



The Young Experts Symposium 2022 “Understanding Chinese Culture in the World”: reflections on a transgenerational and interdisciplinary exchange of thoughts

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Abstract This first contribution to the special issue “Understanding Chinese Culture in the World” represents a philosophical proem regarding the format and general aim of the Young Experts Symposium 2022 (YES 2022), which was held online at Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai (China) and provided a platform for topics related to classical, modern, futuristic, and comparative perspectives on Chinese culture—across generations, cultures, and disciplines. Furthermore, it outlines the basic content of the six papers in this special issue that resulted from this event, including some basic information about the contributors.

Keywords Approaches toward understanding Chinese culture · Necessity of learning and self-transformation · Brevity of human life

Confucius expresses his concern regarding the limited time and life span that we have to learn and transform ourselves, and he laments that we cannot exhaust the transformative power of the *Yijing* 《易經》 (*Book of Changes*) for this reason:

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“If some years were added to my life, I would give fifty to the study of the [yi 易 (changes)], and then I might come to be without great faults” (*Lunyu*, n.d., “Shu er 述而,” para. 17, insertions DB/BP).¹ In ancient Greece, the Pythagoreans and Plato shared the same basic “philosophical belief” (Bartosch 2019) as the Buddhist thinkers of the East: one average human life span is not sufficient to become a *fully* self-perfected human being.² Also Seneca reminds us of the *brevity of life* (2004, pp. 111–150) and the need to make the best of what is granted to us. In extension, Immanuel Kant states:

[...]every human being would have to live an inordinately long time in order to learn how to make full use of all his/her natural endowments; or, if nature has only set a short term for his/her life (as is actually the case), it may require an incalculable series of procreations, one transmitting its [partial] insights to the other, in order to finally bring its seeds in our species to that stage of development which is adequate to its end. And this point in time must, at least in the idea of the human being, be the goal of his/her endeavors, because otherwise the natural dispositions would have to be regarded as largely futile and purposeless; this would nullify all practical principles, and thus make nature, which must otherwise serve as a principle in the judgment of all other institutions, a suspect of mere childish play in regard to man alone. (Kant 1964, pp. 35–36, tr. and insertions in square brackets DB/BP)

This insight provides a valuable bridge of understanding between the East and the West. And it supports the *motivating hope* that if each and every human being starts to work things out from their angle *now*—putting all efforts into learning and a better understanding of the “world”³ in general at least as far as it benefits personal self-cultivation—we might still be able to achieve a collective reintegration into the true “harmonics” of life on the surface of our planet. After all, to refer to Confucius again, “[w]hile you do not know life, how can you know about death?”⁴ (*Lunyu*, n.d., “Xian jin 先進,” para. 12)

¹ Source text: “加我數年，五十以學易，可以無大過矣。”

² According to these ancient teachings, a process of metempsychosis must underlie the fabric of individual existence to enable a more profound transformation towards the ideal state of human cosmic integrity. Usually, it is less known that also ancient Greek philosophers thought about rebirth in ways that are comparable to Buddhist thought. For example, one can refer to Plato’s dialogue *Meno* in this regard. In the twentieth century, based on repeating patterns and representations in various states of consciousness of his patients, the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung developed the concept of the collective unconscious. It allows the finite and partial possibilities for personal transformation to be viewed as embedded in a transpersonal and time- or life-span-transcendent realm. Jung, who also studied the *Yijing*, thus provided a progressive alternative to the more archaic idea of metempsychosis.

³ Of course, the term “world” refers to an infinite and infinitely creative horizon that cannot be fully “conquered” by the finite observer perspective (see also the article by Markus Heidingsfelder in this special issue). In this regard, Maturana (2003, pp. 57–58) held the view that “existence is constitutively dependent on the observer, and that there are as many domains of truths as domains of existence she or he brings forth in her or his distinctions.”

⁴ Source text: “未知生，焉知死？”

Alternatively, the reference to the brevity of life and the wisdom to gain self-reflective experience about our personal process of existence is also to say that, in the transferred sense, all of us are more or less “young.” Without question, some of us are more experienced and knowledgeable than others in the realization of their particular path of professional, or rather, intellectual development, especially if this refers to a personal progress that has been achieved over many years or even many decades. In fact, some scholars are capable to always grow and to cultivate further their positions to outstanding stages of development until the final period of their lives. The intellectual biographies of thinkers like Confucius, Wang Yangming, Immanuel Kant, and many others provide great historical examples.⁵

However, in some rapidly developing new fields, it is possible that *some* experts who are comparatively young(er) *in the literal sense* may turn out to be more skilled, experienced, or interculturally competent than *some* of those who belong to an older generation. The advancement of technological means and related possibilities for extended learning experiences that can reach across the borders of various cultures provides new means that allow for a comparatively accelerated and extended intellectual growth, especially when compared to the years prior to digitalization and today’s instantaneous communication in the form of online conferences, etc. At least in some cases, these preconditions will fall on fertile ground, one has to assume.⁶ And besides all that, there is also plenty of pre-digital *historical* “proof” for great intellectual achievements at a younger age: For example, the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) published his first important works in his mid-twenties. Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE), the most important Chinese thinker of his era, died at the very young age of 23. The list goes on and on. Excellence and competence in a particular academic field certainly cannot be reduced to the number of years a person has been around, but it is related to a person’s ability to leave his or her “comfort zone(s)” and to continually advance in whatever he or she is doing. Again, there are cases of early or continuous high achievers and “late bloomers.” They all tend to be “young at heart,” so to speak.

The basic ideas here are that (1) we can *all* consider ourselves as basically “young,” simply because of the limited average lifespan of the human being and the narrow window of intellectual productivity associated with it, and (2) that expertise cannot *necessarily* be measured in terms of advanced age. Against this background, the idea of a special intergenerational, intercultural, and interdisciplinary symposium was born. It was supposed to meet three basic criteria: The organizers wanted to establish a trans- or intergenerational polylogue between young(er) and old(er) academics, in other words, between those who are at the beginning or earlier stages of their careers and those who, so to speak, still “feel young at heart” and are still curious. Secondly, there was a motivating hope to create new opportunities for mutual learning across disciplines in the humanities, sciences, arts, and other

⁵ A more recent example is personified by John B. Cobb, Jr. (b. 1925), who, after more than seven decades of excellent academic scholarship, is still evolving in his thought, see Cobb (2023).

⁶ Of course, the general ambivalence of technology cannot be ignored in this context, too. The technological development allows for accelerated growth as a learner, but it also brings more opportunities for distraction.

fields in a way that could be considered a non-hierarchical context of communication. Finally, and more generally speaking, a third incentive was to help promote the ideas of friendship, peace, and win-win across civilizations and continents.

The resulting international online conference, hosted by the Research Institute for Globalization and Cultural Development Strategies at Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai (BNU Zhuhai), China, on November 19 and 20, 2022, brought together active participants from all walks of academic life and from five continents—from university students to academics at all stages of their careers, to a major decision-maker in the international publishing industry, and a retired ambassador. The timely theme of this first Young Experts Symposium was “Understanding Chinese Culture in the World.” This overarching leitmotif represents one of the most important, yet somewhat neglected, topics that need to be further explored in an international context today. The current global socio-cultural transformation processes need to be jointly managed from a level of humanistic self-realization that represents nothing short of a *second, but indeed truly intercultural and multipolar Enlightenment* that corresponds to a new “commerce of light” (Perkins 2004) in the sense of a poly-directional nexus of a myriad of branches of mutual learning and problem-solving in the 21st century. The understanding and proper evaluation of Chinese culture plays a key role if humanity wants to save what is still left to save. The general discussions outside the narrow confines of sinology and Chinese studies are still too little influenced by the real historical processes of our time. The lack of an objective discussion based on a holistic and interdisciplinary foundation can be observed in many ways. For this reason, we have brought together contributions not only from authors of different age groups and various cultural backgrounds, but also from different disciplines. We hope that this may provide a proper example of how Chinese culture can be discussed in such a way.

This special issue “Understanding Chinese Culture in the World” contains a selection of six texts that are based on the respective participants’ speeches. We believe that this represents a valid cross-section regarding the fruitful communication that took place in the context of the symposium. The order of the appearance of the texts alternates between those provided by senior scholars and those contributed by more (or less) junior scholars. Although the placement of the first of the following six papers signals, so to speak, a “seat of honor” in this context, the order of the succession of the texts is not meant to be conceived as hierarchical here. Instead, the contributions can be thought of as links in a spiral of growing understanding in which each link offers a unique perspective that complements the others:

The first paper, “Confucius and the Chinese culture: address to the Young Experts Symposium (YES 2022),” represents an extended version of the honorary speech provided by Wang Ronghua on occasion of the symposium: Wang has engaged in promoting Chinese traditional culture since his retirement from diplomatic service. He opened a very successful website in English, published many bilingual and English books to promote Chinese culture, both traditional and contemporary, and he is an honorary guest professor at Jinan University.⁷ Standing in an ancient cultural

⁷ Wang Ronghua has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph.

tradition of scholarly officials and having experienced the task of balancing international relations first-hand, Wang’s address blends the scholarly expertise of ancient Chinese classics with the field of modern *intercultural* relations. Wang argues that to overcome the dangerously lurking Cold War mentality that is reemerging today, *a better understanding of classical Chinese culture—both on the sides of non-Chinese and Chinese observers—is of paramount importance*. By drawing from the ancient classics and the most important modern Confucian scholars of the 20th century, Wang outlines a broad and detailed plan of what and how to study in this regard. Wang’s perspective is based on many decades of learning and experience in a living tradition, in other words, it is based on his personal development as a Confucian scholar. It provides valuable guidance for scholars and interested learners worldwide.

The paper “Novelty and innovation, the joy of experimentation, and the ‘investigation of things’ (*gewu*) in pre-modern China: the example of gunpowder” by David Bartosch, Aleksandar Kondinski, and Bei Peng approaches the overall topic from a transdisciplinary perspective—thereby bridging the gap between the natural sciences and interdisciplinary humanities. Bartosch and Peng both have a background in philosophy and musicology as the foundation of their academic training in Germany, and both work at Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai, China, where Bartosch holds a position as Distinguished Research Fellow. Bartosch obtained his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Oldenburg, Germany, with a pioneering parallel analysis and systematic comparison of the philosophies of Nicholas of Cusa and Wang Yangming 王陽明.⁸ Since then, his work in philosophy and interdisciplinary studies has focused on traditional European, Chinese, and extended transcultural perspectives in philosophy and interdisciplinary studies. Bei Peng obtained her doctorate in musicology from Heidelberg University in Germany with a topic on the Chinese Ming dynasty music theorist and mathematician Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉.⁹ In China, she is also known for her translations of philosophical works by renowned thinkers in the field of Critical Theory directly from the German into Chinese. Aleksandar Kondinski studied chemistry at Jacobs University Bremen, Germany, where he developed skills in practical and computational chemistry, along with an interest in science history and culture. Following his promotion in 2016, he secured prestigious fellowships and undertook research roles at RWTH Aachen, KU Leuven, and the University of Cambridge. Since 2022, he has been working on AI-driven material discovery at the Cambridge Centre for Research and Education in Singapore.¹⁰ The present paper was developed by revisiting and extending the topic of Kondinski’s original presentation held at the YES 2022. It had raised the question of how

⁸ See Bartosch (2015).

⁹ See Peng (2019).

¹⁰ Aleksandar Kondinski has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph as it relates to him.

cultural and environmental imperatives shape the way how scientists and engineers prioritize, approach, and solve problems. In this paper, the three co-authors combine the perspectives of the history of ideas and the entangled histories of indigenous Chinese philosophy and sciences with the systems perspective of modern chemistry to explore the questions of the inspiring and creative backgrounds of the invention of gunpowder in China, its actual emergence, the question of creativity in science and technology, and the significance of the development of gunpowder for the subsequent history of science in China.

Holger Briel's essay "Asian futures: the case of Sinofuturism" is based on his keynote address to the YES 2022. As one of the senior experts participating in the symposium, Briel has an academic foundation in both German and US-American scholarship and has taught at various universities around the world for several decades. Currently, he is a professor of cultural theory and media studies at Beijing Normal University–Hong Kong Baptist University United International College in Zhuhai, China, where he also served as the Dean of the School of Culture and Creativity until 2022. He is well-known for his research on intercultural and transcultural phenomena, especially with regard to comics, science fiction, and critical New Media theories. Briel has published widely on these and other topics in journals and written several monographs.¹¹ In his paper, he shifts the focus of understanding Chinese culture from the past to the imaginative contours of its possible future(s) in Chinese science fiction literature as well as from related comparative angles. This provides another important perspective on the overall theme of this special issue. Amongst other things, he refers to Sinofuturism as a complex example of how new movements in science fiction are contributing to a new multilateralism in describing the future. Through the lens of the science fiction literary genre, Briel does not only present a timely and complementary perspective on how to learn to understand China in the world, but also an invitation, as he states at the end of his essay, "to discuss the possibilities diverse futures will offer to make our world a fairer and more inclusive place."

Alice Simionato's paper "Context and difference in intercultural understanding: a case-study from the Neo-Confucian tradition" adds another important layer to the discussion of the overall topic of the special issue. Simionato obtained a BA in Chinese Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and then pursued a Research MA in Asia Studies and an MA in Philosophy at Leiden University. She obtained her PhD in Philosophy at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, with a dissertation on the concept of reason in Spinoza and the brothers Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤.¹² In her contribution to the YES 2022, she focuses on the topic how to learn to differentiate in the context of comparative studies of Chinese and European philosophical traditions. By referring to the case example of the Cheng brothers, Simionato examines the Neo-Confucian concept of *li* 理. She starts from the problem of translation in the context of polysemantic applications of Chinese

¹¹ Holger Briel has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph.

¹² Alice Simionato has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph.

characters in Chinese premodern thought (and of polysemantic word use on the side of early Jesuit translators), later emphasizing that “*li* as a formal indication can help us to appreciate the role of context and difference in understanding Chinese philosophical texts, an endeavor here taken as but one example of cross-cultural and intercultural understanding.” In this sense, Simionato’s perspective on the notion(s) of *li* in the philosophical reflections of the Cheng brothers is central not only to the problem of a proper understanding of major strata of premodern Neo-Confucian philosophy, but also to the question of developing a deeper understanding of Chinese thought culture in the contemporary world and in general.

Markus G. T. Heidingsfelder’s essay “World, culture, Chinese, understanding: a fragmentary epistemological conceptualization” combines the perspective of a systems theorist with that of a media scholar. Heidingsfelder is a senior German contributor to the YES 2022, and he has also kindly chaired a panel of young scholars on this occasion. He works as an associate professor of media and communication studies and international journalism at Beijing Normal University–Hong Kong Baptist University United International College in Zhuhai, China. His work explores the dynamic relationship between media and society, relying on a communication theory that views society as the product of a complex plurality of different observers: minds, machines, networks, and systems. He is particularly interested in the first and the latter, striving to creatively interpret Niklas Luhmann’s systems-theoretical concepts to describe, for example, the societal functioning of pop music or piracy, and to reach a broader intellectual audience.¹³ Due to his academic collaborations with his mentor Peter Fuchs, Heidingsfelder can be considered as a direct “grand-student” of Luhmann. Modern systems theory in this tradition has implicit connections to Chinese thought and shares many touch points with Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Daoism. Heidingsfelder’s essay focuses on the four key terms of the YES 2022 theme: “world,” “culture,” “Chinese,” and “understanding.” In a very detailed manner, and by addressing a plethora of points in a very fruitful way, Heidingsfelder opens up a new horizon for future observer perspectives, which—as he states at the end of his conclusion—are not only in line “with a systems-theoretical perspective but with a characteristically ‘Chinese’ approach that would not go badly with us now: ‘Seek common ground, tolerate differences’ (*qiu tong cun yi* 求同存异).”

Victoria Sukhomlinova’s text “Wenhua as ornamentalization: transgressing methodological Eurocentrism” presents an important and worthy “capstone” to the whole discussion of this special issue “Understanding Chinese Culture in the World.” After studying area studies and earning her Candidate of Science degree (equivalent to a PhD in Germany) in philosophy at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Sukhomlinova now pursues her interest in non-Eurocentric methodologies within the field of intercultural philosophy. Currently, she supports the program “Conceptions of Human Flourishing” at The New Institute in Hamburg, Germany, as a program coordinator.¹⁴ In her paper, she develops a concept of ornamentalization.

¹³ Markus G. T. Heidingsfelder has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph.

¹⁴ Victoria Sukhomlinova has contributed to the biographical and career-related information and to the wording of this passage of the present paragraph.

It is inspired by the original semantics of the Chinese term *wenhua* 文化—which is commonly translated as “culture.” In light of the general focus of this special issue, Sukhomlinova applies her concept to the (self-)transformative discourse in modern Confucianism that concerns the image of a Westernized China. She argues in favor of the method of ornamentalization as a unique way of inscribing cultural elements on another cultural horizon in a way “that effects no substantial change in the material but, at the same time, makes it open for interpretations,” as she emphasizes in her article. This new methodological approach in intercultural hermeneutics is not only very helpful when it comes to the question of understanding Chinese culture in the world, but it can also be easily transferred to all kinds of other possible constellations in the realm of transcultural understanding.

We would like to reiterate that all the contributions collected here represent different perspectives. However, and despite their specific topics and backgrounds in different academic disciplines, they are also to be seen as embedded in a larger context. This is especially true with regard to the overall theme and “logic”—or nexus—of understanding as such: From an etymological perspective, the word component “under-” in “understanding” relates to the Proto-Indo-European word root “*nter-,” to the Sanskrit “*antar*,” and the Latin “*inter*,” all of which carry meanings of “between” or “among” or “amidst” (Bartosch 2021, p.128; “understand (v.),” n.d.; “*antar*,” n.d.). It is such an inconcludable and process-open “in-betweenness” that characterizes the overall-situation of the human being (*ren* 人) per se (see *Liji*, n.d., “*Li yun* 禮運,” para. 20). By “standing in-between,” or rather, by actively placing oneself “in the midst of” all the trains of thought in this special issue, the reader of the entire issue should be able to discover many eye-opening points of contact among them that will hopefully be useful in furthering a better understanding of Chinese culture in the world.

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