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BOOK REVIEW

Im Spiegel der All-Einheit: Selbst- und Weltbezug im chinesischen Mittelalter

By Kai Marchal

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At the heart of Kai Marchal's study stands Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1126–1271), whose syncretic work strikes a balance between discrete philosophical concepts and debates. One of the great masters of the late Song dynasty, Zhu Xi was instrumental in the renaissance of Confucius' teachings, endowing them with the magisterial aura that they maintained for seven centuries until the collapse of the Qing dynasty. The general argument is that Zhu Xi, by assimilating Buddhist themes and sensibilities, expanded Neo-Confucianism's focus on orthodoxy and transmission through a focus on subjectivity that previous variants of Confucius' doctrine lacked. The German title of the book – which roughly translates as “In the Mirror of All-Unity: Relating the Self and the World in the Chinese Middle Ages” – draws on Buddhist and Confucian themes, such as *xin* 心 and *xing* 性, and, by invoking the vague concept of “Chinese Middle Ages”, makes concessions to a generalist Western audience that may find itself ill-equipped to manoeuvre the dynastic chronology prevalent in a Chinese Studies context. This audience, hopes Marchal, may find engagement with Zhu Xi beneficial towards combatting some of the lingering prejudices that, in spite of the discipline's emphasis on self-criticism, continue to prevail among Western historians of philosophy. As “probably the most influential and most important thinker in East Asia prior to the twentieth century” (p. 9, all translations from German my own), Zhu Xi's work presents a challenge to the idea that subjectivity should be considered the invention of occidental modernity. What is more, his treatises and commentaries lead straight into East Asian metaphysics and prove the notion that Chinese philosophers could neither address metaphysical problems nor formulate innovative concepts wrong.

Although Zhu Xi considered himself primarily the spiritual heir of Chinese antiquity, his work is also the product of an intensive reception of Buddhism, which had originally been imported from India. This is why Marchal's book is divided into two story arcs (Chapters 1 and 2) that move toward the book's conclusion (Chapter 3): the first arc discusses Neo-Confucian thinkers since the eleventh century, whose engagement with Chinese antiquity displays the same level of respect for established norms as it does an awareness of its need to be reformed; and the second arc gives an account of Buddhist thinkers and their radical scepticism at the onset of the second millennium. Addressing the clash between these two strands of philosophy, Marchal wonders: “Why did this strand of Buddhist thought repeatedly connect with anti-sceptic strategies in its East Asian reception? Their aim was to close in on the *negative experience of groundlessness* as a therapeutic means to facilitate positive *realisation*, even *certainty*” (p. 87, italics present in the original). Indeed, that Nāgārjuna's (150–250 CE) *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) could serve as a source of inspiration for a state religion such as Neo-Confucianism is most surprising. In contrast to the stable worldview found in Pure Land Buddhism, Nāgārjuna pursues the path of sceptic radicalism, rejecting orthodox positions and indulging in a type of negative thought that not merely rejects the reality of the self, a common Buddhist concept, but also that of thought-independent reality itself. In this regard, Marchal points out that this negative teaching does

not solidify into any theory but forms part of a soteriological process that thwarts the formation of metaphysical certainties as well as a stable self (p. 85). Inspired by Nāgārjuna's influential *Fundamental Verses*, generations of Chinese scholar-monks discussed the ineffability of reality and its implications for enlightenment. After Seng Zhao's 僧肇 meditations on the "twofold truth" canonised paradoxical figures of speech in Chinese speculative thought, others conceived of alternative models to capture the dichotomy of realisation and perspectivism, among them the tetralemma discussed in the Sanlun 三論 school (pp. 100–113). This strand of thought considers human's enmeshment in *samsāra* as identical with the state of *nirvāṇa*, thereby confusing the established directionality of true knowledge and salvation. Unsurprisingly, this stance constituted a provocation in the eyes of Confucius' heirs, who would not compromise on the pursuit of harmony.

In light of the attention given by Confucius to the most practical matters – the reader will perhaps recall the sage's recorded mastery of sweeping the floor – it seems unclear how such radical positions were useful to Neo-Confucians. Zhang Zai 張載 was the first to embark on this route, taking Nāgārjuna's emphasis on the instability of the self and the cosmos as indicative of the totality of the "spirit" (*xin*). Host to the ever-changing interplay between unity and multiplicity, the spirit gives rise to the human subject, which represents an isolated, transient act of differentiation. Within this complex system, another elementary force nurtures those constant changes: the *qi* 氣, a concept that, were it not for Zhang, would have remained peripheral in Chinese philosophy. Faced with such an emphasis on processualism and the lack of a central signifier, Zhang introduced a quick fix to rescue the salvific project of Confucianism. While Nāgārjuna and his successors embraced groundlessness and uncertainty as the hallmarks of authentic experience, Zhang levers out the potential nihilism embedded in such cosmic scepticism, attributing ultimate authority to canonical texts that articulate the unchanging truth, such as the *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易). Regardless of Zhang's monism of the spirit, Marchal finds that the status of the object world remains ambivalent; after all, his *qi* concept stubbornly resists full integration into the totality of *xin*. Even if *qi* represents a subcategory of the latter, its existence underscores the subject's embedding into a world of things, and it is only through one's engagement with this world that one can gain full insight into pure truth.

Zhang Zai's patchy monism forms the backdrop to the book's concluding chapter on Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian synthesis. Having been familiarised with Buddhist teachings through close interaction with charismatic masters, the young Zhu also acquired an excellent command of the classics early in life. Torn between mystical inwardness and the dogma of transmission, he began to negotiate a middle position to mediate between the two poles, a project that never really achieved a stable, final manifestation. Zhu Xi's main oeuvre comprises his famous commentaries on the Four Books and the Neo-Confucian anthology

Reflections on Things at Hand (Jinsi lu 近思錄), in which he avoids reproducing the opposition between “everyday” and “pure consciousness”, thereby upending reliance on the concept of the “twofold truth”. While emphasising the significance of external reality, Zhu would not consider it in quasi-empirical terms as a thought-independent entity. Quite the opposite: his reality is one that can only be grasped through “inner contemplation”, whereby the subject learns to assess the correlation between external phenomena and the primordial structure of the world (*li* 理). While Zhu Xi, like Zhang, draws on the authority of transmission, he adds a wholly new element as the key to access truth by highlighting the role of a person’s self-reflection. According to Marchal, this attention to one’s inner life, motivations and drives mark a decisive moment in Chinese intellectual history. Moving beyond the preparatory work laid out by Zhang, Zhu Xi pioneers a kind of self-empowerment that was all but unthinkable within the ancient paradigm of Confucianism, thus laying the groundwork for a Neo-Confucian *Lebensform*. In light of this modernisation, Marchal finds it regrettable that philosophers and historians have, thus far, written their histories of subjectivity primarily with reference to Socrates and Descartes, very much in ignorance of the variants of interiority that emerged elsewhere (pp. 187–193).

Im Spiegel der All-Einheit is an exceptional project that succeeds thanks to the wealth of sources used in the book and the author’s judicious analyses. Although Marchal’s own translations of original material are convincing, he does not grant them primacy over rival translations with which he engages in a productive manner. His meticulous, deliberative approach also shows in his engagement with existing scholarship, which draws heavily not only on German- and English-language work, but also on Chinese-language material from different ages. Across the centuries, and in many cases millennia, scholars have engirdled the Chinese classics with different layers of commentary, an overwhelming prospect for today’s readers. Rather than simplifying the situation by following the *ad fontes* method, Marchal joyfully paves his route through those different historical layers.

The author’s preference for nuance over singular meaning shows most clearly when it comes to the translation and interpretation of concepts that warrant historical analysis as well as an awareness of context. In this vein, universal terms like *dao* 道 become part of a cartography that moves beyond familiar designations, such as “way”, “method” and “teaching”. While most Neo-Confucians contract its semantic field to “the right way” or “All-Unity”, Zhu Xi further narrows down its meaning to a “rational, total, real alignment of the cosmos” (pp. 19, 63). Such methodological scruples become particularly fertile once a Sanskrit word, such as *svabhāva*, facilitates a philological journey through Chinese, German and English translations, followed by an insightful proposition to render its meaning as “the essential aspect of an object” or, to ensure greatest accuracy, as “the ontological potential of an object to exist without change” (p. 79). It goes without saying that the term *xin* requires a five-page, footnote-heavy digression, guiding the reader through its different historical uses (pp. 182–186).

Despite Marchal's obvious expertise in Chinese matters, his writing comes accompanied with a comparative passion that offers helpful cross-references to Western history of philosophy: the Neo-Confucian notion of the soul draws parallels to gnostic thought (p. 39); Nāgārjuna's dynamic model of discourse finds a match in Wittgenstein's pragmatism (p. 78); the Indian philosopher's scepticism exhibits overlaps with Greek Pyrrhonism (pp. 86–89). While some readers will be irritated by such daring comparisons, Marchal always closes in on the *differentia specifica* that infallibly persists between the two spheres. In one respect, however, the author moves beyond the realm of comparisons that could still qualify as scholarly. As many subchapters are garnished with epigraphs, some of them risk leaving the reader scratching their head. A quote from physicist Wolfgang Pauli indicating the man's esoteric belief in numerology precedes a general account of the significance of *qi* (p. 145); the discussion of the Cheng brothers' Neo-Confucianism is paired with a floating quotation from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (p. 216). After initial confusion, the reader wonders if these signposts amount to more than mere testimonies of erudition, and in fact represent the rudiments of a comparative project of a very different scale and spirit. What could be the point of engaging Wassily Kandinsky in dialogue with Zhang Zai, Hans Blumenberg with Seng Zhao and Nelson Goodman with Zhu Xi? Arguably, such encounters lead straight into an ambivalent realm where ingenuity becomes indistinguishable from nonsense. For the time being, the author sticks with Nāgārjuna's insight that the ultimate truth cannot be articulated in human language, and so he leaves the reader with mere hints.

Despite the study's overall brilliance, it comes with one regret, namely its abrupt ending. Where the reader comes to expect a concluding chapter on Zhu Xi that would continue the detailed, absorbing account, the end of the book feels rushed. This creates the impression that Zhu Xi, who in Marchal's account comes across as an inconsistent thinker, was not so different from the predecessors whose philosophical systems he supposedly rectified. Returning to the author's question of why Buddhist thought repeatedly connected with anti-sceptic strategies, one may rephrase the question: what appeal did Zhu Xi's continued struggle to balance mystical and traditionalist aspects hold for those administrators and scholars who canonised the hegemonic ideology of Neo-Confucianism? Did his writings put an end to the questions that unsettled one's sense of self? The book's insightful analyses of Nāgārjuna und Zhang Zai are reminders that their speculative forays only encountered temporary neutralisation in Zhu Xi's thought but not a blunt rebuttal. As their negative philosophies blended with the paradoxical thought-games of Daoism, they continued to undermine the neat, reality-oriented worldview of scholar-administrators. In the shadows of official doctrine, Chinese letters never tired of voicing radical doubt, starting with the melancholic poetry of Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 through the instable plains of reality in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢) to the cosmic philosophy of the last great Confucian scholar, Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1897). Time and again, radical scepticism rises to the fore in

Chinese intellectual history, perhaps not *in spite* of Zhu Xi's synthesis but *in correspondence* with it.

One of the great takeaways of Marchal's book is the prolific, almost playful, attitude that East Asian sceptics display toward the groundlessness of being. To end this review with a comparison *à la* Marchal: when held up against Western rationalism and empiricism, Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian project offers a generous framework that is porous enough to accommodate dissenting – and, in a way, complementary – worldviews.