

Introduction

Li Zehou is undoubtedly one of the most distinguished, significant, and influential Chinese philosophers of our time and one of the rare Chinese intellectuals whose work acquired broad readership outside of China. Since the late 1970s, Li has propelled a number of views that have had a deep and lasting impact on Chinese intellectuals. Even his critics acknowledge his scholarly influence and academic accomplishments (Ding 2002, 246). Because Li belongs to a group of exiled intellectuals, his contribution towards contemporary Chinese thought and culture is rather complex. The same holds true for his brand of philosophy, which has been variously characterized as “neo-traditional,” “neo-Kantian,” “post-Marxist,” “Marxist-Confucian,” “pragmatist,” “instrumentalist,” “romantic,” and more. Despite this complexity, which cannot be reduced to any dominant philosophical categories or currents, he doubtless belongs to the most significant modern scholars of Chinese history and culture, especially considering the fact that his work was central to the Chinese Enlightenment (*qimeng* 啟蒙) of the 1980s.¹

Even though Li deals with complex philosophical ideas, he is able to express them in multifaceted texts, successfully combining logical analyses with narrative and emotive elements. His philosophy has helped modify and transform antiquated patterns of Chinese intellectual discourses. His innovative, imaginative, and unique approach to a wide range of basic theoretical problems, grounded in solid arguments and analyses, has created new styles of intellectual investigation into the post-Mao period and presented a new challenge to the tedious and monotonous theories delivered by the official Party ideologists. Li’s ambition to fill “old bottles with new wine” often took the form of a reversal or inversion of words or phrases that were central to his philosophical endeavors. Three key phrases warrant mention.

1. The most famous example is his reversal of the nineteenth-century slogan “(preserving) Chinese substance and (applying) Western functions,” which became “(assuming) Western substance and (applying) Chinese functions” (from *Zhongti Xiyong* 中體西用 to *Xiti Zhongyong* 西體中用).
2. Li likewise inverted Lin Yusheng’s “creative transformation” to “transformative creation” (from *chuangzaoxingde zhuanhua* 創造性的轉化 to *zhuanhuaxingde chuangzao* 轉化性的創造).
3. Finally, he gave new meaning to Marx’s vision of a non-alienated relation between men and nature,—the “humanization of nature,” by complementing it with the reversed phrase “naturalization of humans” (from *zirande renhua* 自然的人化 to *rende ziranhua* 人的自然化).

During the creative urgency of this period, when it seemed that aesthetics offered the most effective redemption from the difficult experiences of the Cultural Revolution, Li offered young Chinese people new, exceptionally creative interpretations of art, philosophy, and literature. He launched many views that have had great impact not only on the Chinese, but also on global theories of ethics, humanism, aesthetics, and philosophical anthropology. Mainly by remaining loyal to the conceptual framework of Marxist historical materialism, he simultaneously drew selective inspiration from the works of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, Lukács, Piaget, Lacan, and Habermas. One of his main contributions to contemporary Chinese—and, to a certain extent, to contemporary Western philosophy—lies in his deepening of the problem of the active and autonomous human potential in post-revolutionary modernism through his neologism “subjectivity” (*zhutixing* 主體性). Li uses this concept to ground human agency in the historically conditioned and environmentally subsumed—but nonetheless conscious—subject. In doing so, Li upgrades the Marxist view of consciousness as a solely mechanical reflection of the material world and, even more importantly, refutes the passivity of the subject. With this concept he created a revolution in the name of beauty. This radical re-interpretation of the notion of subject achieved scholarly distinction with the publication of his book *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* 批判哲學的批判: 康德述評 (*Critique of Critical Philosophy: A New Approach to Kant*). In this book, Li places the central framework

of Kant's philosophy upon a social and materialist foundation by simultaneously recovering the original Marxist definition of human beings as *homo faber*—as living beings developed through practice and able to make use of tools in a systemic, continuous way. Humans, in Li's view, recreate both their environment and their inwardness into something he calls "humanized nature."

A second important neologism in which Li's philosophy, especially his philosophical anthropology, is rooted is the concept of *sedimentation*. With this geological metaphor, Li expresses the historical process of continuous, gradual, and successive shaping of epistemological, ethical, and aesthetical forms of human inwardness. The greatest challenge to the modern and postmodern subject was the problem of a meaningful context. Proceeding from his conception of an active subject, he points out the pragmatic reasoning that also defines the concept of *subjectality*. This led to his construction of the evolutionary path of the subject, which began in the Neolithic era and led to the contemporary human subject. To Li, the main driving force of evolutionary development is subjectality. The crucial formations that enable and mark the creation of different stages of this development can be seen in various forms of dynamic cultural sedimentation. In his best-known book *The Path of Beauty* (*Meide licheng* 美的歷程), Li argues that art is the central unfolding imprint of the psychological condition of human ontology—of the subject's existence in the world. The concept of sedimentation brought Chinese thought into dialogue with world philosophy, while giving the specifically-Chinese experience of human evolution a historicized and activist role. In *The Path of Beauty* and the subsequent *Four Essays on Aesthetics* (*Meixue sijiang* 美學四講), Li creates an innovative synthesis of Marxism, classical Chinese moral philosophy, medieval aesthetics, and continental rationalism. He insists that science and technology produce beautiful things that can be appreciated as aesthetic objects, especially considering their origin. These beautiful things can be seen as products of human endeavors on our human path towards the unification or reconciliation of nature (or heaven) and human beings (*tian ren heyi* 天人合一).

Li Zehou's thought seeks to respond to an era that is defined not only by attempts to revive various traditions, but by efforts to harmonize or reconcile cultural heritage with the demands of the dominant economic, political, and axiological structures of a globalized world. His thought can be described as the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional Chinese thought, driven in order to elaborate a system

of ideas and values capable of resolving the social and political problems of the modern way of life. He attempts to reconcile Western (especially Kantian and Marxist) theories with traditional Chinese (especially Confucian, and also to a certain extent, Daoist) ideas, concepts and values, to create a theoretical model of modernization that would not be confused or equated with “Westernization.”^{2,3}

By renewing and rethinking traditional Chinese values and knowledge, Li makes an important contribution to contemporary philosophical discourse. His work can be seen as an ongoing effort to rediscover and renew traditional Chinese (especially Confucian) *ideational* tradition, by not only aiding China on its path to future material and spiritual development, but also making a unique and valuable contribution to world philosophy. In spite of the basic cosmopolitan nature of his work, he still remains loyal to specifically Chinese theoretical and methodological approaches. Li’s complex philosophical and essayistic opus cannot be understood without an understanding of the historical, political, and ideational context to which he belonged.