Li Zehou’s Ideas on Chinese Modernity Revisited: Possible Applications of Xi ti Zhong yong

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Abstract
We propose Li Zehou’s idea of “Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Function” (Xi ti Zhong yong 西体中用) as an interpretative framework for two distinct theories: Sungmoon Kim’s political theory of public reason Confucianism and Yan Lianke’s literary theory of mythorealism. This paper aims to show that Xi ti Zhong yong can provide a unified explanatory framework for these two apparently distinct theories. Second, we show that Xi ti Zhong yong can be applied even more broadly to other phenomena occurring in contemporary discourses on China. In particular, we show that it provides new interpretative perspectives in political philosophy and literary theory.

Keywords: Li Zehou, history of ideas, Chinese philosophy, Yan Lianke, mythorealism, Sungmoon Kim, Public Reason Confucianism

Ponovni pregled Li Zehouovih idej o kitajski modernosti: možne aplikacije Xi ti Zhong yong

Izvleček

Ključne besede: Li Zehou, zgodovina idej, kitajska filozofija, Yan Lianke, mitorealizem, Sungmoon Kim, konfucijanstvo javnega razuma

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Introduction

This article aims to revisit Li Zehou’s idea of “Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Application” (Xi ti Zhong yong 西體中用), further referred to as Xi ti Zhong yong. Our research is an attempt to operationalize it in the areas of political philosophy and literary studies. In particular, we draw on Li’s idea to provide a new interpretative framework for Sungmoon Kim’s public reason Confucianism and Yan Lianke’s mythorealism (shenshizhuyi 神實主義). We believe that some crucial features of this framework are indicative of its explanatory force not only for the two presented theories, but also for a more comprehensive array of theories that explore modern Chinese phenomena. Such features include the search for continuity as well as the evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) character of how modernization pathways for China have been shaped.

This article has the following structure: first, we briefly present the historical context of Li Zehou’s idea and his approach to the interplay between the two well-established concepts of “substance” (ti 體) and “application/function” (yong 用). In particular, we outline the significance and implications of Xi ti Zhong yong. In the main part, we first present Sungmoon Kim’s political theory of public reason Confucianism and then Yan Lianke’s literary theory of mythorealism through the interpretative lens of Xi ti Zhong yong. Finally, we conclude with final remarks and provide a perspective for further research on Xi ti Zhong yong.

Li Zehou was an active thinker from the 1950s until his death in 2021, and well-read in both Eastern and Western traditions. He created some of his most insightful works in the 1970s and 80s, including a panoramic overview of the history of Chinese thought, a critical examination of Kant’s philosophy, and a re-evaluation of Confucius’ heritage (Lambert 2021). Li solidified his academic standing with the publication of *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* in 1981. Although his work on Chinese aesthetics earned him the status of an academic celebrity, he decided to venture into a new philosophical area after adopting a stance critical of the government’s response to the Tiananmen Protests in 1989, and after three years of house arrest he moved to the US in 1992. Li proposed some distinctive ethical theories, such as the theory of sedimentation and “emotion as substance”. The last few years have brought a renewed interest in Li Zehou’s thought; among them, a book edited by Ames and Jia (2018) and the special issue of *Asian Studies* dedicated to his work (2020). In the former, Karl-Heinz Pohl presented probably the most recent and most explanatory take on the idea of Xi ti Zhong yong.

The reception of an essay published in 1987, “Random Thoughts on ‘Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning as Application’ (Man shuo Xi ti Zhong
yong 漫說西體中用), was indicative of Li’s future. Published at the height of his popularity in the People’s Republic of China, “Random Thoughts” was fiercely criticized both by radical liberals for an overly conservative approach and by orthodox Marxists for inviting total Westernization (quanpan xihua 全盘西化) (Liu 1994; Pohl 2018). Whether or not his critics were right, such divergent receptions of Li’s proposal indicate its interpretative potency and richness.

However, its immediate reception in the late 1980s is not what matters most today for developing the ideas shared in Li’s essay from 1987. His proposal of Xi ti Zhong yong is a subversive voice in a much longer debate. China’s position towards the West has been a leitmotif of Chinese intellectual life and social debates since the Opium Wars. This historical frame needs to be accounted for in discussions of Li’s views on Chinese modernity.

Moreover, the distinct starting points of Li Zehou’s conception present it as particularly well-suited for engaging in a meaningful dialogue with a diverse array of contemporary voices. His ideas, rooted in a deep understanding of Chinese intellectual traditions while simultaneously engaging with Western philosophies, create a fertile ground for dialogue with thinkers such as Sungmoon Kim, whose works delve into East Asian political philosophy, or literary figures like Yan Lianke, who is keenly interested in the pace and influence of modernization in China and its toll on society.

Sungmoon Kim’s reflections are inspired by the actual social existence of people in East Asia. According to Kim, the enduring East-Asian social conditions are irrevocably marked by value pluralism and structured by political institutions originating from external traditions. Nonetheless, the lives of East Asians are deeply permeated by Confucian mores and habits. The question then is how one can accommodate the fact that Confucianism greatly influences East Asians even if they identify themselves as followers of other doctrines in their public and private lives.

Likewise, there are noticeable similarities between Li Zehou and Yan Lianke. In both cases their theoretical work stems from genuine concern for society, and both Li and Yan take an interest in China’s development and path toward modernity, even though they use different tools in approaching these topics. Even though it is not crucial to this analysis, it is worth mentioning that Yan, just like Li, examines the relationship between humans and productive forces. He does so by presenting in his fiction recurring motifs to comment on painful societal matters such as the exploitation of the human body (Hard Like Water (2021), Lenin’s Kisses (2012), and Dream of Ding Village (2009)), absurdities resulting from hyper-fast development (The Explosion Chronicles (2018b)), or engagement in utopias (The Four Books (2016) and The Day the Sun Died (2018a)).
Both theories presented in the article are holistic. They both reassess the role of Chinese tradition, grapple with the question of Western influences in contemporary China, and reach similar conclusions.

In the article, we will first shed new light on Sungmoon Kim’s attempt to establish congruence between democratic liberal institutions and Confucian self-identification. We will then reinterpret Yan Lianke’s mythorealism by arguing that it is conceptually close to *Xi ti Zhong yong*.

*Xi ti Zhong yong* was not proposed to establish a framework for any particular area of study. It was Li’s system of philosophical aesthetics and his concepts of the “humanization of nature” (*zirande renhua* 自然的人化), the “naturalization of humans” (*rende ziranhua* 人的自然化), “subjectality” (*zhutixing* 主體性) and “sedimentation” (*jidian* 積澱) that were previously applied in literary studies. In particular, his idea of human subjectality directly influenced the theory of literary subjectivity put forward by Liu Zaifu (Lin 1992). Similarly, it was Li’s simultaneous apprehension of Kant’s aesthetics and Marx’s politics that invited reflections on concepts such as political freedom (Bruya 2003).

Why then, do we intend to argue that *Xi ti Zhong yong* is applicable to the fields of literary study and political philosophy? First, Li’s formulation stems from his awareness that Western influences on Chinese reality cannot be ignored. This awareness is a substantial background behind Chinese intellectual debates. Second, we believe that the two theories share a common ground with Li’s idea and can be thought of as concrete instances of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. Finally, exploring links between *Xi ti Zhong yong* and its potential practical applications provides an opportunity to reinterpret the latter. We are not looking for the direct conceptual genealogy linking *Xi ti Zhong yong* with the ideas analysed here. Instead, we aim to show that Li’s proposal serves as a useful interpretative framework for different research areas.

*Xi ti Zhong yong*: The Context and the Contents

The Chinese intellectual landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries went through waves of change and deconstruction. Contact with the West, although initially conducted on Chinese terms, deteriorated into “the century of humiliation”. The disintegration of the idea that Chinese culture offers sufficient resources to respond to any challenge forced Chinese intellectuals to actively seek ways of addressing the pressures of modernization. This impulse for modernization had a very particular face—one of deeply Western provenance. The inrush of “Western
learning” propelled by the use of military power was not yet another ideological novelty to be absorbed and Sinicized by the capacious means of Chinese culture. Instead, it created a vital challenge to the very paradigm of the Chinese political model. As a result, Chinese thinkers were determined to reexamine their traditions and come up with ingenious ways of confronting this challenge. The spectre of “Western learning” became a presence—to some menacing, to others providential—that was ubiquitous and unavoidable. The responses took multifarious shapes, spanning between two organizing principles of “Westernization” (xihua 西化) and “Sinicization” (zhonghua 中化) (Yu 2010, 153). The former is probably best represented by Hu Shi’s appeals for “total Westernization”, whereas the latter took the most prevalent form in Zhang Zhidong’s formulation of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application” (Zhongxue wei ti Xixue wei yong 中學為體西學為用) put forward in “Exhortation to Study” (Quanxue Pian 勸學篇) in 1898.

A binary notion of substance and function has been present in Chinese tradition from the times of neo-Confucianism. Thus, the idea of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application” had already taken deep roots in the Chinese intellectual landscape when Li Zehou conducted his “ingenious turnaround” (Pohl 2018, 64). At the end of the 19th century, Zhang Zhidong repurposed the neo-Confucian notions of ti and yong to present his vision of incorporating Western ideas and changing the country. In Zhang’s understanding, Zhong ti represented the orthodox basis of society (ibid., 63). In his influential work, Zhang voiced the belief of his time that Western learning could be limited to scientific, technological, and economic know-how, effectively serving what the Chinese could call “worldly affairs” (shishi 世事).

Zhang’s use of ti-yong was “by no means orthodox in a Confucian philosophical way but […] rather creatively clever” (Pohl 2018). Li Zehou, on the other hand, despite returning to the traditional view of ti-yong as inseparable (tiyong bu er 體用不二), proposed a treatment of the formula that was far from conventional. First, Li adapted this idea by reversing it. Second, he proposed a different understanding of ti:

I repeatedly emphasize that social existence is the substance of society [benti 本体]. Turning ‘ti’ into social existence does not involve only the ideological state, and it is not just ‘science’. Social existence is a mode of production and ways of everyday life. This is social existence in itself from the materialistic viewpoint and the root of human existence. Modernization primarily means changing this ‘ti’. (Li 1987; authors’ own translation)
Here Li believes *ti* and *yong* to be two sides of the same coin. The “function” (*yong*) is an “upgrade” and “variation” of the Chinese tradition and the starting point to realize the Western *ti*.

This ‘Chinese function’ involves ‘Western substance’ applied in China and includes Chinese traditional culture and ‘Chinese learning’ since those should serve as the way and method to achieve ‘Xi *ti*’ (modernization). In this sense of *yong*, what used to be the original ‘Chinese learning’ is upgraded, altered, and varied. Only with this kind of ‘Zhong *yong*’ ‘Western substance’ can be genuinely and adequately Sinicized, instead of—yet again—turning it under the banner of Sinicization into ‘adopting Western knowledge for its practical while keeping Chinese values as the core’. (Li 1987; authors’ own translation)

In a comprehensive and highly elucidative chapter, Karl-Heinz Pohl describes “Western learning as substance” as a modernized social existence that not only comprises natural sciences and technology, but also involves “the political, social, and economic thought that enabled the development of technological know-how, as well as the thought tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (of which Marx was an integral part)” (Pohl 2018, 64). The corresponding “Chinese learning as function” refers to a specific Chinese form that both shapes and is shaped by the modernized social existence (Li 2018, 64).

Although Li’s understanding of the terms *ti* and *yong* contradicts that of Zhang Zhidong, there is a historical parallelism that provides them with a shared context. The year 1898 was a tumultuous and fervent one that culminated in the bold yet failed Hundred Days Reform (*wuxu bianfa* 戊戌變法). Similarly, 1986 was marked by the so-called “Cultural Fever” (*wenhua re* 文化熱) (that also includes the “Aesthetic Craze”—*meixue re* 美學熱), a period abounding in daring movements, such as the ‘85 New Wave that openly followed ideas of Western art. Li’s primary concern in this context is how to establish the most favourable way of incorporating both tradition and modernity in China. In both 1898 and 1986, China was at a crossroads. In both cases, there were widespread doubts about the efficacy and relevance of China’s heritage under the growing influx of foreign ideas. Questions of identity and the degree of opening up to the outside world prevailed. In both cases, the intellectual ferment was possible thanks to the period of short-lived political liberalization. Zhang Zhidong’s proposal of prioritizing “Chinese substance” and disjoining it from “Western application” became inscribed in the Chinese intellectual imagination. In contrast, Li advocated treating both as equal and, more importantly, inseparable. On the other hand, following
Lin's (1992) and Lambert's (2021) observations, it could be argued that it was Li Zehou’s innovative reworking of *Zhong ti Xi yong* that underpinned Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic appeal to “cross the river by feeling the stones” (*mozhe shitou guo he* 摸著石頭過河).

### Sungmoon Kim’s Public Reason Confucianism

As Yutang Jin (2021) aptly observes, the diversity of contemporary Confucian political theories is due to different ways of understanding social change and assessing whether and how Confucianism can respond to social change. Jin further points out that this is but another iteration of “the age-long debate about ‘substance’ (*ti*) and ‘function’ (*yong*) in Chinese intellectual history” (Jin 2021, 18). Finally, he distinguishes between two main approaches among Confucian political theorists: the cultural and the intellectual. The cultural approach is represented by Confucian perfectionists such as Sungmoon Kim or Franz Mang. It takes Confucianism as a set of interconnected values, customs, and behaviours deeply ingrained in the cultural practices of contemporary East Asians. As such, Confucian perfectionist values need to be given serious consideration. The primary challenge is thus to find legitimate means of promoting them within the context of the modern state (ibid., 4). The intellectual approach regards Confucianism predominantly as a system of thought upheld by an extensive intellectual tradition. The normative implications retrieved from this philosophical framework can potentially question the dominance of liberal democratic universalism in contemporary society (ibid., 8). Jin divides the intellectual approach into revivalists and reconstructivists. The former, represented by Jiang Qing, strives to devise methods of reviving traditional Confucianism to tailor a concept of modernity suitable for East Asia. The latter, represented by Stephen Angle, Tongdong Bai, Daniel Bell, and Joseph Chan, while recognizing that traditional Confucian thought is no longer applicable to complex modern societies, remains optimistic about retrieving and adapting philosophical insights from Confucianism and their relevance for understanding contemporary issues. Nevertheless, both subgroups regard Confucianism as a system of thought upheld by an extensive intellectual tradition that can serve as a reservoir of normative challenge to the dominance of liberal democratic universalism. Concerning the “substance” (*ti*) and “function” (*yong*) framework, Li Zehou’s idea of “Western substance and Chinese function” is represented by the cultural approach (ibid., 18). Kim’s conception of public reason Confucianism is a good example of how Li’s principle can be applied in practice.
As Kim describes it, public reason Confucianism is a particular mode of Confucian democratic perfectionism that “best articulates the complex relationship between Confucian cultural values and Confucian democratic citizenship under the institutional constraints of democratic constitutionalism and within the normative parameters of democratic principles” (Kim 2016, 19). It aims to reconcile the existing diversity and value pluralism of East Asian societies with their assumed pervasive Confucian character. To achieve this goal, Kim creatively revises the Rawlsian concept of public reason to open it to the possibility of public reason perfectionism and, subsequently, to public reason Confucianism (ibid., 80).

While Jin does not elaborate on his idea further, his observation points to Kim’s public reason Confucianism as an example of the Xi ti Zhong yong principle. At the same time, he acknowledges the complex intellectual and historical background of contemporary Confucian investigations. At the very source of contemporary Confucian political thought lies the impetuous and often violent encounters with the West. According to David Stasavage (2020), China and Western Europe represent not just two different models of political development, but are “the starkest alternative” (Stasavage 2020, 138) in terms of how their political experiences unfolded. This modal polarity is the predominant reason why the encounter with the West resulted in a challenge unprecedented in Chinese history. At the beginning of the 20th century the generally undisputed role of Confucianism and Confucian political thought was questioned and criticized for its perceived role in China’s inability to modernize and resist Western and Japanese imperialism. Both liberals and communists deemed Confucianism “hopelessly outdated” (Elstein 2021, 490). Consequently, contemporary Confucian political philosophy took shape in a context of vulnerability and self-contestation. Confucianism was no longer the unwavering political ideology within a stable institutional framework, but instead needed to be re-established and re-imagined to respond to the influx of cultural, political, and philosophical challenges of Western modernity.

In recent years, the explicit discourse centred around the categories of “Westernization” and “Sinicization” has waned (Yu 2010, 183). Some researchers believe that, in times of globalization, we should discard old distinctions and replace them with “Complementary Substance and Complementary Function”, hu ti hu yong. In other cases, the debate between Zhong ti Xi yong and Xi ti Zhong yong is considered to be no longer relevant (Yao 2019; Gao et al. 2016), or even responsible for stagnation in academia (Gao et al. 2016). However, the need to reconcile local and non-local institutional, cultural, or political elements is still a challenge in China and East Asia. The engagement with Western philosophical tradition is a defining feature of contemporary Confucian philosophy (Elstein 2021, 7), and the question of how to operationalize the relation between Western
and Chinese learning undergirds most of the contemporary political Confucian scholarship regardless of its stance. Even Jiang Qing (2013), an ardent proponent of reviving traditionalist Confucian political philosophy who emphasizes the importance of holding onto the original Confucian principles (Rošker 2015, 513), cannot but engage with ideas of Western provenance, even though he himself accuses such Confucian political reformers as Kang Youwei and Zhang Junmai of excessively internalizing Western constitutional principles (Jiang 2013, 46). While Jiang’s goal is to present a modern form of a Confucian political order divorced from the influences of Western-style liberal democracy, he nevertheless has to engage with such concepts as constitutionalism or legitimacy.

The heterogeneity of Confucianism has led to the development of diverse ways of capturing the ever-changing aspects of the Confucian tradition. Apart from basic geography- or history-based classifications, a wide array of scholars have proposed taxonomies centred around the chosen method (Chan 2014), set goals (Angle 2012), the way the authors draw on Confucianism (Jin 2021), or the doctrine that serves as a reference point for Confucianism’s self-transformation (Kim 2016).

According to Sungmoon Kim, Confucianism has been in the process of self-transformation throughout its whole history. What stimulates this constant evolution is the need and willingness to negotiate with doctrines that pose cultural, philosophical, or political challenges to Confucianism. Kim singles out the encounters with Legalism and Buddhism as the defining forces that first reshaped classical Confucianism into political Confucianism of the imperial period, and then redirected its interest toward metaphysics and moral psychology (Kim 2016, 242‒43). Kim’s proposal, public reason Confucianism, is also a result of such an encounter between Confucianism and liberal democracy.

Let us put aside the question of whether public reason Confucianism passes the test of feasibility and intelligibility (Angle 2019; Chan 2019; Wong 2019; Jin 2021), to be both philosophically significant and recognizable as belonging to the Confucian tradition. Regardless of the answer, Kim’s theory remains a substantial voice in discussing how Confucian political theory can engage with liberal democracy. The hermeneutical lenses of ti and yong afford a more comprehensive understanding of how his proposal differs from other recent Confucian political theories that result from such an encounter (Angle 2012; Bai 2019; Chan 2014). In particular, it affords a way of understanding these differences regarding the internal structure of their engagement with the Western philosophical tradition.

At the very beginning, Kim acknowledges that external factors are responsible for the fact that the patterns of constitutional structure, political system, or public
identity in the political societies of East Asia have not emerged from within their own cultures (Kim 2021, 126). Moreover, traditional political institutions and patterns of public engagement are defunct, creating a vast political vacuum. Since Kim sees the traditional East Asian political culture as overlapping with Confucianism to a great extent, he claims that traditional Confucian institutions (such as one-man monarchy or political ritualism), as well as the resulting social divisions, are all but obsolete (Kim 2016, 24). In contrast to Confucian revivalists (e.g., Jiang 2013), Kim claims that the attempt to resuscitate these institutions would not only be undesirable but also impossible. The circumstances of modern politics characterized by value pluralism and moral disagreement (Kim 2016, 13)

render the Confucian sage–king paradigm groundless.

Kim’s observation coincides with Li Zehou’s statement that “although the substance ti on which traditional politics and culture are based has gradually collapsed, many of its superstructural systems, values, and relationships still exist and became a huge habitual force”. The traditional Confucian political institutions might be gone alongside the traditional ways of life, but such “deep structures of Confucianism” as the outlook on life or habits of thought (Li 2018, 216) are still in place. Li describes them as complex composites in which “desire, emotion, and reason (rational knowledge) reside in complex interrelation within a type of structure” (ibid.). Despite transformations and changes on the “surface level”, the deep structures remain relatively stable since they are formed through a long process of “sedimentation”¹ (Rošker 2020a, 14–15). According to Kim, although traditional Confucian political institutions (such as one-man monarchy) have been at least partially superseded by the modern institution of citizenship (Kim 2016, 95), East Asian citizens are nonetheless Confucian citizens who are still under a penetrating and lasting influence of “Confucian mores and habits” (ibid., 67). Confucian citizens are thus put in a peculiar position. While they are deeply, although often unconsciously, entrenched in Confucian “habits of the heart” (Ivanhoe and Kim 2016), the circumstances of political, economic, and social life that conditioned these habits have almost entirely changed.

Instead, exogenous institutional elements (be they liberal democratic, or other) have been applied in a somewhat piecemeal and unintegrated way. The juxtaposition of the tentative institutional make-up and the shared Confucian way of how “ordinary men and women interact with themselves, think about moral questions, and make important political and legal decisions” (Kim 2021,126) results in a cacophony that renders East Asian societies unintelligible to their citizens. In

¹ Rošker (2020a) shows how the historical development of people’s social and cultural life is akin to “the gradual layering of silt” that accumulates along riverbanks.
response to the needs and expectations of Confucian citizens, Kim proposes that the state should be allowed to “publicly promote a (characteristically) Confucian way of life” understood as “a constellation of values such as, but not limited to, filial piety, ritual propriety, respect for elders, ancestor worship, harmony within the (extended) family, and social harmony” (Kim 2016, 14). At the same time, core democratic values must be embraced non-instrumentally (ibid., 27). His scheme can be reframed according to the *ti-yong* framework, where the core values of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation (ibid., 245), constitute the substance *ti*, while the constellation of underlying Confucian values constitutes its application *yong*.

According to Kim, the impact of modernity on the circumstances of politics in East Asia is indisputable. What, within the *ti-yong* framework, could be presented as *Zhong ti* is no longer plausible. Kim states that the “political theology of Heaven, the political ideal of sage-king, the moral metaphysics of virtue, and traditional Confucian political perfectionism” (Kim 2018, 10) have all become obsolete and no longer viable. The existing sociopolitical arrangements position East Asian citizens as equal and normatively diverse, even though their “lives are still significantly shaped by Confucian values, rituals, and social practice” (ibid., 9).

This argument can be illustrated by building upon the analogy used by Chengyang Li (2023) to describe different approaches to reconstructing Confucian philosophy. An ancient house needing renovation could be demolished and replaced with a new building. However, this would be detrimental to maintaining the inhabitants’ unique way of living, outlook on life, and habits of thought. Conversely, such an ancient house could be meticulously restored to its original form, including the no longer functional parts and possible faulty designs (Li 2023, 9). However, paraphrasing Kim, the circumstances of modern living require such basic amenities as running water or electricity. Only after introducing these substantial amenities does an ancient house become practically habitable, allowing its dwellers to pursue their Confucian-valenced lives.

The experience of “cacophony” is indeed a reformulation of the modernization challenges that East Asian societies, and China in particular, have faced since before the beginning of the 20th century. Kim’s solution for resolving this disharmony is consistent with Li Zehou’s recommendation to infuse “sedimented tradition” (*chuantong jidian* 傳統積澱) and “cultural–psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構) with the new consciousness, thus changing the “hereditary factors” (*yichuan jiyin de gaihuan* 遺傳基因的改換) and resulting in a change in “habits, functions, and appearances” (Li 1987, 27). Kim intends to give the regulative idea of public reason a distinctly Confucian form. By changing and rejecting
some of the Confucian “hereditary factors”, such as the monistic approach to ethics and politics or “the elitist aspect of Confucian meritocratic perfectionism” (Kim 2016, 14), Kim wants to offer a political proposal that satisfies three conditions. First, it should maintain a meaningful historical connection with traditional Confucianism (ibid., 15). Second, it could be recognized as distinctively Confucian by Confucian citizens. Third, it should nevertheless embrace the core democratic values non-instrumentally (ibid., 27). While Li postulates the transformation of everyday life in its political, economic, and social aspects according to Western patterns, Kim assumes that this change has already happened. What Kim calls the circumstances of modern politics are nothing else but the already modernized modes of living. From this perspective, it is only reasonable to subsequently subject the Confucian tradition to selection and transformation “on the basis of a new consciousness, shaped by a modernized social existence” (Pohl 2018, 65).

Yan Lianke’s Conception of Mythorealism Reinterpreted as “Western Substance and Chinese Application”

As likely happened to all regional and local literatures worldwide, Chinese literature in the past century dramatically transformed itself through the reception and appropriation of outside influences. This was also the case with literary theory, and turbulent episodes of Chinese history led to a few momentous years of Cultural Fever, during which “in a short span of five or six years, roughly fifty- or sixty-years’ worth of Western theories were introduced to Chinese readers” (Zhang 1992). The influx of new and foreign ideas coincided with the peak interest in Li Zehou’s work. Eventually, the overzealous application of Western methods to the analysis of Chinese humanities inspired a self-reflection on the specific Chinese subjectivity of literary works and theory. As a side-effect, this sudden backlash against Western theory may have influenced the critical reception and misconstruction of Li’s idea of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. The same phenomena could serve as an explanation for why the notion of the “Chinese School” of literary theory first put forward in Hong Kong and Taiwan was so warmly received in Mainland China in the mid-1990s (Dan and Zhou 2006).

One of the most acclaimed contemporary Chinese novelists, whose works include literary critique and theory, is Yan Lianke, and while he does not claim to represent the comparatist school mentioned above, his theory of mythorealism also takes Chinese particularity as a starting point. Yan himself coined the term mythorealism, and for this reason it is sometimes mistakenly described as a writing strategy that only he applies. However, Yan refutes this misconception by stating:
[...] Chinese literature already contains a body of writing that diverges from both nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century modernism. This overlooked literature is precisely what I am calling mythorealism. (Yan 2022)

Mythorealism is a new literary mode that strives to touch upon the so-called “reality of the inner soul” (linghun shendu zhenshi 靈魂深度真實) to create and transform the objective and social. Yan distinguishes four types of reality. Apart from the reality of the inner soul, he also names the “reality of social construction” (shehui konggou zhenshi 社會控構真實), the “reality of worldly experiences” (shixiang jingyan zhenshi 世相經驗真實), and the “reality of life experiences” (shengming jingyan zhenshi 生命經驗真實). In this sense, the relation between “nonrealist”/“suprarealist”/“non-realist” and “realist” in mythorealistic writing may reproduce the dynamics of ti and yong intended by Li Zehou. The “inner soul”, both on an individual and collective scale, may involve myths, legends, fantasy, and spirituality. Those are the things that partly shape the “Chinese function” as a part of traditional culture and “Chinese learning” (zhongxue 中學).

Social construction, worldly experiences, and life experiences are the realities that Yan Lianke believes to be “the biggest cemetery of literature” (Yan 2004). Yet the reality of the inner soul that mythorealism pursues grows out of social reality (Yan 2022, 99). In this sense, modernization (ti) and widely-defined “Chinese experiences” (yong) (ibid., 104) are mutually redefining themselves, creating a kind of synergy that could be interpreted in a similar manner in which Li considers ti and yong inseparable, ti yong bu er 體用不二.

Interestingly enough, since Yan does not name any foreign works that could fit the definition of mythorealism, the new optics is, in fact, a “Chinese application” of external literary paradigms. The “Chinese application” of mythorealism, however, is no longer for a China at the crossroads. It sets off to explore the already transformed Chinese reality, which “possesses unprecedented complexity, absurdity, and richness” (ibid., 100). This new reality is partly a side effect of the unprecedented pace and scope of Chinese development after 1978. Interest in the often disconcerting results of this drastic socio-economic transformation is common for many works that Yan considers to be examples of mythorealism. In his own writing, the entrapment of individuals and communities by the unrelenting logic of the new system is a recurring theme. The author often resorts to mythorealism to illustrate specific social conditions observed in China. For example, in The Explosion Chronicles (2018b) Yan problematizes China’s economic development by condensing temporality (Cao 2016)—a fantastical curve of time represents the almost unlikely pace of many infrastructure projects developed in China in the first decade of this century.
According to Lambert (2021), the theorization of the relationship between humans and productive forces is one of Li Zehou’s requirements for aesthetics. This premise of Li’s thought on aesthetics may not be just a coincidental similarity to Yan’s social engagement, but also another thread linking *Xi ti Zhong Yong* and mythorealism.

After receiving strong criticism of his idea, Li Zehou underlined the short-sightedness of the uncritical acceptance of Western solutions. In his view, “gradual transformation (improvement rather than revolution) is exactly what the position ‘Western substance, Chinese application’ stands for” (Li 2004). Similarly, Yan Lianke also does not consider Western theory a ready-made paradigm:

> For the past three decades, contemporary Chinese literature’s repeated attempts to borrow techniques and characteristics from various branches of Western literary modernism demonstrate that sometimes Western literary trends and local Chinese experiences don’t necessarily accord with one another. (Yan 2022, 104)

While some authors position China and the West in a dichotomic manner and consequently define *ti* and *yong* as two different realms, Li considers them binary, and thus inseparable (*ti yong bu er* 體用不二). *Ti yong bu er* may be seen as the principle of mythorealism not only regarding its position on the relation between reality and fiction, but also on balancing local and foreign influences. If we agree to interpret mythorealism as a form of “Chinese application”, then we can set Yan Lianke in line with Li Zehou in this context, as can be seen in the following paragraph:

> Contemporary mythoreal writing cannot separate itself from the influence of twentieth-century world literature. […] This principle also applies to literature, and just as mythorealism cannot separate itself from Chinese tradition and create a world out of nothing, it similarly cannot separate itself from world literature’s modernist writing and attain a completely autonomous existence. (ibid., 113)

There is also no priority given to foreign influences, namely Western modernism, “not at all inferior to nourishment from the Chinese tradition” (ibid., 114). The dynamics of West-China relations within the framework of mythorealism position both sides in a manner similar to that of Li Zehou: outside influences are inspirations that lead to different objectives and directions, since the initial forces were significantly different. The dynamics of modernization, according to “Western learning as substance”, is such that it draws from its own sources. At the same time, it absorbs useful inspirations from Chinese culture.
Even if the parallels between Chinese literary tradition and Zhong xue seem too far-fetched, Yan does not provide any contemporary factor shaping local literature that could be specifically indigenous. Yan believes mythorealism is the best way to reach the “new truth” and “new reality”. Mythorealism is thus both a conceptual framework and an epistemological tool. In any case, Western forms of literary expression are realized with reference to Chinese tradition in order to fully realize the potential of China’s particularity. This is where Yan Lianke’s mythorealism and Li Zehou’s Xi ti Zhong yong meet.

Conclusion

We claim that the attempt to enhance the interpretational potential of Xi ti Zhong yong represents a form of engagement in cross-disciplinary perspectives in research on contemporary China and the complexities of Li Zehou’s thought. Even some of Li’s less elaborated ideas provide an interesting theoretical tool that applies to areas with which he was always concerned, such as politics, art, and Chineseness. Li’s ability to move smoothly within and beyond the paradigm makes his proposal relevant even though after publishing “Random Thoughts on ‘Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning as Application’ he gradually moved away from discussions about the balance between Westernization and Sinicization. Although Li did not intend Xi ti Zhong yong as a methodological tool but rather as a manifesto for the future direction of China, there is no reason not to extend his idea to other potential applications. We have shown that Xi ti Zhong yong is a fruitful interpretative framework highlighting the internal structure of the two analysed theories. Moreover, it provides a unifying perspective for them even though they may appear quite distinct. Our findings serve as the basis for further examination of how Xi ti Zhong yong can be reinterpreted in light of the presented applications in literary and political theory.

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2 Yan remains mysteriously silent on Chinese socialist realism, and some possible explanations for this are provided by Ma (2022).
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