



Notes and News

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International Conference **Comparative Perspectives:** **Islam, Confucianism and Buddhism** **Ljubljana, December 11–13, 2015**

In 2011 Jana S. Rošker and Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik, two sinologists at the Department of Asian Studies, University of Ljubljana, initiated a conference series called *Specific Topics in Chinese Studies*, with an aim “to encourage and advance the study of specific topics related to China and Asia through knowledge and information flow across disciplinary lines, and to strive to create and maintain a multidisciplinary platform for a fruitful exchange of ideas on different types, images, and categories of Chinese and Asian cultures”.

The 2015 edition of the conference¹ was dedicated to the comparisons and dialogues between three major Asian religions and/or philosophies, namely Islam, Confucianism, and Buddhism. While these traditions have throughout history and in variety of ways and constellations shaped understandings of individual morality and good/proper government, informed human as well as human-environment relationships, and served as the basis of various forms of belonging and exclusion, the global redistribution of political and economic power has only raised their relevance for contemporary world. Various Islamic, Confucian, and Buddhist revivals are not only significant for the Asian societies of today, but are closely connected with the emergence of new forms of spirituality we can observe on a global scale. The teachings and practices associated with these traditions are not immutable as the move through global cultural and ideational flows, only intensified with ease of travel and communication, but are themselves transformed and ascribed new meanings in the process.

Of course, such borrowings and exchanges of philosophical/religious concepts and ritual practices are not new; certain aspects of historical conversations, mutual influences and even diverse syntheses between some or all of the three traditions have been more or less well documented in previous scholarly work, but many more remain under/unexplored. Rejecting the premises of the Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations”, which perceives these systems

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International conference *Comparative Perspectives: Islam, Confucianism and Buddhism*, organized by the Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana and

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of thought and practice as clearly bounded and mutually exclusive entities, walking in the line of “civilizational dialogue”, promoted, among others by the famous Chinese philosopher Tu Weiming, the conference organizers have invited comparative contributions, emphasizing “the urgent need for historical reflections and reinterpretations of these ideational systems in the light of contemporary concerns”, or in other words, rethinking of the theoretical conditions of comparative dialogues and their engenderment in practice.

What resulted was a small, but highly diverse conference that brought together junior and senior scholars based in Europe, Asia, and the United States, disciplinary experts ranging from historians to philosophers to anthropologists, specialists in Islamic, Confucian, and Buddhist studies, as well as those primarily engaged in comparative studies.

The plenary session was opened by Osman Bakar, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Brunei Darussalam, one of the pioneers in comparative study of Islam and Confucianism. In his talk, he charted the main lines of similarities and differences between these two traditions. He began by reminding the audience of the classical debate on whether we should consider the two as philosophies or as religions, pointing to the problems of definitions and the difficult relationship between reason and revelation as the path to the truth. From traditional Islamic perspective, both traditions can be understood as religion and philosophy, sharing a number of similar traits. They both emphasize the centrality of societal salvation, whether achieved by the practice of the Way of Heaven (*tiandao*, Confucianism) or the Divine Law (*sharia*, Islam), the importance of filial piety as an expression of the relationships between the man and the transcendental and the emphasis on the “middle path”. According to Bakar, the truths they communicate are common, even if the visions and expressions of the transcendental are different. It is the scope and concreteness of the relationship between the Heaven and Earth that varies, not their nature. The perceived differences may then be simply the result of our mutual ignorance and therefore diminished through our efforts.

The question of categories and diversity was also taken up by the other two plenary speakers. Nevad Kahteran, a professor of Eastern and comparative philosophy at the University of Sarajevo, focussed on the encounters between Islam and various Eastern philosophies, and the valuable lessons that can be drawn from these interactions for deep religious plurality of Europe and in particular the Balkans, where much of the rich intellectual and spiritual heritage had fallen prey to parochialism, narrow-mindedness and intellectual myopia. He finds inspiration in the open, inclusive attitudes of traditional Islamic philosophy towards its South and East Asian counterparts, for example to Hinduism in the work of Abū Rayhān Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048) and to Confucianism in the 17–18th century *Han Kitab* – a body of work written by Chinese Muslim intellectuals who were Islamic scholars and at the same time Chinese literati. In one way or another these thinkers and those who follow in their footsteps have perceived and accepted the polytheism and atheism/agnosticism that characterize these traditions as multifarious paths to the one perennial Truth. Much like Bakar, Kahteran emphasized the orientation toward commonalities as a condition of constructive comparative thinking.

The final plenary speaker, Jana S. Rošker, a professor of Chinese philosophy at the University of Ljubljana and a specialist in Modern Confucianism, expressed more caution with regard to the commensurability of different conceptual and categorical universes. Revisiting the debate on Confucianism, religion and philosophy she showed what may be lost if we apply either of

the categories to such complex and diverse phenomena as exemplified by East Asian Confucian traditions, different strands of which have been characterized as philosophy, metaphysics, pragmatic ethics, state dogmatism, religion, etc. Focusing on the question of what might be the religious dimension of Confucianism and how it can be compared to the Western (or “general”) connotations of the term, Rošker pointed out that Confucianism is characterized by immanent transcendence where the creative potential is not outside of creation, but always a part of it and the creation itself is a continuous process; to the inherence of moral self which has no source outside the individual; and to the fact that ancestor worship does not represent a similar form of life after death as it exists in Abrahamic religions. Confucianism can therefore at best be called an atheist religion. While strongly welcoming intercultural comparison and dialogue, she thus advocates the maintaining of diversity rather than move toward similarity.

As an invited discussant, Rajko Muršič, a professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Ljubljana, offered several comments on the philosophically coloured plenary session. He drew attention to the third aspect that should be added to the twin of philosophy and religion, namely “the way of life”, which refers to habitual everyday practice, the way how we do things and the way how we comprehend them. He pointed out that naturalized way of life is invariably grounded in an ideology or a system of belief and that formalized religions are regularly used in construction of social hierarchies as well as serve a back-up for bureaucratization and standardization. Nevertheless, the diverse ways of life are at the same time always a reflection of our shared humanity, since we as humans use symbols and concepts in the same way. The exchange of (or communication through) symbols is thus never just an exchange of ideas, but also of realities.

The plenary session was followed by five thematic panels. In the panel “Ethics, Values, Identities” Eun Young Hwang (University of Chicago Divinity School) adopted a value theoretical approach to virtue of Taylor, Murdoch and McDowell to investigate the virtue ethics of two prominent Chinese thinkers, Zhi Yi, a Tiantai Buddhist thinker, and the Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming. He revealed structural similarity in their conception of virtue and discerned their dissimilarities in framing nature, coherence and specific virtuous values according to their different symbolic emphases on root symbols. Tamara Ditrich (Nan Tien Institute, University of Sydney) examined the question of gender identity in Buddhist discourse by revisiting the dichotomy between the doctrine of non-self or emptiness, which serves as the basis for deconstruction of any identifications, and the actual social practice of negativity towards women, especially in monastic institutions. Looking at three key historical periods, she showed how this doctrine nevertheless allowed for certain creative responses to the hegemonic androcentric and patriarchal social structures throughout Buddhist history and how it may offer new options in understanding and addressing contemporary concerns. Téa Sernelj’s (University of Ljubljana) presentation investigated the concept of anxiety or ‘concerned consciousness’ developed by the third generation Modern Confucian Xu Fuguan and its connection to traditional Chinese philosophical and religious discourses. Xu related the anxiety to the phenomenon of ‘vanishing Deities’ in ancient China, furthering the elaboration of Modern Confucian supposition according to which the transformation of the ancient ‘external Deities’ into the inner ‘Moral Self’ represents an important, specifically Chinese contribution to the ethical heritage of humanity.

The papers in the panel “Intercultural Connections” were more explicitly cross- or inter-cultural. Tseng Wei-Chieh (Asia University, Taiwan) reflected on the portability of the traditional Confucian concept of *xiao*, usually translated as *filial piety*, which he defines as the harmonious relationship between parents and children. He examined how the right of concealment – unreporting of criminal acts committed by close family members, was discussed in traditional Chinese moral stories and how it is legislated in various societies in Asia, Europe, and North America, suggesting that this concept could serve to reconstruct the concept of ethics and justice in contemporary world. Francesco Carpanini’s (University of Tartu) paper sought to re-evaluate François Jullien’s approach to comparison. As a continental philosopher and sinologist, Jullien looked to geography, history, and the language of China as a way of displacing one’s thought. Rather than focusing on the self-evident comparative categories (for example, identity and difference) he strove – as perhaps should we – for a detachment aiming at de-categorizing and re-categorizing comparative methodologies. Beatriz Tomšič Čerkez (University of Ljubljana) first outlined the history of Muslim communities in the area of nowadays Slovenia, before sharing with the audience some of her experiences as an expert advisor to the winning architectural project for the first mosque that is still in the process of being built.

The two papers in the panel “Islam and East Asian Traditions” looked at traditional and modern interpretations of Islam by Chinese and Japanese Islamic scholars. Sami Al-Daghistani (Leiden University and University of Münster) employed Toshihiko Izutsu’s approach of key ethical terms in Islam to discuss what might be considered as Islamic economic thought. Islamic finance, which is now globally on the rise, constitutes but one segment – and a legal normative one – of Islamic economics, the nature and position of which must be further elucidated through the Islamization process of economics, where relationships of production, the balance of social and individual benefit, etc. are based on the ethical terms of Qur’an. Only thus can emerge an alternative, Islamic economic system. Helena Motoh (University of Primorska), on the other hand, examined how late Ming dynasty Chinese Muslim scholar Wang Daiyu attempted to translate the ideas of Islamic philosophy, especially the Sufi mysticism into the language of then prevailing Neo-Confucian philosophy. Motoh summarized the characteristics of this conceptual translation in Wang’s work *Great Learning of Islam* and interpreted the mutual exchange of key elements of Islamic philosophy and Neo-Confucianism as an example of a dialogical relationship.

The fourth panel centred on Sufism. Münevver Ebru Zeren (Taliç University, Istanbul) discussed how Turks have conceived of God and Universe, beginning from their Sky-God religion to Buddhism and Islam, especially in Turkish Sufism, attempting to show – through examples of myths, rituals and art – that God and Universe concepts had an uninterrupted continuity based on the universalism and the unity of God principles from the beginning of Turks’ religious life. Raid Al-Daghistani (University of Münster) introduced two important spiritual techniques in Sufism – *murāqaba* and *muhāsaba*, and elaborated their position in the overall structure of the spiritual scale. Vigilant contemplation/attentive observation (*murāqaba*) and introspection/examination of conscience (*muhāsaba*) are not only two fundamental principles of Islamic mysticism, but also two “spiritual stations”, which a mystic must reach on his spiritual ascent.

The conference concluded with two fieldwork-based papers on daily practices of Buddhism and Islam in contemporary China. Grete Schönebeck (Goethe

University of Frankfurt) introduced the contemporary burial landscape in the PR China, asking where Buddhists and Buddhist religious elements can be found in cemeteries. While symbols and practices such as burning incense or Bodhisattva statues often have Buddhist connotations, they may not necessarily signal a Buddhist identity. Instead, they may indicate a Chinese one, thus revealing the common attitude to Buddhism as a part of Chinese traditional culture, rather than a specific, independent religious tradition. Finally, my own paper explored how notions of filial piety are understood and practiced among a group of young Chinese Muslim women, who became deeply religious during their university studies. While both Confucianism and Islam exhort obedience to and care and respect for one's parents as great virtues, in Islam the parental authority is circumscribed by the submission to God. For these newly pious female students, Islam then emerges as an emancipatory practice through which they negotiate the expectations of their parents, their deeply-felt commitment to making their parents happy and their own ideas of a modern, cosmopolitan self.

Despite the fact that the diversity of papers did not allow for in-depth discussions on the topics addressed by different presenters, the conference presents a stepping stone in development of comparative studies of Asian traditions in Southeast Europe.

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