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## FOREWORD

# The Dodgy Realm of Conventionality - On the Occasion of the Founding of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*

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Written on the occasion of the launching of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies*, this article develops from the fundamental difference the Indian Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (ca.480-ca.540) made between the world of perception and the world of language, and the ramifications this philosophical distinction has for how concepts as 'China' and 'journal' are understood. Further referring to Dharmakīrti (fl. ca. 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century), a hierarchical structure is suggested within the domain of academic publications and the position of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* within this hierarchy is reflected upon. The latter is discussed through the angle of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) *daoxue* thinking, as well as from the perspective of the contemporary state of the field of academic publishing.

本文撰寫於「歐洲漢學學會雜誌」建刊之際，試從印度佛教哲學家陳那 Dignāga (約 480 - 約 540) 關於感知世界和語言世界之間根本差異以及這種哲學上的差別對於「中國」和「雜誌」等概念的影響出發，運用法稱 Dharmakīrti (約六、七世紀) 在所有概念領域內提出的一種層次結構，來考量「歐洲漢學學會雜誌」作為學術出版物的角色，並結合朱熹(1130-1200) 道學思想的角度以及學術出版領域的現狀進行探討。

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**Keywords:** Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Zhu Xi, classical liberal economic theory, neoliberalism

**關鍵詞：**陳那、法稱、朱熹、古典自由經濟理論、新自由主義

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According to the Indian Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (ca. 480–ca. 540), the world of perception is fundamentally different from the world of language. For Dignāga, at the moment of primary perception of an object, no mental defilement has yet occurred. It is the essence of perception that it is devoid of any mental creation (*kalpanā*). This explains why it is in the moment of primary perception that the possibility lies of seeing things as they really are (*yathābhūtan*), i.e., free of any subject/object dichotomy. Immediately following the moment of primary perception, however, a perceived object is mirrored on the surface of the perceiver's consciousness. As a result, the initial perception is transformed according to this consciousness that is, itself, shaped through previous experiences. Also, language is a product of mental activity. Language is also a transformation, created by the subjective mind. Language is therefore not able to make statements about an object as it was primarily perceived. That is to say, because language does not refer to that to which it claims to refer, the world of perception is fundamentally different from the world of language.

Dignāga conceptualised the relation between words and objects by what he termed '*apoha*' (lit. 'exclusion'). Let me explain with an example, whereby I shift my attention from Dignāga's India to China. When a speaker or a writer uses the word 'China', this word – in itself already transformed by the mirror of the speaker's or writer's consciousness – not only evokes 'China' in the way this speaker's or writer's consciousness imagines 'China' to be, but it also evokes all hypothetical interpretations of 'China' that an audience or a reader may, with their own consciousnesses that are shaped by their own previous experiences, possibly create. Although it is very unlikely that two interlocutors or a writer and a reader conventionally portray 'China' in exactly the same way, the conventional level – the dodgy realm of conventionality – is the only realm in which human communication, including scholarly writing, about 'China' is possible.

Regardless of how defective the word 'China' is on the conventional level, it pretends to refer to and apparently also produces a 'universal' notion. For Dignāga, this productive aspect is the positive aspect of '*apoha*'. From a conventional perspective, every positive aspect is unavoidably connected to a negative counterpart. When we use the

same word ‘China’, we, in a negative way, separate all possible conventional interpretations of ‘China’ from what does not correspond to the supposedly ‘universal’ notion ‘China’. Put simply: using the word ‘China’ implies that the object that is referred to is not something that is not-China. Or, to give another example, the word ‘journal’ simply means that the object that is referred to is not a non-journal. Dignāga himself stated that “A word indicates an object merely through the exclusion of other objects. For example, the word ‘cow’ simply means that the object is not a non-cow. As such, a word cannot denote anything real, whether it be an individual (*vyakti*), a universal (*jāti*), or any other thing. The apprehension of an object by means of the exclusion of other objects is nothing but an inference” (Hattori 1968, 12-13, also see Hayes 1988, 26).

Dignāga, and after him Dharmakīrti (fl. ca. 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century), went further. When the positive aspect of ‘*apoha*’ evokes all hypothetical conventional interpretations of a word or concept that an audience or a reader may possibly create in their minds, this also implies that everything that does not correspond to this word or concept is left unaffected, i.e., it remains in the realm of primary perception, and is not brought to the dodgy realm of conventionality to which language belongs. Through this function, ‘*apoha*’ is able to structure reality hierarchically. I again explain with an example: the combination of the words ‘journal’ and ‘European Association for Chinese Studies’ to form the concept *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* specifies a particular specimen within the multitude of non-academic and academic journals – with which a three-level hierarchical structure is created: (((‘European Association for Chinese Studies’) academic) journal). Because the concept *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* refers to only one specific journal, all ‘other’ journals, academic or other, are left unaffected, i.e., they remain in the realm of primary perception. To use Buddhist terminology again: one particular journal – the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* – is brought from the level of the absolute to the dodgy realm of conventionality, i.e., the realm in which we, academics, are also functioning.

Sinologists and China specialists may, as conventional beings, be able to function only in the conventional realm, but the Neo-Confucian (or what the mirror of Chinese perception refers to as *daoxuejia* 道學家) Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) stated the following:

“In the universe, there has never been *qi* without principle, nor principle without *qi* [...] As soon as there is principle, there is *qi*, but the principle is fundamental. [...] In fact, one cannot state that the one is prior and the other is later. However, when one absolutely wants to return to the origin, then one is obliged to see the principle as prior. This does not mean that the principle is a separate entity. On the contrary, it is inherent in *qi*. When this *qi* is absent, the principle would not have anything to hold on to [...] How does one know whether the principle is prior and is followed by *qi*, or the other way round? This cannot be verified. On a conceptual level, however, I presume that *qi* operates in function of the principle. As soon as this *qi* combines [in the form of *yin* and *yang*], there is principle. Whereas *qi* has the capacity to create and realise things, principle neither has the intention nor the plan nor the capacity to create things”

(天下未有無理之氣，亦未有無氣之理。[...] 有是理便有是氣，但理是本，[...] 此本無先後之可言。然必欲推其所從來，則須說先有是理。然理又非別為一物，即存乎是氣之中；無是氣，則是理亦無掛搭處。[...] 而今知得他合下是先有理，後有氣邪；後有理，先有氣邪？皆不可得而推究。然以意度之，則疑此氣是依傍這理行。及此氣之聚，則理亦在焉。蓋氣則能凝結造作，理卻無情意，無計度，無造作。) (*Zhuzi yulei*, 1: 2-3)

It is herein that lies the possibility for self-cultivation, i.e., the possibility to bring the conventional level (what is within forms 形而下) as close as possible to the archetypical level of the ‘principle’ (形而上). As Zhu Xi observed: When something is made “there has to be a well-defined prior principle. (畢竟是先有此理)” (*Zhuzi yulei*, 1: 2-3)

Also when making a journal, there is a well-defined prior principle involved, and the contributors to a journal have to try to attain to the level of the ‘principle’ - or to the level of the absolute (*paramārtha*; *tathatā*), as the Buddhists would have it. An academic journal should aim at making statements about the researched objects that are as little as possible distorted through the conventionality of the observing mind. That is to say, the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* should aim at coming as close as possible to the absolute, archetypical, level of primary perception,

and through this academic endeavour try to distinguish itself from the dodgy conventionality of ‘other’ journals. To the extent that the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* is successful in this mission, it will also add to the renown of the European Association for Chinese Studies.

I return to Dignāga. At the moment an academic transmits to words his/her findings on his/her object of research, this can only be a mental creation (*kalpanā*). The way findings are put into words, the format that is chosen to express these findings in (monograph, edited volume, paper journal, online journal – all of these choices in themselves being ways to structure conventional reality hierarchically), and even the framework in which this research and the transmitting of these findings to words occur, can belong only to the dodgy realm of conventionality. The 21<sup>st</sup> century that is now at the beginning of its third decade has its peculiar conventional characteristics. This also applies to academia. Different from classical liberal economic theory that measures value in objective terms of the cost of resources and labour, neoliberal capitalism uses a subjective theory of value. Value is conceived of as conferred by the subjective preferences of agents. For academia, it is important to add that whereas classical liberalism saw the individual as characterised by having an autonomous human nature and being able to practise (in) freedom, in neoliberalism, the state “seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur” (Olssen and Peters 2005, 315). In neoliberalism, further, the market has become a useful technology for use by the state, a “mechanism for the institutional regulation of public sector organizational contexts, [...] a technique of government’s ‘positive’ power, acting deliberately through the vehicle of the state to engineer the conditions for efficient economic production” (Olssen and Peters 2005, 317–318). That is to say that what David Reisman called the ‘productive state’ (that simultaneously is active as participant in and as controller of the economic process), as opposed to the ‘protective state’ (that limits its ‘interference’ to the protection of citizens within a constitutional and legal framework) increasingly determines economic and academic life (Reisman 1990, 81). In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century global neoliberal world order, the ‘productive state’ extracts compliance from individuals in order to engineer a market order.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the ‘productive state’ threatens to

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<sup>1</sup> For the distinction between ‘protective’ state and ‘productive’ state as the difference between law and politics: see Buchanan and Tullock 1962, 69.

restrict the rights of privacy and personal freedom, as well as of professional autonomy. And, indeed, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘the market’ have encroached on the academic ‘profession’ as well. Also, academic teaching and research are increasingly coping with the logic of ‘the market’, with the introduction of concepts such as demand and supply, relevance to labour market conditions and prospects, targets and objectives, contract-based employment, and results orientation, all to the detriment of values such as ‘professional autonomy’ for the individual academic, and such as the ‘common good’ and ‘public interest’ for the society for whose edification (apart from the value of ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge’ itself) the academic is supposed to work (Olssen and Peters 2005, 324–326).<sup>2</sup>

It is within this context and against the background that commercial academic publishers also have to navigate within the neoliberal framework, that the European Association for Chinese Studies has – after a discussion that took many years – decided to start its own online journal, in an attempt to keep aloof from commercial neoliberal patterns. This approach should also liberate the content of the journal and give space to hotspot discussions, allow a refocusing on all too long forgotten studies, bring non-mainstream topics into the limelight, and cast light on the varied field of Chinese studies in Europe (including studies that are not published in the global academic language that is English). It goes without saying that the editorial committee of the *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* leaves the first and the final word to its contributors.

May this new journal shine through the grey fog of conventionality!

Bart Dessen

President EACS

Sint Amansberg, 6 January 2021

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<sup>2</sup> Olssen and Peters (2005, 326) state that the rising importance of ‘managed research’ and the pressures to obtain ‘funded research’ increasingly infringe on academic freedom, and that “The extent to which the ideal [...] of the university as an institutionally autonomous and politically insulated realm, where there are traditional commitments to a liberal conception of professional autonomy, in keeping with a public service ethic, has any relevance in a global economic order, is increasingly seen as an irrelevant concern”.

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