

Feature Article 【專題論文】

Contextualization and Cross-Cultural
Understanding
學術環境與跨文化理解

ZHANG Longxi
張隆溪*

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* Chair Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation at the City University of Hong Kong and a foreign member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities.

Abstract

Meaning in language is always contextual, and so is the intellectual pursuit of any kind. In making a case in any scholarly discourse, we always respond to a prior argument in the form of a dialogue or intellectual exchange and communication, and that in significant ways determines the orientation of our own argument. In 20th-century theorizing in the West, be it philosophical, historical, sociological, anthropological, or literary-critical, a tendency toward overemphasizing difference becomes prominent, and that forms the context within which we need to rethink the basic assumptions in the humanistic and social scientific studies. To make explicit what contextual determinants govern contemporary intellectual discourse is a way forward to think "outside the box," so to speak, and to rectify some of the excesses, particularly in East-West cross-cultural understanding.

摘要

語言的意義是在上下文的語境中確定的，任何學術研究也都有其語境和學術環境。我們提出的見解和看法都是回應已有的論述，構成一種對話和交流，而這一語境對我們自己的論述也會有相當影響。二十世紀西方的理論闡述，無論哲學、歷史、社會學、人類學或文學批評理論，都有過度強調差異的普遍傾向，而此傾向即構成我們重新思考人文及社會科學研究基本預設的學術環境。明確揭示當代理論話語中具決定性的潛在因素，就有助於我們打破既定的「思想框架」，尤其在東西跨文化理解中，克服某些過度強調文化差異的謬誤。

Understanding is not something we choose to do or not to do, but is constitutive of our very existence and therefore ontologically significant. From recognizing an ordinary object or reading a simple gesture to comprehending complicated situations of a most urgent nature or making sense of conceptual or theoretical issues of the most difficult kind, we always need to understand in order to respond adequately to questions that arise in our lives and our environment. We may define understanding as a hermeneutic activity to grasp the meaning of something we encounter, be it a sign, a text, an event, a natural or social phenomenon, a real entity or an imaginary construct, and that definition already presumes a totality within which meaning occurs. That is indeed an important insight Friedrich Schleiermacher takes to be a fundamental principle in his formulation of general hermeneutics. "The sense of every word in a given location must be determined," says Schleiermacher, "according to its being-together with those that surround it."¹ In the philological tradition, it has long been recognized that meaning is contextual, that is to say, meaning occurs in the context of a circular movement of the parts and the whole, because the context of the whole is not given before the parts, but is rather the accumulation of individual parts, while the meaning of each part is determined by the context of the whole.

This is the so-called "philological circle," in which we understand each word in the context of a sentence, and we understand the sentence by adding up meanings of all the words as the parts. Schleiermacher here follows the philological tradition, but his contribution, as H. G. Gadamer observes, is to apply this philological concept "to psychological understanding, which necessarily understands every structure of thought as an element in the total context of a man's life."² With Schleiermacher, the philological circle becomes

1 Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Hermeneutics and Criticism," in *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, translated and edited by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 44.

2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 190.

the important concept of the "hermeneutic circle," which applies not only to linguistic understanding of the text in relation to words as its parts, but to psychological understanding of the author and his times as a whole in relation to his thoughts and writings as the parts. "The vocabulary and the history of the era of an author relate as the whole from which his writings must be understood as the part, and the whole must, in turn, be understood from the part," says Schleiermacher. "The putting oneself in the place of the author is implicit in what has just been said, and it follows," he goes on to say, "that we are the better equipped for explication the more completely we have assimilated it."³ That is to say, meaning and the understanding of meaning always occur in a certain context, either linguistic or psychological, and the meaning of texts is always to be seen as part of the author's life and times as a whole. To know the author as a living person seems to be the goal of understanding, but it is important for us to remember that the task of hermeneutics, as Schleiermacher defines it, is "to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author."⁴ Schleiermacher's hermeneutics cannot, therefore, be reduced to a simple intentionalism where the authorial intention becomes the absolute criterion of interpretation.

For anyone familiar with the tradition of Chinese thought, what Schleiermacher said about understanding the author in relation to his writings may recall a strikingly similar idea articulated by the Confucian thinker Mencius when he says: "How can it be that while reciting an author's poems and reading his books, we do not know him as a person? Thus we must study the age in which he lived, and that is what we mean by making friends with the ancients."⁵ Like Schleiermacher, Mencius takes the historical circumstances of an author's age as a whole, of which his writings are to be understood as a part; and the

3 Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, p. 24.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

5 "Wan zhang li 萬章下," *Meng zi 孟子*. See Jiao Xuen 焦循, *Meng zi zheng yi 孟子正義*, *Zhu zi ji cheng 諸子集成* (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1954), vol. 1, p. 428.

hermeneutic task is thus to achieve total understanding through historical sympathy, to see every piece of writing or "every structure of thought" as a partial manifestation of the author as a living person. Mencius has also spelled out the normative steps in the act of interpretation: "So the interpreter of a poem should not let the words obscure the text or the text obscure the intention. To trace back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding: that is the way to do it."⁶ In this formulation, the words in a text, the text as a whole, and the authorial intention as an even larger context constitute a hermeneutic circle, within which the interpreter may achieve full understanding by working out the meaning from the parts to the whole, and from the whole to the parts. James J. Y. Liu has characterized Mencius's interpretive method as "intentionalism."⁷ And yet, like Schleiermacher, Mencius is not pinning everything on the authorial intention, even though he does consider the author's intention as an important context for understanding the text and the words. Neither can his method of "tracing back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding" be reduced, again like Schleiermacher's, to a simple "intentionalism" because, as Zhou Yukai argues in a book on Chinese hermeneutic tradition, "on the one hand, he does affirm that the authorial intention is the goal of all interpretations, thereby advocating a kind of 'intentionalist hermeneutics'; but on the other, the means by which he reaches that goal depends on the reader's subjective conjecture, which suggests that he acknowledges the legitimacy of different readers' conjectures and thereby formulates a 'pluralistic hermeneutics'."⁸

Because of the importance of Mencius in the Confucian tradition, his interpretive methodology has a tremendous influence in the Chinese tradition. In the "evidential scholarship" of the Qing dynasty, as Qian Zhongshu points out, Chinese scholars already had a clear sense of the "hermeneutic circle" in

6 Ibid., pp. 377.

7 See James J. Y. Liu, *Language-Paradox-Poetics: A Chinese Perspective*, edited by Richard John Lynn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 96-97.

8 Zhou Yukai周裕鍇, *Zhong guo gu dai chan shi xue yan jiu* 中國古代闡釋學研究 (Shanghai上海: Shanghai People's Publishing House上海人民出版社, 2003), pp. 47-48.

demanding that "one must first know the meaning of words before one can understand the meaning of a sentence, and one must understand the meaning of a sentence before one can grasp the sense of the entire text."⁹ Thus in the Chinese tradition, we find the idea of an interpretive methodology similar to the concept of the hermeneutic circle as Schleiermacher developed, even though the way the concept is expressed and the actual content of understanding are different. This is not surprising, because the basic questions of language, understanding, and interpretation are not specific to any one particular language, culture, or tradition; so hermeneutic questions exist everywhere across the gaps of languages, cultures, and histories, in the East as well as in the West.

Several points can be drawn from the comparison above of Schleiermacher and Mencius on understanding an author and his works. First, we may confirm that the hermeneutic problem is indeed universal, as Gadamer argues.¹⁰ Even though the authors and works we try to understand are different, the theoretical issue of hermeneutic understanding transcends the specificity of particular authors and works; it is not limited to the reading of poetry or literature, or the philosophical contemplation of experience, knowledge, or consciousness, but it has implications in all human efforts at understanding, and thus important for all disciplines of human knowledge, for natural sciences, social sciences, as well as the humanities. Secondly, the universality of the hermeneutic problem expands our horizons not only across the narrowly defined disciplines, but also beyond the usual East / West divide. In this regard, it is especially meaningful to put Schleiermacher and Mencius together for cross-cultural comparison. Finally, the significance of the hermeneutic circle, the realization that meaning and the understanding of meaning are always contextual, achievable in the dynamic reciprocity of the whole and the parts, lead us to the realization of the historicity

9 Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, *Guan zhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986), 2nd ed., vol. 1, p. 171.

10 See H. G. Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 3-17.

of our understanding, that we always understand and interpret in the dynamic exchange of a dialogue, in response to a particular question or a set of questions in a larger context. "A question is behind each statement that first gives it its meaning," says Gadamer. "Furthermore, the hermeneutical function of the question affects in turn what the statement states generally — in that the statement is an answer."¹¹ This is a particularly important insight as it brings to our consciousness the circumstance of our understanding, the realization that each statement we make responds to a prior question which in significant ways affects the way we make the statement. In other words, what we say and how we say it, what we argue for or against in our argument, are all contextual; that is, they make sense only in the context of a question-and-answer exchange.

We may bring that insight to bear on our own work, and here I would like to offer my own experience as an example. Much of my work has been concerned with the issue of East-West cross-cultural understanding, and over the years it has become quite clear to me that the statements I make in my argument, the emphasis I put on the viability of cross-cultural understanding, are indeed affected in significant ways by the prevailing paradigm in modern scholarship, which forms the context within which my argument is formed. A case in point is my encounter with the influential French philosopher Jacques Derrida some twenty-five years ago. In spring 1984, I was invited to give the Eberhard L. Faber Class of 1915 Memorial Lecture at Princeton University, and I presented a critique of Derrida's claim in *Of Grammatology* that logocentrism, i.e., the metaphysical hierarchy of thinking, speech, and writing, is purely Western, while he took the non-phonetic scripts used in Chinese and Japanese for "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism."¹² Derrida's deconstructive approach represents a radical break from the Western metaphysical tradition, which he characterized as "logocentric" and criticized for

11 Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," translated by Christopher Smith, *ibid.*, p. 89.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Charkravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 90.

its "metaphysical hierarchy" throughout the entire tradition from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Nietzsche and many contemporary thinkers. In his critique of the West, Derrida used the East, graphically represented by the non-phonetic Chinese scripts, to form a foil, an opposite and alternative to Western logocentrism, thereby confirming the old East-West dichotomy we find in Hegel and others who consider the Chinese language and thought as totally different from that of the West. And yet, like the Greek *logos*, the Chinese *tao* contains the similar dual meanings of speaking and that which is spoken, and there is in the Chinese tradition a similar "metaphysical hierarchy" of thinking, speech, and writing, which Derrida thought to be uniquely Western. The idea that language is inadequate, that whatever is truly profound or important cannot be fully conveyed by language, particularly the written language, has a pervasive presence in the Chinese tradition whether we look at Laozi's first line in the *Tao te ching* that "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way," or Confucius' desire "not to speak" as recorded in the *Analects*, or the commentary in the *Book of Changes* that "writing cannot fully convey the speech, and speech cannot fully convey the meaning."¹³ Citing textual evidence from both the Chinese and Western traditions, I argue *pace* Derrida that the debasement of writing is not just Western, but can be found in the East as well.

Before my essay "The Tao and the Logos" was published in *Critical Inquiry*, I showed my manuscript to Derrida himself, who was lecturing at Yale at the time. He read it and invited me to his office to have a conversation in one afternoon. Derrida admitted that he did not know Chinese, but he relied on Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound for the view of Chinese as a pictographic writing system. In fact, he praised Pound's poetics under the influence of Fenollosa, saying that "this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first

13 *The lao zi*老子, chapter 1, see Wang Bi王弼, *Lao zi zhu*老子注, *Zhu zi ji cheng*諸子集成, vol. 3, p. 1; "Yang huo陽貨," *The Analects of Confucius*論語, see Liu Baonan劉寶楠, *Lun yu zheng yi*論語正義, *Zhu zi ji cheng*諸子集成 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1954), vol. 1, p. 379; *Chou yi zheng yi*周易正義, 70c, see Ruan Yuan阮元, *Shisan jing zhushu*十三經注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980), vol. 1, p. 82.

break in the most entrenched Western tradition."¹⁴ I told him that Pound was a great poet, but he would be the last person you want to rely on for understanding the nature of the Chinese language. The textual evidence of similar ideas on the inadequacy of language in the Chinese and the Western traditions is of course something Derrida could not comment on, but he still insisted that logocentrism was purely Western. After a fairly long discussion, he finally asked me a loaded question. "Are you saying," said Derrida, "that Taoism and logocentrism are the same?" "Of course not," I replied. "You are the master of *différance*, you know that when you say Taoism *and* logocentrism, or A *and* B, the two things are of course different, not identical." I made it clear that I was not at all ignoring differences between China and the West, but when those differences were pushed to the extreme to become an absolute dichotomy, I felt it necessary to show that there are similarities between the two. Suppose that Derrida, or someone as influential as he was, were saying that China and the West were exactly the same with no significant difference, I would probably take a different position and argue that they are actually quite different. My argument was in that sense affected by the prevailing intellectual trends I found in the West at the time, namely, an overemphasis on cultural differences between the East and the West, the idea that China or the East was so fundamentally different from the West that it provided a contrast, a negative mirror-image of the West for its self-understanding. That is, of course, a major point Edward Said made in his book *Orientalism*, even though he was mainly concerned with the Arabic world and his argument was by no means impeccable. China and the West are certainly different in many ways, and the *tao* and the *logos* are certainly not the same, but when Derrida with his tremendous influence in Western scholarship declares that Western logocentrism and Eastern thinking are absolutely different, I deem it necessary to put forward my argument as a corrective of the overemphasis on difference, the rigid and untenable dichotomy between China and Europe, the East and the West.

14 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 92.

The point is that the viability of cross-cultural understanding must be asserted against the overemphasis on cultural difference and incommensurability. In 20th-century theorizing in the West, be it philosophical, historical, sociological, anthropological, or literary-critical, there is a predominant tendency towards the overemphasis on difference, which forms the context in which we need to rethink the basic assumptions in our own work, particularly in East-West cross-cultural studies. In a recent book, for example, Richard Nisbett argues that Asians and Europeans have totally different "thought processes," that the "nature of Asian society" is "collective or interdependent," totally different from the "individualistic or independent nature of Western society."¹⁵ Separated by such drastically different "natures of society" and "thought processes," Asians and Europeans, according to Nisbett, can hardly understand each other, let alone to form a world of peace and collaboration. The ancient dichotomy between Asia and Europe as represented by the antagonism between Greece and Persia thus manifests itself anew in his argument. "If people really do differ profoundly in their systems of thought — their worldviews and cognitive processes," says Nisbett, "then differences in people's attitudes and beliefs, and even their values and preferences, might not be a matter merely of different inputs and teachings, but rather an inevitable consequence of using different tools to understand the world. And if that's true, then efforts to improve international understanding may be less likely to pay off than one might hope."¹⁶ That should give us pause in considering the social and political implications of such cultural relativist arguments.

Differences between the East and the West, particularly China and Greece, are often brought to a philosophical level of language and thinking. For example, under the influence of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Marcel Granet proposed the idea of a distinct Chinese *mentalité* that differs profoundly from that of the West.¹⁷ In

15 Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), p. xvii.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

17 See Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1968).

examining the failure of Christian mission in China, for another example, Jacques Gernet attributed that failure to fundamental differences between China and the West, "not only of different intellectual traditions but also of different mental categories and modes of thought."¹⁸ Following F. S. C. Northrop, David Hall and Roger Ames contrast Western and Chinese modes of understanding as "logical" and "aesthetic," and stress that this is "in fact a contrast between distinctive concepts of order."¹⁹ More recently, François Jullien has repeatedly set up a sharp contrast between China and Greece and claims that "if one wants to 'go beyond the Greek framework,'" China provides the only alternative because it is "the only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European." Indeed, Jullien declares, "*non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else."²⁰ Examples of such dichotomous argument are legion, but I believe it is already clear without further citations that cultural relativism, the idea that the East and the West are fundamentally different and incommensurable, is indeed the predominant tendency in Western scholarship, particularly with regard to East-West comparisons. In fact, arguments emphasizing the fundamental differences between the East and the West are not just Western, but can be found in the East as well, and the ubiquitous presence of that dichotomous argument in both East and West, as I have argued elsewhere, invalidates the very dichotomy between the East and the West.²¹

To return to the initial question of contextualization and understanding, the main point I would suggest by way of conclusion is to recognize the interrelationship of our understanding or argument with its prior condition as a

18 Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3.

19 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 116.

20 François Jullien and Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un Dehors (la China): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), p. 39.

21 See Zhang Longxi, "The Fallacy of Cultural Incommensurability," in *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 14-17.

dialogue, a question and answer exchange. Particularly with regard to cross-cultural understanding, I would suggest that we achieve a well-balanced view of the dialogic exchange without going to the extreme of overemphasis either on difference or on similarity, either a simple universalism that ignores all distinctions of things, ideas, values, and experiences, or a rigid relativism that denies the possibility of knowledge and understanding. The question and the answer form a hermeneutic circle within which they mutually influence one another, and the task of understanding is to working out their relationship from the whole to the parts, and again from the parts to the whole. To make explicit what contextual determinants govern contemporary intellectual discourse, I would argue, is a way forward to think "outside the box," so to speak, and to rectify some of the excesses, particularly in East-West cross-cultural understanding.♦

♦ Responsible editor: Yeh-ming Chin (金葉明).

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