

Zhang, W. (2006). *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern thinkers: A hermeneutics of cross-cultural understanding*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Review by Miraj U. Desai, Fordham University

In *Heidegger, Rorty, and the Eastern Thinkers: A Hermeneutics of Cross-Cultural Understanding*, Wei Zhang takes up the challenging and relevant task of exploring whether there is a possibility for greater understanding between East and West. Her analysis comes at a most appropriate time. Disciplines such as psychology are being compelled to open up their traditional perspectives to the demands of the increasingly global and multicultural world around them. Though there is a growing body of cross-cultural and comparative work in these fields, complex social, historical, and theoretical considerations still remain.

In analyzing various instances of the “encounter” between Eastern and Western thinkers, Zhang presents some of the challenges inherent in any attempt at cross-cultural understanding—for example, the problems posed by language and communicating across seemingly disparate historical traditions. However, in focusing on particular examples of cross-cultural encounters, such as Heidegger’s dialogue with Japanese philosopher Tezuka, and then on her own conceptual dialogue with Heidegger’s primary text on hermeneutics, the author points us towards a possible way of achieving a positive mode of cross-cultural understanding. In the end, she suggests that the question of an East-West relation should not be seen as a problem to be solved, but as a hermeneutic riddle, resembling a Zen koan which “constantly engages the listeners who are listening to its moral message; as each time it speaks, it speaks anew” (Zhang, p. 7).

The book is presented in a lovely hardbound copy, with an intricate cover design embodying this meeting of two worlds. It is organized into five chapters, and the chapters are divided into four main parts. Each chapter also has several subheadings, which I found helpful when returning to particular passages. Essentially, the book reads as two main sections, with the first setting up the contentions surrounding the practice of comparative philosophy, while the second half focuses primarily on Heidegger and his dialogue with Eastern thought. Readers interested in the Eastern influences on the evolution of Heidegger’s position on language may find the latter half of the book particularly informative.

Part I introduces the topic and scope of the book. Here, Zhang outlines various historical and theoretical positions concerning the West’s relation to the East, and in so doing illustrates the extensive disagreement with regard to whether the nature of this relationship is antagonistic, asymmetrical, or dialogical. Part II then explores one published debate between the philosophers Richard Rorty and Anindita Balslev on whether a particular type of cross-cultural enterprise, comparative philosophy, is even a legitimate practice. Zhang shows that the two thinkers are at

opposite ends of the debate, with Rorty opposed to the disciplinary practice and Balslev in favor: Because Rorty views philosophy as essentialist and a Western cultural practice, he prefers literature as a site for East-West understanding, which is less reductive and more accessible, whereas Balslev views comparative philosophy as an enriching endeavor, helping to counteract philosophical essentialism and to bring more Eastern ideas into the Western academy. Rorty then contends that most of their debate about “philosophy” and academic reform is just masking underlying political questions about the imbalance of resources between East and West, which require pragmatic, economic solutions. Eventually, Zhang suggests that the overly political nature of the debate intensified the already difficult task of attaining a mode of cross-cultural understanding between the two thinkers. The author offers some brief responses to the impasse, such as emphasizing to Rorty the non-political and non-pragmatic nature of the problems discussed in their interchange and highlighting to Balslev that there is already an Eastern presence in the Western academy—but Zhang suggests that the main issue, which will be taken up next, has more to do with the way philosophy has understood itself in relation to the Other.

In the second chapter of Part II, the author steps back from the impasse in the above debate to explore its cultural and intellectual contexts, thus revealing a “hidden history of philosophy and its relationship to the category of the Other” (p. 29). Specifically, Zhang suggests that embedded in Rorty’s position is what Balslev termed “cultural Otherness.” She takes Balslev’s point further by trying to understand Rorty’s argument within a larger historical context of the relationship between philosophy’s self-understanding and the theme of cultural Otherness. With the help of various cultural commentators, Zhang attempts to demonstrate that the very way in which philosophy has tended to define itself is often in relation to its cultural Other, and she argues that this reached a culmination with Hegel’s dialectics, which “successfully translated and transcribed the cultural Other, through the comparison of the Greek culture with that of the non-Greek, into a disciplinary boundary—the boundary that discriminates the unique history of Western philosophy from all the non-Western intellectual traditions” (p. 35). The response by several postmodern philosophers to this supposed philosophical separation of Greek and non-Greek traditions has tended to be a celebration of the cultural Other, but Zhang points out that some post-colonial scholars argue this celebratory reaction potentially leads to more misrepresentation and exploitation. Post-colonialists’ suggestions for preventing further marginalization of non-Western cultures have taken several forms, one being a silent resistance by the Other in the face of potential re-exploitation. At the end of Part II, it is clear that Zhang is concerned about the difficulties in being able to achieve understanding across

cultures as illustrated by the earlier debate and also by the lack of constructive, dialogical options offered by other thinkers.

The second half of the book thus contains her search for and presentation of an alternative, rooted in Heidegger's philosophy, which preserves cultural difference but does not view different cultures as incommensurable or necessarily opposed. Some of the most interesting aspects of the book are to be found in the presentation of Heidegger's dialogue with Eastern thought, particularly with the thinker Tezuka. In Part III, Zhang presents their attempts at intercultural dialogue, first on the challenges posed by language and translation, and second on aesthetics and technology. Zhang states that, as opposed to argument, this discussion proceeded by way of listening to each other on topics unfamiliar, "moving slowly toward what the one tries to say to the other, for 'slowness rests upon shy reverence'—a moral virtue recommended by Heidegger in conducting thinking and dialogue" (p. 57). In the first chapter of Part III, Zhang's discussion of Heidegger and Tezuka's dialogue centers on what is called "language" in the West and its Japanese equivalent, "koto ba" and unearths a possible "common" language origin between the two. Zhang presents this discussion within the wider context of Heidegger's evolving understanding of language and demonstrates how Heidegger's encounter with Tezuka paved the way for his changing position on language from the "house of Being" to "Saying" and his understanding of the meaning of speaking. By filling in the etymological roots of "koto ba," Zhang also clarifies the convergence between the German and Japanese views on a key ontological property of language. Rather than restricting one to a particular cultural-historical tradition, language allows for modes of access and invitation between different cultures through the speech act. In other words, the fundamental character of speaking may be shared by different cultures and hence allows participation in the meanings of another culture. What is most interesting about what Zhang demonstrates is that while the two thinkers are attempting to clarify and appreciate the meaning of language and speech in their respective traditions to allow for intercultural dialogue, they are also embodying cross-cultural understanding through the very speaking about which they are speaking.

I found the latter half of Part III to contain some of the most difficult, yet intriguing, passages in the book. One particular exchange concerns Heidegger and Tezuka's mutual critique of European technology and its negative impact on Japanese society. For instance, Tezuka explained that despite an initial attraction to Western film technology's complementation of traditional Japanese theater, he came to view the two as incompatible on account of the former's perceived distortion of the latter. However, Zhang shows that a positive mode of cross-cultural understanding between Eastern and Western aesthetics is actually attainable through

this technology, when understanding its transmutability and capacity to conceal and simultaneously reveal the world. By opening up the dialogue to these Heideggerian notions of technology beyond Heidegger's explicit reflections on technology, Zhang is able to suggest an alternative option for Japanese society and traditional performance theater with regard to Western film technology. Rather than accepting film unconditionally or rejecting it completely, Japanese society could creatively incorporate this art form in meaningful ways within its own horizons, thus maintaining and revealing its own unique traditions.

The final section presents the author's dialogue with Heidegger's (1988/1999) *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, which Zhang suggests has been largely overlooked in Heideggerian and comparative scholarship. In this chapter, she reads Heidegger's text alongside Buddhist thought and shows convergences between the two. In the end, this parallel reading provides her with the opportunity to conceptualize an approach to cross-cultural understanding that faces the challenges posed by matters such as language and the common dualistic, asymmetrical, and antagonistic renderings of East and West, self and other in comparative work. Following Heideggerian and Buddhist thought, Zhang moves beyond this dualism by describing the world as a moving reality, which is constantly in flux and able to be expressed in multiple, mutually enriching ways. Therefore, cross-cultural understanding is a way of appreciating how different cultures expressively disclose this ever-changing, non-dualistically constituted world, where cultures are neither fixed, static, nor independent of one another.

This book imparts a sense of hope in the pursuit of cross-cultural understanding within the academy and in the greater public arena. Zhang suggests that understanding is ultimately possible and shows us how Heidegger's phenomenology and hermeneutics are particularly situated to enter the study of cultural differences and intercultural dialogue by positively addressing such challenges as language and the spread of technology. In such an ever-evolving cultural landscape, perhaps the author's strongest message comes in showing us the type of cross-cultural understanding that not only has taken place, but also lies ahead of us when one is able to listen to and respectfully dwell with the other, slowly and in a manner of shy reverence.

Reference

- Heidegger, M. (1999). *Ontology—The hermeneutics of facticity* (J. van Buren, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press (original work published 1988).