A Preliminary Overview of the Genealogy of *zhexue* in China, 1888-1930

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For more than a decade,1 ‘the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy’ (*Zhongguo zhexue hefaxing* 中國哲學合法性) has been, at times contentiously, debated in China and beyond.2 Unlike Western deliberations over the ‘legitimacy of philosophy,’ wherein the fundamental aspirations and pretensions of philosophy (or certain kinds of philosophy) have been questioned,3 the ‘legitimacy of Chinese philosophy’ debate concerns the applicability of philosophy as a category to the particularities of Chinese thought since antiquity.

Arguments for and against the use of the term ‘philosophy’ in reference to certain areas of Chinese thought abound; in fact, in the early twentieth century, as Chinese intellectuals began using the term, they already questioned its validity, so much so that the current debate often seems like a repeat episode. The main questions in the earlier debate were: is philosophy harmful? Is it useful? Did China ever have philosophy? And, was the category applicable to China’s indigenous knowledge systems or was it a strictly Western category/concept? The latter question, it should be noted, had significant (and sometimes contradictory) bearings on the former questions. The debate, however, did not last long, and many scholars agreed that philosophy – as a category and term – was beneficial, useful, and relevant to China’s past, and even more so to its present and future, even before the Qing fall. The question of philosophy’s ascendancy in early twentieth-century China is far from trivial, both in terms of the reasons underlying its ascendancy, and in terms of its outcomes and implications. In this chapter, I sketch and analyze the ways in which the term and category ‘philosophy’ assumed a leading role within the world of thought of late Qing and early Republican era intellectuals, and was applied to describe China’s pre-modern knowledge systems.

1 This chapter was finalized in 2011. Several works since then have dealt with various aspects of the subject at hand; particular mention should be made to the various chapters in Makeham, ed., *Learning to Emulate the Wise*.

2 Three issues of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* (37, no. 1 to 37, no. 3, Fall 2005 to Spring 2006) were dedicated to translations of Chinese articles on this subject. See also: Defoort, ‘Chinese Scholars on Chinese Philosophy’, pp. 4-8; Defoort, ‘Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy?’, pp. 393-413; Defoort, ‘Is “Chinese Philosophy” a Proper Name?’, pp. 625-66; Raud, ‘Philosophies versus Philosophy’, pp. 618-25. See also Ge, ‘Wei shenme shi sixiang shi’, pp. 24-26; Ge, *Sixiangshi de xiefa*; Fang, ‘Zhongxue’ ju Xixue’, esp. pp. 29-108, pp. 397-400.

The Japanese Prelude: Philosophy as *tetsugaku*

The scholar who is often credited with coining the Japanese term which stands for philosophy – *tetsugaku* (哲学), later to be adopted by Chinese scholars as *zhexue* (哲学) – was Nishi Amane (西周, 1827-97), ‘the father of modern Japanese philosophy’ (日本近代哲学之父). Nishi was one of the most prolific translators and advocates of Western learning in nineteenth-century Japan. In 1862 Nishi wrote from Leiden, where he was studying at the time, to Matsuoka Rinjirō (松岡鏻次朗), suggesting that ‘in explaining the principles of life, the [Western] discipline of philosophy [hi-ro-so-hi] also surpasses Cheng-Zhu [learning]’ (只ヒロソヒ之學ニ而﹑性命之理を説くは程朱ニも軽き). In the letter, Nishi further claimed that the Western ways of governance were superior to those of ancient sage emperors Yao and Shun. The main currents of Western philosophy which attracted Nishi’s attention were, as Piovesana and Havens have demonstrated, Positivism (Comte) and Utilitarianism (Mill, especially his discussions on logic, mostly inductive logic). In addition, he exhibited a strong distaste for metaphysics (which he termed *kūriron* – 空理論 – ‘Empty Theory’).

For the purposes of this chapter it is important to emphasize that Nishi – following some leading Western philosophers – granted philosophy a leading role among the various scholarly pursuits and disciplines, and saw philosophy as ‘the science of sciences [...] chief among all sciences’ (哲学は科学の科学;