CHAPTER 3

Some Thoughts on Writing the History of Chinese Thought

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From the beginning writing the history of Chinese thought or Chinese philosophy has had a cross-cultural dimension. In the Western world it has been a way to learn about another civilization. Very early the classical Chinese philosophers caught the attention of visitors from Europe. The Jesuit missionaries found that Confucius and his followers represented the quintessence of Chinese culture and they saw it as an important task to bring the Confucian ideas to the attention of people in Europe. They did this mainly by means of translation. In 1687 appeared Philippe Couplet’s (1623–1693) famous work Confucius Sinarum Philosophus [Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese], which contains translations of The Great Learning, The Analects and The Doctrine of the Mean, that is three of The Four Books, but also sections which can be seen as an introduction to Chinese thought, for example about the Confucian classics, later commentaries, Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism and the like.1 In the words of the Danish scholar Knud Lundbæk, this work “gave to the Western world the first systematic and comprehensive presentation of Confucianism as the main component of Chinese civilization.”2

Sketches of the history of Chinese philosophy were published as early as in the eighteenth century. In 1727 Jacob Friedrich Reimmann (1668–1743) published a Historia philosophiae sinensis [A History of Chinese Philosophy], but this work contains little more than a bibliographical outline of Western books relevant for the study of Chinese philosophy.3 Much more importantly, Jacob Brucker (1696–1770)—often called the father of the history of philosophy—published in 1742–44 his influential multi-volume work Historia Critica Philosophiae [A Critical History of Philosophy], which included a section on

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1 See Thierry S.J. Meynard, Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (1687): The First Translation of the Confucian Classics. I am indebted to Dr. Anders Hansson for drawing my attention to Dr. Thierry’s significant work.
3 I am indebted to Mr. Björn Löwendahl for information about this work.
Chinese philosophy (expanded in a supplement to the second edition published 1766–67). Brucker's treatment of Chinese philosophy is generally considered to be the first extensive account of the subject in a Western language. However, it would still take a long time before the first systematic scholarly treatment of the history of Chinese philosophy was written in a Western language. The first such work that I know of is Alfred Forke's (1867–1944) impressive history of Chinese philosophy in three volumes published 1927–1938. During this period the French sinologist and sociologist Marcel Granet (1884–1940) also published his influential, albeit controversial book *La pensée chinoise* (1934).

In China, writing the history of Chinese thought or philosophy was from the beginning part of the reinterpretation of traditional Chinese culture that has been a central concern ever since the first attempts at modernization began more than a hundred years ago in the wake of the Opium War. In this process, the classical texts ceased to be sacred and became the objects of critical analysis and comparison with currents of thought in other parts of the world. It was in this context that the notion emerged of writing "a history of Chinese philosophy" or "a history of Chinese thought".

In recent years, after the decades of Maoist orthodoxy, which strictly regulated all areas of culture, the rewriting of history has emerged as an important topic in China. Maybe the endeavours in this regard may be seen as the beginning of a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, an effort to come to terms with the Mao years.

No doubt, the writing and presentation of the intellectual traditions of China is significant not only for China but also increasingly so for today's globalized world, where cross-cultural communication is rapidly expanding and


5 Alfred Forke, *Geschichte der alten chinesischen Philosophie* (1927); *Geschichte der mittelalterlichen chinesischen Philosophie* (1934) and *Geschichte der neueren chinesischen Philosophie* (1938).

6 See, e.g., "Wo guo zhexueshi chongxie de biyaoxing pouxi lunwen" [An Analytical Treatise of the Necessity of Rewriting the History of Chinese Philosophy].