

Editor's Foreword

Special Issue Dedicated to Li Zehou on His 90th Birthday – Ethics and the Beauty of Human Becoming

The present issue of the journal *Asian Studies* is dedicated to Li Zehou, one of the greatest contemporary Chinese philosophers. It was compiled as a part of the celebration of his 90th birthday, which will take place on June 13 2020.

This special issue is mainly the result of a special panel on Li Zehou's ethics, which was held on October 16th 2018 in the scope of the 3rd Biennial Conference of the World Consortium for Research in Confucian Cultures (世界儒學文化研究聯合會). The conference, which took place at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (香港理工大) in celebration of the 10th year anniversary of the Faculty of the Humanities, was deemed a great success by all the attendees. The panel on Li Zehou's ethics was also well-received, for it included several highly relevant presentations and led to several highly lively discussions on this interesting and important topic.

Throughout his academic life, Li Zehou was a theoretician with an extremely wide scope of interests, which he could consistently follow due to his wide scope of knowledge in various parts of philosophical theory. These include ontology, epistemology, social and political philosophy, ethics, psychology, comparative thought, Chinese ideational history, theories of modernization, etc. In the late 1970s, he showed a resilient attentiveness in epistemology, the theory of perception and aesthetics. Later on, during the 1980s, aesthetics and philosophy of Chinese art gradually shifted into the centre of his theoretical undertakings. He played a very notable role in the aesthetic debates and "fevers" which prevailed in the Chinese intellectual dialogues of the time. Li has constructed his aesthetics based on his anthropo-historical ontology, which gradually became the central theoretical and methodological approach of all his analyses and interpretations. In the light of the inherent structure of his philosophical development, it is completely logical that the questions of ethics as one of the most important specifically human capacities and a precondition for human social life gradually, but consistently, shifted into the focus of his philosophical studies.

This special issue of *Asian Studies* aims to critically introduce and explain Li Zehou's ethical thought, to highlight its inventive elements and to posit it into current developments of ethical theories on the global level. However, in order to

better understand the explanations and interpretations of these questions, readers also need to become familiar with some other, related segments of Li's philosophical thought. Therefore, the present issue is not limited to his ethical thought in the narrowest sense of the term, but also includes some introductory elements that deal with Li Zehou's aesthetic thought, his anthropological theory and his general philosophy.

The present issue is structured into three scopes of content. The first one is entitled *Inspirations from East and West: from Confucius to Kant and Back*; it analyses basic discourses that stem from the Chinese and from the European (or Western) traditions of thought and have profoundly influenced Li Zehou's philosophical theories on many different levels. The scope shows that Li's system of philosophical ethics is based upon—but not limited to—synthetic models consisting of various theoretical approaches. These approaches can be divided into two central categories. The first (and perhaps the most essential) is rooted in traditional Chinese ethical discourses and is firmly grounded on the foundation of Confucian paradigmatic framework. The second approach pertains to Western theories of philosophical ethics; in this scope, Li mainly elaborates on the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and others. At times he compares or relates certain elements of his thought to the ideas and concepts derived from Critical Theory and existentialism, as well as from the theories of Bentham, Mill, Dewey, Rawls, Hayek, Sandel, and numerous other scholars who significantly contributed to the development of Western ethics. Many of their ideas have served Li as inspirations and important starting points for creating and developing his own philosophy, as well as tools for establishing contrastive backgrounds for comparative analyses of their ethical thought on the one hand, and his own philosophy of ethics on the other.

The second scope deals with *Classical and Modern Theories: Reinforcements and Innovations*, i.e. with classical and modern sources from which Li likewise drew inspirations. This scope is based upon the specific ways in which Li is reworking contemporary theory by amalgamating it with crucial classical traditional elements. In his outline, traditional Chinese, particularly Confucian ethics, was always representing a kind of basic footing, which in his view had to be modernized and adapted to the requirements of the present era. In this process of modernizing classical Chinese thought, particular Western approaches are being modified, amalgamated, and combined with traditional Chinese as well as with Li's own innovative conceptualizations to form a new scheme of a universally valid modern aesthetical ethics suited to the contemporary globalized societies. The scope aims to show how and why the framework of Li's philosophy was profoundly influenced by both—traditional Chinese as well as modern Western—ethical and aesthetic ideas. It also points to some new ways in which these ideas can be critically

examined, analysed, and interpreted in order to provide a reasonable synthetic groundwork for new insights in these fields of philosophical investigations.

The third scope is dedicated to one of the crucial aspects of Li Zehou's ethics, namely to his elaborations upon the problem of the relation between harmony and justice. It is entitled *On the Edge between Politics and Ethics: The Precarious Relationship between Harmony and Justice*. Based on Li's specific philosophical system, this scope treats various central issues he has developed over recent decades and places them in relation to Western liberalism and to different aspects of harmony and justice, respectively. In this way, it aims to create a truly comparative dimension by reflecting on both Chinese and Western discourses that have served Li Zehou as groundworks for his emergent theory of morality, in which he founded social harmony on general, but modifiable principles of justice. It is therefore not at all coincidental that this third scope is the longest one: in contrast to the first two scopes, each of which is composed of two papers, this scope contains three lengthy articles that essentially round up the entire volume and contribute to its inner coherence.

The first scope opens with Ady van den Stock's article entitled "Imprints of the Thing in Itself: Li Zehou's *Critique of Critical Philosophy* and the Historicization of the Transcendental". In this first article of the special issue, van den Stock highlights the multifarious aspects of Kant's concept of the "thing in itself" for Li Zehou's anthropological philosophy, mainly by analysing the corresponding parts of Li's book *Critique of Critical Philosophy* (*Pipan zhexue zhi pipan* 批判哲学之批判). This article is followed by Jana S. Rošker's paper, which treats one of the crucial concepts of Li's ethics, namely his notion of pragmatic reason. The paper, which bears the title "Li Zehou's Ethics and the Structure of Confucian Pragmatic Reason", critically introduces and explains the pragmatic nature of this specific kind of rationality, which is tightly linked to and intertwined with human emotions. It also posits the Confucian pragmatic reason into the framework of Li Zehou's ethics and political axiology.

The second scope, which, as already mentioned, is dealing with Li's amalgamations of traditional and modern contents in the fields of his aesthetical permeated ethics, opens with Jia Jinhua's paper entitled "Li Zehou's Reconceptation of the Classical Confucian Concepts of Autonomy and Individuality: With a Focus on Reading the Analects Today". This interesting article aims to elucidate the diverse methods and approaches by which Li Zehou aims to create a unique synthesis of Western and classical Chinese concepts related to ideas of the autonomous subject. It also shows how, through his Confucian project, Li hopes to efficiently apply and develop humanity for a new reconstruction of the cultural order in the present globalized world. The second article in this scope of contents is dedicated to Li's interpretation of modern aesthetics, which is based upon his specific attitude to

and relation with modern Western art. Through a comparative perspective, i.e. through a contrastive analysis of Li Zehou's and Xu Fuguan's interpretations, the author Téa Sernelj points to the innovative nature of the former's ideas. In this article under the title "Different Approaches to Modern Art and Society: Li Zehou *versus* Xu Fuguan", she clearly shows that the dissimilarity between these two approaches is of utmost importance and has wide reaching implications, for their particular aesthetic attitudes also clearly manifest themselves in their respective systems of ethical thought. This article also illuminates the fact that even though Xu Fuguan had profound knowledge of Chinese traditional aesthetics and art, he failed to understand modernity, whereas Li Zehou has a much deeper, more complex understanding of the process.

The third scope of contents comprises three articles, which are—each in its own way—dealing with problems related to Li Zehou's specific view on the relation between harmony and justice. The scope opens with Wang Keping's paper "Behind Harmony and Justice". In this article, Wang shows that Li Zehou's proposition of "harmony being higher than justice" implies a hierarchical consideration rather than a value assessment, and that it can be employed to further develop Li's specific view on "the Chinese application" and "the Western substance". The second article in this scope was written by Paul D'Ambrosio and is entitled "Li Zehou's 'Harmony is Higher than Justice': Context and a Collaborative Future". It places Li's proposal within the context of the contemporary debate on harmony and justice in Western and Chinese traditions and outlines some of the other major views on the relationship between harmony and justice, but also providing in this context a critique from Li's perspective. Finally, the author strives to expand on Li's theory by delineating an alternative path for our thinking about harmony and justice. The scope (and also this special issue) ends with Robert Anthony Carleo's III paper entitled "Confucian Post-Liberalism". It offers an insightful comparison of Li Zehou's and John Gray's ethical thought; although the former proceeds from Confucian-Kantian perspectives, while the latter is decidedly un-Kantian, they both equally negate foundational claims regarding the universality of liberal principles and values. On the other hand, they both—even though each in his own, different way—affirm the universal value of those principles that supports social structures, which enhance human flourishing. Through this comparison, the author points to an interesting view that can have wide-reaching consequences for a creative and dynamic understanding of Li Zehou's ethical thought. He namely shows how in this comparison it can become obvious that John Gray—in spite of the fact that he is a Western philosopher—not only aligns with the Confucian elements of Li's ethics, but may even be enriched by them.

I am immensely happy that the editorial board of Asian Studies has succeeded to collect a number of excellent papers written by scholars who belong to the most

competent experts on Li Zehou's philosophy in the Western world. Therefore, I have good reasons to hope that this special issue will highlight the uniquely dynamic agenda which underlies all segments of Li's aesthetically permeated ethics. As a small stone in the recently created new mosaic of diverse introductions of Li Zehou's thought to the Western audience, it shall hopefully also contribute to a better understanding of his philosophy and its important role in the current intercultural world.

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