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ABSTRACT

The present paper compares three models of modernized Confucian Ontology. The philosophers under debate belong to the most important, well-known and influential theoreticians in modern Taiwan and mainland China respectively. Through a contrastive analysis, the paper aims to critically introduce three alternative models of ontology, which have been developed from the Chinese philosophical tradition by the most well-known Taiwanese philosopher Mou Zongsan and by two most influential mainland Chinese theoreticians, Li Zehou and Chen Lai respectively. In this paper, I will analyze and critically introduce Li Zehou's and Chen Lai's respective critiques of Mou Zongsan's basic assumptions that have been reflected in his methodological paradigms, while also exposing some major differences within their own lines of thought.

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to introduce and critically evaluate three different modern and contemporary Chinese ontological systems. It deals with the comparison of Mou Zongsan's, Li Zehou's and Chen Lai's views on the fundamental nature of existence and reality in order to expose and illuminate some alternative models of ontology, which have been developed on the basis of a specifically Chinese philosophical tradition and can hence be seen as a valuable contribution to contemporary intercultural philosophy.

After illuminating the Modern New Confucian paradigm of immanent transcendence, the comparative perspective opens with a critical introduction of Mou's double ontology, which is based upon the paradigm of immanent transcendence, and proceeds then to Li Zehou's critique and negation of this ontology. Li highlights that it is incompatible with the traditional Chinese 'one-world view (*yige shijie guan*)', which is the epistemological basis of his own ontology of the emotion-based substance (*qing benti*). Chen Lai, on the other hand, proposes replacing Li's notion with the substance of humaneness (*ren benti*). In his view, the Confucian idea of humaneness as a substance (root) was merely another—namely better—way of expressing emotion as a substance (root). However, as we will see, the two approaches are nevertheless essentially different.

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Following these suppositions, the paper aims to expose some crucial differences between Li's and Chen's own theoretical alternatives to the conventional Modern Confucian moral metaphysics. Through a contrastive analysis, it will explore differences and similarities between Li's emotion-based substance, and Chen's ontology of humaneness (*renxue benti lun*). In this way, the present paper aims to detect some common threads in the two most influential—and mutually divergent—contemporary Chinese responses to the theory of this major representative of the second generation of Modern Confucian thought.

2. The modern Confucian paradigm of immanent transcendence and Mou Zongsan's model of 'double ontology'

Ontological issues were unavoidable for the second generation of Modern Confucian theorists. Addressing these issues meant reacting constructively to the developmental trends of the theoretical (but also practical) problems of modernisation with the aid of certain elementary aspects adopted from traditional Chinese philosophy.

The focus on ontological questions can thus be seen as a specific reaction of traditional Chinese philosophy to modernisation. In Modern Confucian interpretations, classical Confucianism saw Heaven (*tian*) as the ultimate *noumenon*.[1] It represented the elementary entity, creating and changing all that exists. Due to its ontological duality, the Modern Confucians understood Heaven as something, which is simultaneously transcendent and immanent; it endows human beings with innate qualities (nature, *xing*) that were essentially determined by the elementary Confucian virtue of humanity (*ren*). This was a development of the Mencian understanding of the Self, which was typical of the Neo-Confucian discourses in which Mencius was canonised as a 'proper' follower of Confucius. However, in their interpretations of traditional systems, the Modern Confucians went a step further: in their discourses, innate human qualities (nature, *xing*) became that potential which not only formed the moral or spiritual Self, but also transcended the individual's empirical and physiological characteristics. By acting in accordance with humaneness (*ren*), the individual could be united with Heaven (*tian ren heyi*) and thus experience the genuine meaning and value of existence.

The elementary features of the concept of Heaven (*tian*) can help clarify the difference between external (*waisai chaoyue*) and internal (or immanent) transcendence (*neizai chaoyue*), with the latter being one of the typical features of Chinese philosophy. The concept of immanent transcendence was chiefly established by Mou Zongsan, but later assumed and further developed by several later representatives of the Modern New Confucianism, particularly by Liu Shu-hsien.

In interpreting traditional Confucian thought (especially the fundamental ideas of *Dao of Nature* or Heaven), the Modern Confucians often made use of the concepts of 'transcendence' or 'immanence'. They pointed out that the Confucian *Dao of Nature*, which is 'transcendent and immanent', is diametrically opposed to the basic model of Western religions, which are 'transcendent and external' (Lee, 2001a, p. 118). Mou Zongsan has also explained this double ontological nature of the Confucian Heaven in the following way:

> The Way of Heaven, as something 'high above', connotes transcendence. When the Way of
> Heaven is invested in the individual and resides within them in the form of human nature, it
> is then immanent (Mou, 1990, p. 26).

David Hall and Roger Ames have criticised Mou's notion of immanent transcendence,
noting that while he underscores the inseparability of Heaven and humankind and offers
an immanent characterisation of the concept in question, he simultaneously claims that
it is 'transcendent to the extent that it connotes independence', a definition which, in
their view, 'seems inappropriate' (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 205). On the contrary, the notion
of transcendence as it has been shaped and generally understood in Western culture,
can be defined as follows:

> A principle A is transcendent in respect to that B which it serves as principle if the meaning
> or import of B cannot be fully analysed and explained without recourse to A, but the reverse
> is not true (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 13).

Their fear is that the application of these notions might lead to still further misunder-
standings in the already difficult dialogue between Western and Chinese traditions of
thought. They also take Mou to task for his distinctions regarding transcendence and the
Decree of Heaven:

> To have a sense of the Decree of Heaven, one must first have a sense of transcendence,
> which is possible only if one accepts the existence of such transcendence (Mou, 1990, p. 21).

Hall and Ames (1987, p. 205) believe that in such passages Mou is clearly attempting to
attribute a 'strict transcendence' to the early Chinese tradition; for them, such an
attitude seems to be rather problematic. For Lee Ming-huei, however, their criticism is
the fruit of a 'misunderstanding' (Lee, 2002, p. 204):

> When Modern Confucians apply the concept of "immanent transcendence", they are
> adhering to the basic premise that "immanence" and "transcendence" are not in logical
> contradiction. This means that they never apply the concept of "transcendence" in the strict
> sense understood by Hall and Ames. Their critique is thus clearly based on
> a misunderstanding (Lee, 2002, pp. 226–227).

Notions, especially if abstract, have different semantic connotations, and in this instance
the term 'transcendence' is no exception. It has various connotations in the history of
Western philosophy. The notion of 'immanent transcendence' denotes a certain type of
transcendence; it certainly does not cover the entire spectrum of the possible semantic
connotations of this concept, especially not those linked to 'independence' or to the
'separation between creator and creation'.

Besides, the Modern Confucians have never interpreted these notions in the sense of
a 'strict transcendence'. On the contrary, they have often exposed the difference
between 'pure' (or 'strict') and 'immanent' transcendence on the basis of discursive
differences between Christianity and Modern Confucianism:

> The theological worldview of Christianity could be defined as "pure transcendence". This
> means that God has created the world, but is not part of it. Thus, God possesses
> a transcendental nature, which is beyond or outside of the world. This is the actual
> traditional belief in the Christian tradition ... The Chinese tradition instead believes that
> Dao circulates between heaven and earth. The *Xi Ci* chapter of the Book of Changes states
> 'that which is above the form exists as Dao (the Way, the Great principle), and that which is

below them exists as a definite thing'. But it also affirms that 'Dao is the definite thing and vice versa'. On the one hand, Dao is above the forms (i.e. it is metaphysical), and thus not a definite, visible or perceivable thing. Therefore, it is transcendent. On the other, it can only be put into practice through definite things (i.e. through physical forms); thus, it is immanent. This is the form of 'immanent transcendence' (Liu, 2005, pp. 14–15).

The notion of *Dao*, which is one of the core concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy and manifests itself in multiple ways in the category of the Way, is thus a notion of 'immanent transcendence' (*neizai chaoyue*). In its oneness and indivisibility, it reflects the original cosmic principle, but at the same time it also reveals the smallest atoms of existence, constantly creating through their infinite combinations all existing worlds. *Dao* is both the elementary, abstract driving force of the universe, and the concrete, intimate path of every human being. *Dao* is the fundamental source of all existence, and the incorporation of each particular appearance.

In Chinese philosophy, 'Dao' represents the essence of the universe, society and every individual, but also the moral substance implying humanity, justice, rituality, loyalty and similar axiological contents (Liao, 1994, p. 46).

However, *Dao* does not constitute an absolute principle, as in the theological idea of Divinity or the ancient Greek idea of substance. In the framework of immanent transcendence, particular notions are never incorporations of absoluteness, for their nature is conditioned by everything they surpass; they create existence, but are simultaneously an inseparable part of this creation.

In their own discourses, Modern Confucians have always emphasised the significance of such 'immanent transcendence'. According to Lee Ming-Huei (2001, p. 118), this emphasis is explained by the fact that they wished to overcome the widespread prejudice against Chinese philosophy (including among sinologists) prevalent in the Western academic world since Hegel. In his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1969, pp. 142–143), Hegel described Confucius as an ancient 'master' who had disseminated a collection of thoughts on morality without creating any real philosophy. This naturally implies that his work did not contain any transcendental dimensions. This superficial (mis)understanding of ancient Chinese texts continues to hold sway in Western theory not only with respect to Confucius, but also in terms of Confucianism in general, and the whole of traditional Chinese thought.

On the basis of the immanent transcendence paradigm, Mou established the concept of his 'double ontology'. In 1971, he published what is generally considered his most important work, *Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy (Zhide zhijue yu Zhongguo zhexue)*, in which he examined the specific Chinese understanding of the structure of existence. In doing so, he drew certain parallels with Heidegger's ontology and pointed out inconsistencies in Kant's theories. Until the end of his philosophical career, Kant was for him both a fundamental source of inspiration and the object of harsh criticism. Due to the existential significance Kant ascribed to morality, Mou considered him to be the pinnacle of European and Western philosophy (Rošker, 2016, p. 579). At the same time, he was convinced that his theoretical system was flawed and logically inconsistent. Not surprisingly, much of Mou's work is dedicated to performing a series of 'upgrades' and 'repairs' on Kant's philosophy. Mou was convinced that along this line of thought he could build a valid moral

metaphysics, which Kant did not succeed in doing (Mou, 1975, p. 37). For Mou, moral metaphysics' refers to the existence of things with moral substance that are reflected by moral consciousness. Thus, according to him, this clear consciousness is the 'moral substance, and, at the same time ontological substance' (Mou, 1975, p. 40).

In working out his thesis, Mou relied on his earlier study, *Criticism of Cognitive Heart-mind* (*Renshi xinzhi pipan*), in which he had laid the groundwork for his Confucian rehabilitation model and his expansion of it, especially in the area of Chinese onto-epistemology (Rošker, 2016, p. 57).

Contemporary scholars generally consider *Appearance and the Thing-in-itself (Xianxiang yu wu zishen)* and *On Summum Bonum (Yuan shan lun)* as Mou's second most important works. In *Appearance and the Thing-in-itself* he uses traditional Chinese philosophy to redefine the concepts of *noumenon* and phenomenon and their reciprocal relation. While writing this work, he also translated Kant's 'three critiques' into Chinese. Hence, Mou based his idea of 'double ontology' on this new-found distinction between phenomena and 'things in themselves':

> If we start from the assumption that 'man is finite as well as infinite' we must apply ontology on two levels. The first is the ontology of the *noumenal* sphere, or the 'detached ontology'. The second is the ontology of the sphere of appearances, or the 'attached ontology' (Mou, 1975, p. 30).

Double ontology is thus divided into the *noumenal* and phenomenal, or the detached and attached ontologies. Within the frame of these he defines detachment and attachment as follows:

> 'Detached' corresponds to 'the free and unlimited heart—mind' (in the sense of Wang Yangming's clear heart-mind of the cognitive subject) ... 'Attached' corresponds to the 'attachment of the cognitive subject' (Mou, 1975, p. 39).

Confucian metaphysics, which is also included in his *noumenal* ontology, is understood as not only 'detached' (*wuzhi cunyoulun*) but also 'transcendent' (Mou, 1975, p. 39). A metaphysics of this kind is possible due to intellectual intuition (*zhide zhijue*). Hence, the 'detached ontology' corresponds to the free and unlimited heart-mind (*ziyoude wuxian xin*). Parallel to this ontology of detachment is the 'attached ontology'. Thus, both the 'detached' and 'attached' ontologies are linked to the cognitive subject or cognitive perception.

3. Li Zehou's critique of Mou's approach

Li Zehou, who is among the most important and influential Chinese philosophers of the contemporary era, has refuted the overall model of Mou's double ontology, because it was based upon the aforementioned paradigm of immanent transcendence, which, in his view, cannot be upheld, for it is based upon a self-contradiction.

Li Zehou regards Mou Zongsan as the only significant philosopher of the second generation of Modern or New Confucianism (*xin ruxue*) (Li, 2008c, p. 321). In Li's view, Mou was especially interesting because he also attempted to produce a synthesis of Confucian and Kantian ethics, although in this respect his methodology and basic theoretical approaches essentially differed from those applied by Li in his own theory.

According to Li Zehou, however, Mou's method of integrating Chinese with Western philosophy was essentially problematic. He writes that this New Confucian scholar

> proceeded from the Confucian position but tried to incorporate into it certain foreign elements in order to endow it with a new guise. However, it might be even better to combine them proceeding from the opposite view, and to apply the contents of the foreign, modern ideas as a driving force or an essence. In this way, it would be possible to create a transformative, new dimension of our tradition (Li, 2008c, p. 332).

This remark is especially important in the context of Li's specific understanding of Chinese modernisation. As is well-known, he inverted Zhang Zhidong's famous slogan, which suggested that in the process of modernisation China should 'Preserve Chinese essence and apply Western functions (*Zhongti Xiyong*)'. Li thus proposed that China should rather 'assume Western substance and apply Chinese functions (*Xiti Zhongyong*)'. Although numerous scholars misunderstood Li's new phrase and interpreted it as a proposal for wholesale Westernisation, Li Zehou often emphasises that this is not the case:

> The main flaw of the (slogan) "Chinese substance and Western applications" is to be found in the assumption that technology is application and not substance. But the exact opposite is true: technology is substance, because technology is connected with social existence, as well as with productive forces and the modes of production (Li, 1996, p. 253).

Hence, the correct interpretation of the new slogan hinges on the understanding of the concept *ti*, or substance, which the proponents of the original motto viewed as the 'substance of tradition', while Li instead saw it in Marxist terms as the material basis of society (Rošker, 2019, p. 174). This interpretation of *ti* is in accordance with both original Marxism and original Confucianism. On the other hand, the 'function' (or application) is of immense importance, because it determines the concrete circumstances of people's lives.

Based upon such an understanding of intercultural philosophical syntheses, Li believes that Mou Zongsan did not truly manage to upgrade Kant's philosophy, for he was unable to escape the inner contradiction of Neo-Confucian philosophies, which aimed to establish dualist models in a holistic 'one-world' framework. The main point of Li's critique of Mou Zongsan is linked to his basic methodological approach, namely to his concept of immanent transcendence. As we have seen, Mou Zongsan aimed to interpret Chinese philosophy through this concept, in which rational and spiritual notions possess a double ontological nature. Therefore, each of them must necessarily belong to both, to the transcendent and immanent realms at the same time. Li Zehou sharply opposed this idea, seeing it to be incompatible with the 'one-world' paradigm, which underlies the original Confucian discourses and the classical Chinese philosophy in general.

He believed that this huge contradiction can be traced back to the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming periods. However, because Mou tried to place it within the Kantian framework, it became even more problematic. In the foreword to his *Five Essays From 1999*, Li Zehou offered a simple explanation of this contradiction:

> On the one hand, the theory of immanent transcendence emphasises the continuation of the Confucian tradition. In this regard, it negates the existence of transcendent, external deities and places the moral imperative upon fundaments such as "the unity of human heart-mind and the heart-mind of heaven", or "the unity of human inner nature and the sacred inner nature". In this framework, the innermost heart-mind and inner nature

represent the basis of substance. On the other hand, it imitates the Western "two-world view", a framework which separates heaven and the worldly people, the world of ideas and the world of social reality, substance and phenomena (Li, 2003b, p. 133).

In this schema, the human heart-mind and inner nature are necessarily transcendent. In Western philosophy, transcendence means something that surpasses the empirical world. Hence, the transcendent (God) decides, determines and guides humankind— including all human experience. But vice versa this is not true, for human beings cannot determine (and not even influence) God. Everything that exists in reality therefore belongs to appearances; substance or essence is only that which surpasses this reality (or the realm of experiences). Traditional Chinese culture, which deals with everything from the perspective of the one-world view, is fundamentally different.

> On the one hand, (the Modern Confucians) emphasise Chinese tradition with its "unity of humans and nature", or its "unity of the moral and empirical self", but, on the other, they hold notions like "humaneness", "compassion", or "innate knowledge" that can never be divided from sensitivity and emotions, to be immanent transcendental notions or notions of immanent transcendence. In this way, they necessarily create a huge contradiction between the transcendental (i.e. that which is transcendent, that is, not connected to sensitivity) and the empirical (i.e. that which is inward and connected to sensitivity), or between deities or God on the one side, and concrete, real people on the other (Li, 2003b, p. 133).

Li believes that Mou's conceptualisations can therefore not be combined with the traditional Chinese paradigm of the unity of heaven and human beings, nor with the view that holds substance and function to be inseparable (*tiyong bu er*), although even Mou's teacher Xiong emphasised this aspect in his philosophy. Hence, Li repeatedly highlights that the Western notion of transcendence can by no means fit into the Chinese one-world view. Consequently, it is completely wrong to lay stress upon the traditional Chinese notions of the unity of Heaven and people, and not explain the concepts that are originally confined to the sphere of sensuality and emotions, such as humaneness (*ren*) or inborn knowledge (*liangzhi*) as something immanently transcendent or transcendental (Rošker, 2019, p. 137). In this context, he also reveals (Rošker, 2019, p. 137) that it was precisely due to the one world-view that social and ideational development in ancient China could lead to the typically Chinese 'culture of pleasure *(legan wenhua)*', because in such a holistic system people can have no tense relation (*jinzhang guanxi*) with external deities or fears of God.

Li Zehou regrets that Modern Confucianism has not succeeded in generating any truly innovative philosophical approaches or theoretical advances that could function as a basis for future philosophical efforts or novel philosophical systems (Li, 1999, p. 8).

4. Li's alternative: the emotion-based substance

Although Li mentioned the concept of emotion-based substance several times in his early works (see Zehou & Liu, 2011, p. 9), he provided an integral theoretical explanation of this notion for the first time in his book, *Pragmatic Reason and a Culture of Optimism* (*Shiyong lixing yu legan wenhua*). Emotion-based substance is the core concept, necessary for the understanding of Li's idea of the specifically Chinese culture of pleasure. He uses the term substance (*benti*) not in the sense of a *noumenon* that is different and separated from the sphere of phenomena, but simply as the 'basis' (*genben*), the 'root'

(*bengen*), or the 'ultimate reality' (*zui hou shisai*) of everything actually existing in the material world. This means that emotion, which occurs in the empirical world (Li & Liu, 2011a, p. 27), is the basic ontological ground of all human life (Li, 2008, p. 54):

> The so-called substance is the ultimate reality, which cannot be further questioned regarding the meaning of its existence. It surpasses the empirical causalities. That, which exceeds the substance of psychology, is god or a spirit. That, which departs from the psychology of substance, is science or a machine. Therefore, the ultimate and genuine substance is actually nothing else but the structure of human sensibility (Li & Liu, 2011b, p. 54).

Because it includes the dynamic situational connotation, emotion-based substance is by no means a firmly established, static normative system. It rather represents an open structure, which causes humans to continuously confront new aspects of their lives. They can always encounter new uncertainties, and it is precisely this coincidental nature of human life, which creates the universal and necessary laws of history (Li & Liu, 2011b, p. 54). Therefore, the substance of our life lies in our actual experiences, which continuously give rise to our emotions and unconsciously shape our values. They are inevitably linked to and shared by our fellow people and at the same time are the most intimate quintessence of our inwardness. Due to the ontological structure of emotion, the world always matters to us in one way or another, and in this sense emotion is one of our primary ways of experiencing what actually matters and for which reasons. As Li writes:

> Perhaps this is the reason because of which people can overcome death, and conquer their worries, troubles and fears. Only in this way can we experience the ultimate principle that is hidden in our everyday relationships beyond the moral imperatives, without a transcendent God, devoid of all estranged spirits or immovable rational models. We can find it in the warmth of our human interactions, in the joy of springtime. Only in this way can we experience that which is spirit and matter, existence and meaning at the same time. This is the real essence of human life. We taste, cherish and look back on all these coincidences, mourning for our losses and enjoying life, including all the absurdness it brings. We treasure the sensitivity of our existence, and thereby can obtain a genuine understanding of our life. Human beings are not machines, and neither are they animals. Here, the "absence" becomes "presence" (Li & Liu, 2011b, p. 54).

Although (the idea and the form of) this substance arose in classical Chinese culture, its significance is not limited to the Chinese tradition, but can also prove itself to be extremely relevant for contemporary world. It could lead modern societies to a 'second Renaissance' by helping us to overcome the mechanistic domination of technology and the alienation this brings about. In Li's view, an awareness of emotion-based substance can liberate people from the misty realms of postmodern worldviews, just as the Renaissance helped people to defeat the estrangement of mysticism.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, especially in the classical Confucian teachings, emotion-based substance was understood as the ontological foundation of existence, not only regarding human life, but also in terms of the entire universe. As such, Li advocates a return to classical Confucian ethical approaches, which interpret emotions as the foundation of morality (D'Ambrosio, 2016, p. 720). He argues that human emotions are the starting point of the Way (*Dao*), and that they manifest themselves in ritualistic aspects of daily life (*lijie*). Hence, in his view, the foundation of ritual and obligations lies in human emotions, not in any external realm. Here, human emotions are the root or

substance of human existence, since they are based on the innate human heart-mind (*xin*), which is not transcendental or *a priori* (in the Kantian sense), but nevertheless surpasses the limitations of the tangible and transitory world. On the other side, however, emotions manifest themselves in daily human affairs, being so natural and self-evident that they are often not even realised. Li argues (2016, p. 73) that in classical Confucianism, concepts such as sincerity, respect, affection, loyalty, trustworthiness and empathy are doubtless seen as concrete emotional states, and not as some rational concepts linked to an abstract mind.

They are the essential binder, which connects people within discrete relationships. In this way, Confucianism amounts to a moral interpretation of relationships as the fundamental constituents of human life and morality. Relationships bring about and cultivate human feelings and emotions. Through socialisation and habitual practice people learn to transform their natural instincts and inclinations into virtues (Li, 2016, p. 727), which, in turn, must be associated with particular relationships. According to Li Zehou, relationships are not merely rational practices or systems in society. We must not forget that they are acknowledged, accepted, sustained and developed by emotions.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of emotion as a root of existence or a special substance that is grounded in the tangible, phenomenal world, was shaped and developed in ancient China, especially in the scope of original Confucian teachings. In the pre-Qin era, the concept of emotion was thus highly valued. During the Neo-Confucian period of the Song and Ming dynasties, however, emotion (which also included intentions, wishes, and desires) was mainly seen as something negative, something that had to be erased. However, gradually starting in the 17th century, and culminating explosively in the May 4th Movement (1919), emotion was 'rehabilitated', since in this 'Chinese enlightenment movement' wishes and desires were seen as important driving forces of scientific progress.

However, the negative connotation of the term remained in place in the development of the Modern or New Confucian (*Xin ruxue*) stream of thought and in moral philosophies that were created under the influence of this, because its representatives mainly based their theories on Neo-Confucian approaches. In a longer essay entitled '*The Failure of the Song and Ming Neo-Confucian Quest for Transcendentalism*' (*Song Ming lixue zhuiqiu chaoyande shibai*),[2] Li sharply criticised their views on the issue. He concludes that similar to their Neo-Confucian predecessors, Modern Confucians failed in creating an intelligible moral metaphysics because they did not pay attention to a crucial difference between the cultural-psychological formations of religious and shamanistic cultures. While the former were rooted in the realm of transcendence and interpreted human life (including its essential value) based upon this foundation, the latter—which prevailed in the origins of Chinese tradition—proceeded from the concrete human condition and created human spiritual life based on tangible, physical foundations that were rooted in the concrete material world (Li, 2008, p. 68). In his view, we therefore need to re-examine the notion of emotion-based substance as the core of Chinese philosophy and culture.

The central Confucian virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁) played a very important role in the development of the idea of emotion-based substance during the course of Chinese cultural development. This is understandable, considering the etymological meaning of the term as explained in the *Shuowen jiezi* (*Interpreting Texts and Explaining Characters*).

Its author Xu Shen (ca 58–148) suggests that humans could only exist in communities with other people: the original meaning of humaneness (ren仁) thus implies that people depend on each other, and that we cannot afford not to love, cherish, and help each other. What the original meaning of humaneness (ren) expresses is therefore a deep feeling of mutual interpersonal empathy (see Rošker, 2019, p. 298).

Li highlights that Confucianism sees humaneness (ren) as 'the heart-mind of Heaven', and emphasises that Heaven and Earth, the cosmos and human society are rooted in harmonious human relationships that are based on a shared sense of community. Since in this way nature and its laws were psychologised (i.e. conceived of in terms of human emotions), there is no need 'for a religion revolving around a personified deity, nor for the eternity and immortality of the soul which transcends the sensible world of time and space, because eternity and immortality are found within it' (Li, 1999c, p. 54).

Li thus identifies humaneness (ren) as Confucius's key concept, and takes it as a basic virtue covering the five vital levels determining the traditional Chinese social system, namely the basis of blood (kinship) relations, psychological principles, humanism, ideal personality and pragmatic reason, which conducts and pervades all other, mutually intertwined, levels. Through the reciprocal interaction of these factors, Confucius used humaneness to preserve and develop rituality, which helped people to internalise external ethical regulations in order to transform them into a vital part of individual inwardness. The foundation of all these levels, however, is precisely the psychological principle of emotions. (Li, 1985, p. 16). In such a framework, secular life was cherished and emotions functioned as the main source through which the world was experienced. As such, emotions were the very foundation on which people established and preserved their mutual relations (Jia, 2018, p. 163).

In this context, emotion-based substance generates positive feelings and thereby constructively influences social attitudes. Precisely because of this aspect, the Chinese emotion-based substance obtained very wide ethical implications. In such a view, the ethical life is always—*inter alia*—emotional,[3] and virtues are therefore inclinational. This poses a significant challenge to the predominant Western theories of ethics that have commonly dealt with a search for confirming abstract and normative moral rules.

Besides, we must not forget that traditional Confucian ethics was relational, one of the so-called 'role ethics' (see Ames, 2011; Rosemont & Ames, 2009). This kind of ethics was an integral part of the social system that was based on the special features of what Li Zehou called 'relationalism' (*guanxizhuyi*), which does not correspond with any of the existing Western categories or models, in which the individuals enter into their social relations as independent and isolated selves. In contrast to such views, the Confucian person is constituted by the social roles she lives. In such social networks, human beings cannot be abstracted or separated from their relations with others. Because the individual is thus constituted by social relations and depends on them, it seems logical that the community exists before the individual.

Although the emotion-based substance is an important element of Chinese traditional religious morality, Li Zehou also promotes its incorporation into modern institutions (D'Ambrosio, Robert, & Andrew, 2016, p. 1061). Here, the emphasis lies on the cultivation of human emotions on a personal level based on individual rights. Such an incorporation of emotional contents and elements into contemporary ethics could serve

as a foundation for generating communal harmony and interpersonal benevolence. This idea is tightly linked to Li's conjecture that 'harmony is higher than justice'.

5. A contemporary Chinese philosophical dialogue on the fundamental nature of reality: Chen Lai vs. Li Zehou

Against this background, it seems only natural that Li's idea of emotion-based substance was highly influential among contemporary Chinese philosophers. In his renowned book *The Ontology of Discourses on Humaneness* (*Renxue bentilun*), Chen Lai proposes replacing Li's notion with the substance of humaneness (*ren benti*). Wu Ning, a reviewer of the book, summarises the difference between the two contemporary theoreticians and their central notions in the following way:

> After comparing his ontology of humanity with Li's ontology of emotion, Chen finds some similarities. Nevertheless, the flaws of Li's metaphysics are evident. For example, it is hard to distinguish the theory of emotional entity from naturalism; also, Li's interpretation of emotion is not philosophical, but anthropological, historical, or psychological (Wu, 2015, p. 453).

Chen Lai himself seems to see the crucial difference between Li's emotion-based substance and his own focus on humaneness rather in their basic attitudes towards and relations with Western or global philosophies. As he writes:

> Li Zehou hopes that Chinese philosophy will appear on the stage in the realm of global philosophy; therefore, he suggests we should "enter the world". But my position, on the other hand, mainly emphasises that we have to adapt, renew and develop our inheritance in accord with contemporary Chinese culture. We should participate in the revival and evolution of a new Confucian philosophy in such a way, instead of chiefly proceeding from the foundations of global philosophy. This, of course, does not imply a negation of the importance of confronting the modern world (Chen, 2014, p. 409).

In a recent article about his ontology of humaneness, Chen Lai argues that the ontologies of emotion and humaneness are actually related, and seems to point to the possibility that the difference between Li Zehou and himself is to a certain extent only a terminological one. As he writes:

> Li Zehou also reveals that Confucianism takes humaneness as its root. However, it never occurred to him that in fact humaneness could also be regarded as substance. Especially considering the fact that he saw humaneness as an emotional experience, it seems that in his understanding this Confucian idea of humaneness as the root was merely another way of expressing emotion as a root (Chen, 2014, p. 50).

However, he then criticises Li for neglecting the possibility of establishing a humaneness-based substance, and focusing entirely on the sensitive nature of humaneness emphasising its role in the human experience of love. In Chen's own view, however, the notion of humaneness had already obtained much wider, and in fact universal, connotations, in the Neo-Confucian discourses, which treated it as a dynamic totality of the continuous flow of vital forces (*qi*). Therefore, he points out that for Zhu Xi and his contemporaries, humaneness was already seen as an entireness comprising all possibilities for the sustainable development of human life, i.e. as the substance of the Way (Chen, 2014a, pp. 50–51).

Regarding his own interpretation of the emotion-based substance, Chen first notes that Li was correct in revealing the characteristics of the traditional Chinese understanding of the substance, which is—unlike the Western *noumenon*—rooted in phenomena. However, he also cannot help but mention (Chen, 2014a, p. 50) that this is common knowledge, which was already elaborated at great length by Zhang Dainian (and is hence nothing new for experts in Chinese philosophy). He finds additional problematic aspects in Li's alleged emphasis on the individual, and also in his materialist worldview:

> In Li Zehou's anthropo-historical ontology, the substance is equated with the concrete living individual. But substance cannot be the life of any particular entity as such. It can only pertain to the life of innumerable individuals. Furthermore, the individual he exposes in his context cannot be brought in accord with his overall theory. Especially when speaking about the "common existence of human beings and the cosmos", he should not understand it as linked to individual people. This kind of common existence can only be obtained through the transcendence of the individual. He also repeatedly emphasises that this common existence of men and the cosmos is based on "material synergy". Now, if this common existence only refers to a material one, than it highlights materialism, but simultaneously, it loses its ethical meaning. In such a case, it can only refer to an inseparable unity between human beings as a biologic and physical species on the one side, and the material attributes of the external world on the other. Such a synergic common existence is then no more a metaphysical one, but only pertains to physics. Li Zehou thinks that only in such a model can human beings assign their various orders upon the cosmos and nature, respectively. However, it is clear that such a project is not possible if the common existence is reduced merely to the material and physical one. And besides, if the unified existence of everything that exists is only a simultaneous existence in the one and the same universe without any inherent connections, then such a common existence does not make any sense (Chen, 2014a, p. 51).

However, in Li's system the emotion-based substance can by no means be reduced to the mere basis of individual life (even though it is reflected in it). Due to the double nature of Li Zehou's concept of emotion (Zehou & Liu, 2014, p. 197; Li & Liu, 2011b, p. 53), it is simultaneously also a foundation of collective human life. While it is true that Li often focuses on problems of the human mind, he also emphasises that the internal psychological aspects of individuals are constructed and constituted through the external factors of the community and society in which these individuals live. As he often explains:

> From externality, we have internality, just as from ritual, we have humaneness (*ren* 仁) … In terms of the community, ritual (ethics) comes from emotionality (as shared circumstance), whereas for the individual, reason governs emotions (Li, 2016, p. 1076).

Hence, Li differentiates between collective and individual emotions. The former can be denoted emotionality, and the latter as (individual) emotion or feeling. From his general ethical schema, one can clearly see that ritual regulations are based on communal emotionality, which arises (as a common reaction) from the shared circumstances of social life. In order to clarify this double nature of emotion, he differentiated between intention (*neitui*) and extension (*waitui*) of the emotion-based substance. While the former is related to the realm of individual human inwardness, the latter pertains to social and political interactions (Li & Liu Xuyuan, 2012, p. 15). As such, Chen's reproach that the emotion-based substance only manifests itself in and is limited to the individual realm is groundless. The same holds true for Chen's claim that the unity of people and

nature (or Heaven) cannot refer to individual people, for it must be based on a transcendent human being. As we have seen, Li does not acknowledge the concept of Western-style transcendence in Chinese philosophy, but on the other hand he emphasises the importance of his notion of 'the transformation of the empirical into the transcendental (*jingyan bian xianyan*)'. The understanding of this notion enables us to see why and how the human psychological formations that are perceived as being 'transcendental' by individuals are, in fact, a product of the dynamic layering of experience and practice. Analogously, what is seen as the transcendence of human beings is actually their integration into the totality of humankind (Li, 2016, p. 1117).

In this context, it is easy to see that Chen Lai's critique of Li's materialism likewise lacks a comprehensive understanding of his philosophical system as an entirety. First of all, Chen's view of materialism as not pertaining to philosophy, but rather merely to physics, is highly problematic, for materialism refers to a scope of metaphysical theories (that is, theories dealing with the nature of reality) belonging to a philosophical monism which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in reality. Hence, Li's theory doubtless pertains to materialist philosophy and not to physics. The fact that in Li's view material practice is the primary basis of human development—and thus for the specific unity of human beings and nature—does not imply that humans are confined to matter and cannot surpass the laws of their biological conditions. On the contrary, it is precisely the supra-biological nature of human beings which enables them to transcend the mechanistic laws of physical reality. In this sense, the emotion-based substance belongs to those (culturally determined) formations of human mind that enable people to generate a specific ethics guided by pragmatic reason (*shiyong lixing*).

If we want to compare Chen Lai's concept of humaneness-based substance and Li Zehou's emotion-based substance, it is important to begin with exposing the crucial features defining the notions of humaneness and emotion, respectively. Both notions pertain to psychological factors, which obtained a dimension of ontological fundamentality. However, in spite of this important similarity, and even though they are both typical of the specifically Chinese culture and society, there are major differences between them.

Among other issues, these differences are linked to the divergent understandings of both central notions in question, i.e. humaneness and emotion. Regarding the first, Li highlights the importance of Dong Zhongshu's interpretation which has been neglected by Chen Lai. This Han Dynasty scholar defined it as the core of the universe (Li, 2016, p. 1137). Hence, such a concept of cosmological emotionality reinforced the integration of Confucianism with Legalism. In this way, it has bounded China's political and religious institutions together for over two millennia (Li, 2016, p. 1137). On the other hand, humaneness as an important factor of the human mind also includes rational (or reasonable) elements. As such, in Chinese culture it is constructed as a part of the emotio-rational structure (*xingli jiegou*) of the human mind. Indeed, the notion of humaneness is also a significant concept in Li's philosophy, as it stands for an inner development which is directed towards an altruistic goal, and is based upon the vital importance of interpersonal relationships. Humaneness in the sense of a central virtue of traditional, and especially Confucian, China, also plays a dominant role in the process of cultivating human emotion, which is a predisposition for the proper functioning of the specifically Chinese ethics of relationalism. However, the emotion-based substance goes

beyond such developments, for it represents the fundamental value and integral role of emotions *per se* for the existence and development of human beings and their cultures.

However, we must not forget that, in contrast to humaneness, the concept of emotion is defined by much wider connotations, for it does not only imply interpersonal empathy, but also includes negative emotions like hate or jealousy, and especially wishes or desires. In this regard, Li Zehou exposes that human substance, which also influences social ethics, has to take into consideration the entirety of emotions and not only their constructive elements.

Against this background, it becomes clear that the two contemporary models of ontology are different but also stand in mutual interaction. However, Li Zehou's emotion-based substance has wider and more fundamental implications than Chen's notion of the humaneness-based ontology, for the concept of humaneness is mainly limited to the metaphysical dimensions of reality.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, questions pertaining to the nature and structure of existence belong to crucial problems elaborated by modern and contemporary Chinese philosophical theories, dealing with the revival of the Chinese ideational tradition and the task of its most reasonable adaptation to the requirements of Chinese modernisation.

In this article, I have critically introduced three discourses which—each in its own way—attempt to construct a new ontological theory, based on traditional Chinese, and particularly Confucian, philosophies. While Mou Zongsan and Li Zehou have tried to posit their theories into a fruitful dialogue and interaction with Western ontological presumptions, Chen Lai's ontology is grounded almost exclusively in the methodological and theoretical framework of the Chinese ideational tradition. In Chen's view, the ontology of humaneness (*ren*) is rooted in a holistic philosophy, which does not acknowledge any kind of division between the *noumenal* and phenomenal spheres. In contrast to Chen's theory, Mou Zongsan's model of double ontology is based upon a Kantian differentiation between these two realms of existence. Li's critique of Mou's double ontology is directed against his assumption of what Li calls the Western 'two-worlds view' of reality. Even though Mou's double ontology is a framework underlying the human perception of reality, Li's conceptualisation of the emotion-based substance is grounded on the basis of material practice, which is seen as the ultimate cause of specifically human mental formations. In such a view, the conditions of material external reality are inseparably connected to the transcendental aspects of the human mind. Therefore, even though on the conceptual level Li Zehou's own alternative model also functions within a differentiation between two levels of ontology, pertaining to the instrumental (*gongju benti*) and the psychological substance (*xinli benti*), respectively, they are both rooted in the immanent sphere of phenomena. Nevertheless, on the ontic level, his notion of the situationally determined emotion-based substance (*qing benti*) represents a unified entity of the social and individual, material and metaphysical realms of existence. As such, it still belongs to the holistic realm of his one-world scheme.

Through a contrastive analysis of Mou Zongsan's, Li Zehou's and Chen Lai's ontological theories, the article illuminated some crucial problems pertaining to their particular approaches. However, in spite of the multifarious, complex problems arising from different views on the manner and most suitable methods of establishing a 'Sinicised

version' of ontology, these thinkers have all made important and valuable contributions to the further development of contemporary philosophy on the global level.

Notes

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2. In this regard, the only exception was Xu Fuguan: 'Even though all other adherents of Modern Confucianism were focused upon metaphysics and ontology rather than political theory, Xu believed that these lines of thought could not contribute enough to solving the various urgent social and political problems of modern China.' (Sernelj, 2019, p. 99).
3. As a subchapter, this essay is included in Li's book *Pragmatic Reason and a Culture of Optimism* (*Shiyong lixing yu legan wenhua* 實用理性與樂感文化).

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