discussion in Zuo Zhuan about three immortalities (三不朽): by virtue, by achievement, and by words (Ruan 2021, vol. 18, 1614). There was no discussion about the imperishable nature of a spiritual being, as in Plato’s Phaedo. It was only after Buddhism was introduced into China that the idea of an immortal spirit became familiar among Chinese intellectuals. In his famous discussion with Buddhist scholars, Fan Zhen, a fifth century Confucian scholar, argued powerfully that spirit, as a part of the body, could not survive the body (神滅論). Fan Zhen represented the mainstream idea of Confucianism, and this is also the idea of zoontology. The three immortalities depend on a belief in continuous history. Only on the condition that the historical record is always right and complete could people believe that their virtues, deeds, or words would be remembered forever. Among Chinese intellectuals, there is a common practice of “entrusting immortality” (托以不朽). When someone was about to die, he entrusted his immortality...
to a trusted friend, and thus asked his friend to publish his books or record his achievements in historical works (Xie Yan 2017, 99–106).

There has been a great tradition of historiography in China, one that can be compared with the philosophy of history in the West. However, the two great civilizations weigh history for quite different reasons. In the West, the idea of lineal time is the philosophical basis for a history with a beginning and an end. In China, history is important because it is the way for human civilizations to make progress and even become immortal. All human spiritual achievements, including culture, literature, philosophy, and religion are important to make human civilization immortal, but if we raise them above nature and even destroy nature in the name of civilization, it would be entirely against the very purpose of civilization. There is no divine reason which guarantees that any specific civilization or community will make the progress needed to become immortal. Human beings could preserve and develop their civilization with their collective wisdom, but it is always possible that their stupidity, ignorance, pride, and internal conflicts will make their civilization decline or even die out. It is already a huge achievement that human civilization has made such great developments over the millennia. Indeed, human history is a miracle compared with the natural living cycles, but the more developed a civilization is, the easier it is for people to make terrible mistakes. The rapid development of human civilization often creates an illusion that we have conquered nature and can do whatever we want, but this is likely the most dangerous misunderstanding we have ever had. Nature is the only sacred thing that needs to be respected at all times. This kind of respect, however, is not a religious one, but based on the rational reflection and development of human beings.

**Subjective Philosophy in Zoontology**

Subjective philosophy is the mainstream of modern philosophy. Descartes realized that the first certain thing that one can know is the ego. The very fact that I am thinking proves that I am, hence is the famous saying *cogito ergo sum* (Descartes 1998, 64). From the standpoint of the ego, one can also realize the existence of the external world and God, and hence knowledge of the whole world. Descartes also established the dualism between spirit as something thinking and matter as something extending. The essence of the ego is a spirit, and one’s body is something material. The interaction between spirit and material is a serious problem in Cartesian subjective philosophy, and hence one cannot identify another person as a thinking ego as oneself, but merely treat the other person as an extending body.
Since Descartes, subjective philosophy has become the dominant philosophical trend. Empiricists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke also viewed the world from a subjective perspective, though quite differently in some ways. George Berkeley and David Hume made a step forward and questioned the objectivity of the external world. If we know everything from our own perspective, how can we know our cognition accurately reflects the objective world? It is Kant who made the decisive step to denounce knowledge of an objective world entirely. For him, human beings are not capable of knowing the objective world, and what they regard as objective rules are rules within their own logic. While denouncing such epistemology, Kant also established a moral metaphysics. We could not prove the existence of God, but could realize what is right morally, and if we obey all the categorical imperatives without a second thought, we are obeying God’s rules and spiritually free. While Kant pushed subjective philosophy in a more radical direction, he also made an important turn. For him, it is not cognition, but will, that makes up a subject. The most important thing is not what we know, because we cannot know anything outside of ourselves, but what we will. Hence it is will that makes a person what he is.

While Schelling and Hegel tried to make the objective world philosophically significant again, the Kantian philosophy remains the ideology of liberalism. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the flourishing of the philosophy of life. Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Bergson, and Freud all contributed to this intellectual trend. I consider the philosophy of life a kind of subjective philosophy as well. Following Kant’s line, the ego in their philosophy is not constituted by cognition, but by will. What makes them different from Kant is that their voluntarist philosophy is not centred on morality. For them, will originates more from life instinct, and hence the concept of will in Freud is hardly distinguishable from desire. In this way their philosophy went to another extreme as to be amoral or even antimoral.

The problem of subjective philosophy was a major concern of Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl saw his philosophical efforts as a further deepening of Descartes’ subjective philosophy, but he also fully realized the problem of subjective philosophy. One starting point in Heidegger’s Time and Being is to criticize and revise subjective philosophy. The perspective of Dasein, however, seems to be another subjective philosophy, and that is why Heidegger would make a great turn in his later period.

For me, subjective philosophy as such is reasonable. We cannot deny the fact that Descartes and his followers presented: we do everything from the perspective of ourselves. What makes it problematic is how subjectivity is constituted. For
Descartes, the ego is a thinking spirit; but for Nietzsche and Freud, the ego is a willing or desiring self. We accept the fact that we do everything from the perspective of ourselves, but our subjectivity is not constituted by thinking or willing alone, but by living. What makes zoeontology different from the philosophy of life is that it centres on living. Thinking and willing are both important faculties of living, but not its totality. A living subject is an individual who has his own time-space system. Living, as the entire nature given to us by Heaven, is sacred, unsurpassable, and unreducible. Living is not composed of carbohydrates, but of time-space rhythms.

In order to build civilizations, human beings have to analyse the living nature and highlight a part of it, but this does not mean that nature could be grasped in this way. The most common way to highlight nature is dualism, that is, to divide nature into spirit and body. Dualism has been very important in Western philosophical tradition, since body and soul are seen as two kinds of being. Cartesian dualism is the modern type of this philosophical stance, but there have been serious challenges to it since the last century (Lovejoy 1930, 31; Watson 1987, 181). An important feature of zoeontology, however, is its monism. Life is an entity and could not be divided into different parts. In Chinese philosophical tradition, the monistic understanding of life is the mainstream. The thinking mind is an important and even the dominant part of life, and in several philosophical texts the metaphor of a king and officials is used to describe the relationship between the mind and other parts of a body. Although a king is the predominant force, he is the same kind of human being as his officials and subjects, and his being a king depends on their existence and support. Similarly, although the mind is the predominant organ in a human body, it is not different to the body itself, and its dominating faculty depends entirely on the body, as the mind does not survive when the body dies. Although sometimes we treat the body and mind as two kinds of things, that is only for the convenience of language, and we cannot take this division seriously.

When a child is born they are already in the process of living, and begin to orientate themselves in the living community, albeit unconsciously. When they grow up and get the mature ability of reasoning and willing things, they begin to realize and rationalize this orientation, but cannot start it afresh. According to Kant, a child is brought to the world unwillingly by his parents, and hence owes nothing to their mother and father. Instead, the parents are obliged to raise their child (Kant 1991, 99). Zoeontology does not see it this way. Because life is the noblest thing in the world, being born is the greatest benefit. Whether I will my birth or not is meaningless, because before my birth I was not there to will it. If I find my life is not so good after I have been raised by my parents, it is unreasonable and ungrateful to complain to them for giving birth to me without my consent.
Although I have my own time-space system, I do not start it all myself. In the living community, my living process runs in parallel to that of all other subjects. It is understandable if we do not communicate with each other, but if different living processes intersect it is necessary that different subjects must do so. Further, if a subject is essential to another’s living process, there must be deep interactions between them. This is exactly what happens between parents and children. My birth is an important moment in my parents’ living process, and their marriage initiates my living. My relationship with my parents is my first orientation in the living community. When I begin to desire anything necessary after my birth, I enrich my living world by my primary living abilities. With more nourishment and knowledge I grow up. My central knowledge is the origin of my life. Living is common to all the lives in the world, and not something particular to human beings. There are also instinctive affections between parents and children in animals, but the children of animals do not take care of their parents after growing up. Instead, they will establish their own families somewhere else. What distinguishes human beings is that they can reflect on their own origin and life. When I fully realize that my parents are the people who gave me life and then express my gratitude to them in an appropriate way, I have a solemn respect for my own life, and that is the beginning of civilization. Human reasoning could be used in many ways, but it is filial piety that is its proper use. That is why Mencius says that the essence of humanity is nothing but filial piety (仁之實，事親是也) (Ruan 2021, vol. 23, 366).

Parents are the first people who have a living relation with their child’s ego. It is such a special relationship that I owe my life itself to them. I start my orientation in the living community from my parents, centring on the very fact of living. In the Chinese language the term 生 means both living and giving birth, since generation is the very beginning of living. There are three preliminary relationships springing from giving birth: husband and wife, the cause of birth; parents and children, the very product of birth; and siblings, different products of the same parents. These three are called “the closest relatives” (至親) or “relatives in a body” (一體之親) in The Etiquette. “Parents and children are like head and limbs, (父子首足也) husband and wife are like two halves of one trunk, (夫妻牉合也) and siblings are like different limbs (昆弟四體也)” (ibid., vol. 11, 908). Starting from my parents, I extend my network to my siblings, who are also children of my parents. I will then learn that my parents also have parents and siblings, and hence I will extend my living network to them too, and then to the whole lineage of my family. In addition to these people linked by blood, I should also find a spouse with whom to generate our own children. Then I would extend my living network to people from other families. Mencius says, “Treat your parents well and then
treat other people’s parents in a similar way” (老吾老以及人之老) (ibid., vol. 25, 52). I could not treat the parents of a stranger well from the beginning, but must start with the parents of a related person, that is, my parents-in-law. This is exactly what Fei Xiaotong calls “the differential mode of association” (差序格局) (Fei 1992, 60). It is quite different from the Christian idea of treating any other person as a brother. It is human nature that in general a person will treat relatives better than strangers. Only after I can treat my relatives in the proper way could I learn how to treat other people with whom I have different relationships. After I can manage a family well, I would be able to manage a community bigger than a family. Here is an example that Mencius presented: suppose that I drink with some people from a community, among whom there is both my older brother and a senior member of the community. When I propose toasts to everyone present, should I propose to my older brother first or to the senior member of the community? Although my older brother is closer to me, I should drink a toast to the senior member of the community first (Ruan 2021, vol. 25, 512). Only by knowing this could I also know how to manage a community properly. When I have learned how to treat different people in a community properly, I might be qualified to manage a government, because I could regard the whole country as an entity. A step further, I would also learn how to treat different countries in a proper way, and so manage the world under Heaven (天下) well. This is the order presented in The Great Learning (大學): to cultivate yourself, to regulate your family, to govern your country, and to bring peace to the whole world under Heaven (修身，齊家，治國，平天下) (ibid., vol. 17, 2707). In the hierarchy of feudal China, the emperor should be able to bring peace to the whole world under Heaven, the feudal princes should manage their own countries, and high officials should manage their large families, usually consisting more than one hundred people, and an ordinary person should only treat their core family well. Although different people could extend their relationships to a different extent, what is common to all is the cultivation of the living self, which is the starting point of any subject.

In his old age, Fei Xiaotong developed his theory of the differential mode of association and extended it to a broader scope (Fei 2009, 302). Now we know that the Earth is not the whole cosmos, and it is quite possible that in the future we will extend our network beyond the planet. It is still debatable whether the universe is limited or limitless. From a zoontological perspective, we could never get a “God’s eye view” to grasp the whole universe. Starting from the ego, anyone can have knowledge within a certain scope, of the family, country, the Earth, and so on. These are living communities at different levels. Even without human civilizations, the world is already a living community in which every life is engaged in living. Civilization is nothing but a self-conscious living community. A human
being knows his place in such a community and consciously make it a better one for everyone in it. If a person could think beyond himself and consider the family from the perspective of the whole, then he could manage the family well; if he could think about the country from the perspective of the whole, he could manage the country well; and if he could think about the world from the perspective of the whole, he could achieve peace for the whole world. With the development of human civilization, we are extending the scope of our lives and becoming responsible for bigger living communities. Now we can already see the possibility of life beyond the planet. On the one hand, however broad our scope becomes, we know everything from the perspective of the ego; on the other hand, we could know the whole only relatively, but never absolutely. As civilization develops, our scope might extend more and more, but it will never reach an end. We should thus be open forever.

In such a world view there are three ways to treat non-human lives. First, they might be only objects of our desires or tools in our life. When human beings are confined to a very narrow scope, they could only treat other things in such a pragmatic way. Second, when human beings have better knowledge of the world they would be able to find beauty in other things and treat them in an aesthetic way. Thirdly, when they see the world as a living community, they would realize that even other things are living things, and treat them as co-lives. As such they might make efforts to make the whole community a better one for all its members. When they are more civilized they will have a larger scope and treat more things as co-lives. However, artificial things like robots can never be co-lives, but merely tools.

Dialectics between Nature and Civilization

What is the relationship between civilization and nature, and what is human being’s place in the universe? These are key questions for human knowledge. Nature was seen as sacred both in ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Chinese philosophy. It is in the Jewish-Christian tradition that nature began to be seen as something created by God. While God is regarded as the creator of the whole world, human beings’ salvation is also seen as beyond the reach of nature. In Cartesian dualism, nature is nothing but the material world measurable mathematically, and the spirit is of course far greater than this material world. This idea has long been dominant in the modern world and become a great driving force for scientific developments. However, it has also caused great problems. Nature has been dethroned, conquered, and humiliated, which is a fundamental dilemma in today’s world.
From a zooeontological perspective, though, there is a dialectics between nature and civilization. Naturally, every life has its own time-space system. By establishing a common time-space system, human civilization creates an idea of lineal history beyond natural cycles and a civilized world much larger than any individual. We also have created a lot of spiritual products to enrich our living community. But human civilization could never surpass or rebel against nature. Nature is an entity that has no will, feeling, or any personal ability, containing many time-space systems. It is neither a personified God in any religious sense nor a mechanical unity. We could not have any objective knowledge of the whole of nature, but we could have some knowledge in a certain scope, that is, we can extend our common time-space system to a much large scope. Kant is right that we know everything with our own forms of time and space. That does not mean, however, that this is not an efficient way to know the outer world. With our common time-space system we can not only communicate with each other in the living community, but also learn about other time-space systems and make the world a better living community, although we cannot know the whole universe.

The English word “civilization” has its origin in the deep tradition of Greek city-state politics. In its Chinese counterpart, 文明, however, the character 文 originally means the vein in a thing, and 明 means enlightenment. Civilization comes into being when the vein within human nature is discovered and enlightened. This idea is somehow close to Leibniz’s metaphor of the vein in a piece of marble, after which a statue of Hercules is sculptured (Leibniz 1996, 52). In The Book of Harmonia (樂記), it is said, “the deeper natural feeling is, the more civilized we are” (情深而文明) (Ruan 2021, vol. 14, 1905). Confucius himself also talks about this point, “it is too artificial if the culture outweighs nature, and it is too savage if nature outweighs the culture. Only when there is a balance between culture and nature, could there be real gentlemen” (文勝質則史, 質勝文則野, 文質彬彬, 然後君子) (ibid., vol.23, 152). Civilization could not flourish by conquering nature. Civilization is fully developed only if living nature is vigorous.

In The Book of Changes there is an important discussion of the origin of civilization, “with the combination of yin and yang, we grasp astronomy, i.e., the vein of heavenly nature; with the extent of civilization, we see humanity, i.e., the vein of human nature. After astronomy, we could understand the seasonal changes; after humanity, we could civilize the world under Heaven” (剛柔交錯，天文也；文明以止，人文也。觀乎天文以察時變，觀乎人文以化成天下) (ibid., vol. 1, 196). While civilization is created by human beings, it must follow the way of natural living and is aimed at enlightening it instead of conquering or changing it.
I define civilization as a civil community, i.e., a special living community established by human beings to transcend private time-space systems. Though different from a natural living community, a civil community is still a living community, and every member of a civilization is still a natural life. Although we have a common time-space system, it could not replace our private time-space rhythm. Civilization only provides a community for better communications and a better life, but any individual still lives according to his own rhythm. Any human creation could not be made from nothing, but must make a living and die according to nature.

Fuxi, a legendary ruler of great antiquity, is said to be the inventor of human civilization (Ruan 2021, vol. 1, 535‒36). There are many legends about his inventions, which could be classified into five categories: 1) written language and the eight diagrams; 2) marriage rules, family order, bureaucracy, and laws; 3) music and instruments; 4) the system of five elements and calendar; 5) all kinds of tools. And these are exactly the most important aspects of a civilization.

Language distinguishes human civilization from nature, an idea that is now common sense in modern social sciences. Because the Chinese written language is based on pictographs, the importance of written characters is especially emphasized. Chinese characters are also seen as a kind of vein within nature. This has a quite similar role to the *logos* in Western civilization, yet it is not a kind of human creation or divine inspiration, but the abstraction of the inner vein of natural things. The eight diagrams are also a kind of abstract characters, resembling the eight most important natural phenomena: Heaven (☰), earth (☷), water (☵), fire (☲), wind (☴), thunder (☳), mountain (☶), and marsh (☱). The combination of these not only represents all kinds of natural changes, but also civil events and the vicissitudes of fortune.

Language and a calendar could be seen as preconditions for civilization, while all other inventions are under the same category of *nomos* and *harmonia* (禮樂), which are the framework of human civilization. The basic idea is expressed in The Book of Harmonia: “the great institute of nomos resembles the differences in the cosmos, and the great institute of harmonia resembles the harmony in the cosmos” (大禮與天地同節，大樂與天地同和) (Ruan 2021, vol. 15, 1866). *Nomos* is established according to the natural difference, for instance, the difference between two genders, the difference between different generations, and so on. The basic theory of *harmonia*, however, is to establish harmony between different melodies, and hence represent the idea of harmony in civilization. All these institutions are designed to turn natural living into a kind of civil living.

It is said in The Book of Changes: “the intercourse between Heaven and Earth makes all lives possible; the intercourse between men and women makes all lives
live” (天地氤氲，萬物化醇；男女構精，萬物化生) (ibid., vol. 1, 557). The first part is about the natural living in the cosmos, while the second part is about how marriage follows the natural way in human civilizations.

These two parts represent the functions of the two parts of The Book of Changes itself. The key point of the first part, which contains 34 hexagrams, is “because there are Heaven and Earth, everything is generated” (ibid., 600). It is about the living rhythm in the natural world. The second part, which contains 30 hexagrams, is about the order in human civilization

because there are Heaven and Earth, there is everything; because there is everything, there are men and women; because there are men and women, there are husbands and wives; because there are husbands and wives, there are parents and children; because there are parents and children, there are monarchies and ministers; because there are monarchies and ministers, there are rulers and the ruled; because there are rulers and the ruled, nomos could have its right place. (Ruan 2021, vol. 1, 603)

The beginning of the second part is almost identical to the first part. This shows that human civilization is a part of nature, and should follow the natural way of living. The rest of the second part, however, presents what is particular to human civilization. It begins from regulations of copulation and generation, which is not a deviation from nature, but a human way to fulfil nature.

On the one hand, everything in human civilization follows instead of departing from natural ways; on the other hand, there is something quite artificial in human creations. It is not easy to balance the two aspects, and this is an important theoretical tension in zoeontology. There are many related debates in the history of Chinese philosophy. Zhuang Zi, for instance, saw the natural way of living as the best, and regarded the development of human civilization as a kind of corruption because it unavoidably destroys the nature of life. Xun Zi, however, held the very opposite view. He regarded human nature as inclining to evil, because people are always selfish and greedy, and there would be serious conflicts and confusions without external constraint. Mencius, whose idea became the mainstream of Chinese theories on human nature in Neo-Confucianism, stood between these two poles. For him, human nature is good because it has the seed for the order and nomos of civilization. Hegel argued that evil human nature is a better theory than good human nature (Hegel 2010, 51). He was right as far as the Western philosophical tradition is concerned, because a transcendent idea of absolute spirit is set as the goal. When human nature is presumed to be evil, people could be whipped to raise themselves to a better spiritual state. However, things are very different
in the Chinese theories of human nature. Good human nature is a better theory because it could better balance nature and civilization.

In our modern version of zoeontology, this tension is even more remarkable, because it points to a key problem of modernity. Zhuang Zi was right that civilization is destroying nature, but it is impossible to return to the primitive life as he advocated. What is more, Zhuang Zi could not want an absolutely natural life. He required at least some social order, i.e., he could not denounce the living community. If there is a living community, it necessarily has some order. Once there is social order, how could we prevent it from developing further? From Mencius’ point of view, human civilization is created from the good nature of living. The problem is that once we start to create, how can we guarantee that we do not corrupt nature? In the modern understanding of science, nature is something measurable by mathematical methods. Everything we do is to analyse, make use of, and even change nature. How could we then respect nature as something sacred? The core idea of zoeontology is the dialectical balance between these two poles. We do not understand such a dialectics as a kind of compromise, but as a kind of mutually beneficial situation.

As a human effort to build a better living community, civilization is innate to human nature. There is nothing wrong when human beings civilize a living community. It takes a child quite some time to have a good understanding of his place in the family, community, country, and world. It takes a much longer time for human civilizations to have a better understanding of their proper place in the world and universe. There are lessons in the process of our growing up. Religious fanaticism, self-deification, and the idea of conquest are all things which have drawn punishments from the nature. We are learning when we grow up. From a zoeontological perspective, neither a good nor bad future is destined in a religious sense. The mutual understanding and cooperation between different civilizations is the precondition of a better living community.

There is a noteworthy idea in Chinese tradition: “human beings are the heart of the cosmos” (人者，天地之心也) (Ruan 2021, vol. 1, 1223). Zhang Zai, a great philosopher of the Song dynasty, regarded it as an important task for intellectuals to “set the heart of the cosmos” (為天地立心) (Zhang 2012, 376). Human beings, as the only intelligent lives on Earth, are the heart and wisdom of Heaven and Earth. This is not the arrogance of human beings, but their duty. We are responsible for managing the world we live in well and making it a better place for all members of this living community. When we establish a common time-space system for better communication between different lives, we should also remember that everyone has his own living rhythm, which is the living nature of each private
individual. The dialectic between civilization and nature is first of all a balance between the common living rhythm and the private living rhythms. The freedom of individuals is fulfilled by preserving the private living rhythm, while the common rhythm could help everyone achieve freedom through living together in a civilized community. In this way human beings help Heaven and Earth to enable everyone to live a better life (參贊化育). In traditional Chinese philosophy, only the sages could do this, but from a modern zoeneontological point of view, I see this as the most important function of human civilizations.

Conclusion

From a zoeneontological perspective, we have reconsidered some central issues in the history of philosophy: time and space, subjectivity, the meaning of history, and the relationship between civilization and nature. This was not meant as idle speculation, but instead an attempt to rethink some contemporary questions that the human world is facing.

With the rapid development of science and artificial intelligence (AI), there has been heated philosophical debate about the role of AI in the human world. As it is deeply concerned with the nature-civilization relationship, zoeneontology sees nothing that is artificial as having any claim over the natural world. AI is a kind of tool created by human civilization, but not one of our co-lives. Robots are not natural lives, and they can never replace human beings, and any scientific attempt to change nature would result in punishment from the nature.

Zoeontology should also offer new insights on political life and the international order. Modern theories of natural rights and international law started from the idea of self-preservation. Facing the danger of a violent death, one could do anything to protect oneself. Self-preservation is similar to, but not equivalent to, living. Zoeontology sees living as the most important thing, but one should not weigh one’s own life as above everything else, because the state of nature is not a condition of all against all, but a natural living community. At least parents are not against their children. The community is not an artificial thing, but a precondition for all human life. Hence one is obliged not only to protect one’s own life, but also the living order of the community. In a family, a responsible person should protect the living order of all family members; in a country, one is responsible for the living order of all citizens; in a world, one is responsible for the living order of all human beings. A civilized person is not one who has denounced nature, but one who not only weighs nature in his own person, but also in the living community.
The greatest difficulties in today’s world are due to cultural misunderstandings and political clashes. We have experienced some serious human disasters in recent centuries, and are very close to new ones. I see all these disasters rooted in the ontological understanding of history, which has sacralized wars and massacres as something above human nature and everyday life. From a zoeontological perspective, however, everything in human civilizations is created for the sake of living. Originating from Confucianism, zoeontology does not see anything besides living as sacred. Living is the measure of everything, and human beings should not sacrifice human lives for anything else.

Presented above are some brief zoeontological arguments about contemporary issues. We now wait for other opportunities for further clarifications of them.

References


