

Encounter with China: Challenging one's own presuppositions

Interview with Henry Rosemont, Jr.

Vytis Silius. *During your stay in Vilnius, I have heard that you have so many invitations to give lectures and deliver speeches at conferences in the United States and abroad that you have to decline many of those. What made you to accept the invitation from the Centre of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University? And how do you feel about your choice to come here now, as your visit is slowly coming to an end?*

Henry Rosemont, Jr. Well, a number of things combined. First was a meeting with Loreta at the Academie du Midi conference last year and her friend Geir Sigurdsson—now moving to the University of Tallinn—both of whom said they would like to have me come to their campuses for lectures and provide some consultations for developing Asian studies programs at their institutions.

I am always pleased to assist in the development of academic programs dealing with Asia, as you know, because we are now at a point in the world where we must seriously entertain the idea that we must not only learn *about* the other, but *from* the other as well. Moreover, neither my wife JoAnn nor I had ever been to either country, so of course I accepted the invitation to come if the arrangements could be made. Happily they were, and we are very glad for we have already come to be very fond of the Lithuania we have seen so far—the countryside, the old city, the university, and the people—and we are looking forward to enjoying Iceland as well.

V.S. *Why should scholars study Chinese thought? What is it that is relevant to peoples with such different cultural backgrounds as in Iceland, Lithuania, the United States, and China?*

H.R. Although Lithuanian, Icelandic, and American cultures are different, they share a number of assumptions and presuppositions. All three are strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek religious and philosophical heritages. Of course China is very different from those, and therefore I have always seen China as an extremely useful intellectual tool for the education of young people, because it forces you to confront a way of life that is different from what you are accustomed to in a very basic way. You don't just challenge the view; you challenge the presuppositions on which the view is based. And in that way, the more you look through the window

of another culture, the more it eventually becomes a mirror of your own, and you are able to see your own cultural presuppositions in a way that you could never see them before.

For example, if you are a philosophy student, you will become very interested in the mind–body problem, especially since it was modelled by Descartes: how do you link the mind, which has no extension, with the body, which does? You see much of the history of modern Western philosophy devoted to trying to solve the mind-body problem. Only when you go to a place like China can you come to see that the problem is not a universal one, but unique to the heritage and the grammars of the languages of Western civilization. There is a different vocabulary employed by the Chinese, who simply don't see us as having minds that are distinct from a body.

That is very humbling, because it of course suggests that the mind–body problem is not a universal philosophical problem. It is unique to Indo-European languages in the West. In that way, one has an idea that you can think about the mind–body problem and then see why it's maybe not really a problem. This is a very difficult insight to obtain if you just stay within the Western tradition.

V.S. Is it possible for people from different traditions to actually overcome those presuppositions that you just talked about? Is it possible for me, a European who is trained in the Western tradition, not merely cognitively to acknowledge these differences, but really to extend my mind in order to take a view of Chinese as at least a part of my own worldview? Is it not that I as an European more often divide myself into the scholar, who is interested in Chinese thought and merely cognitively recognizes those differences, but as a person does not take them deeper into my personality?

H.R. I believe I have imbibed a little bit of the Chinese perspective and do not think I am particularly unusual in having done so. Of course I remain deeply steeped in my own cultural heritage, and always will. I don't think you can get rid of your entire cultural perspective—nor should you want to—but you can certainly call much of it into question utilizing the material from other cultures, especially the seamier sides of one's own. That in itself is liberating. Once you see that you are a product of your cultural tradition, you have gone a long way toward overcoming it and being restrained in it. And it becomes possible to learn to begin looking for alternatives.

It is also important to note that when Chinese come to the West we certainly expect them to be able to drop their Chinese ways and become Westerners; why can't we do the same? And I think a number of people do go both ways. There is an understanding. That is one reason we do Chinese studies in our universities—to make it easier for people who go to China to feel more comfortable there.

Can we ever really think like someone else? I am not sure. But we can go a long way. There used to be expression—'going Asiatic', for some of the old missionaries,

some of the old traders, and so on. They fell in love completely with China; they were wearing Chinese clothes, spoke Chinese all the time, ate just Chinese food, and they seemed to become almost Chinese. For instance, one of the most famous of the Jesuit missionaries, Matteo Ricci, supposedly could write Chinese so well that no Chinese could tell that he wasn't a Confucian scholar.

At the same time, he never forgot that he was a Jesuit going there to convert the elite Confucians. How much he was a Chinese? I don't know. It's a good question, and I say probably we never leave all of our cultural tradition behind. But I am not sure that would be a good thing to do anyway.

Loreta Poškaitė. *I would like to ask you a little bit similar question. As a translator of some Chinese canonical texts, first of all of Lunyu 论语, I want to ask you about this search for some common philosophical language, especially about the translation of Chinese concepts into Western languages. As far as I know, the problem of translation and true understanding was raised within the work of the Jesuits in China. Then it was raised again in the East-West comparative conferences in Honolulu. So it is a lasting problem. Do you see any changes in it? What has changed with this problem? Or do you think that this problem has transformed into some other aspects?*

H.R. As scholarship on China has increased over the last 150 years, it became clearer just how many presuppositions the early translators brought to bear on the works they studied, not least the justly admired late 19th century translator James Legge. He was wonderful, but clearly he was looking for what looks like God, or what looks like an immortal soul, what looks like Heaven in Chinese writings, because those are the metaphysics and theology of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We don't do that today, but it doesn't mean we see the Chinese as they 'really are'. But I think we are getting more comfortable with the fact that there is a unique set of philosophical terms in Chinese that don't match exactly what I call the concept cluster of contemporary Western thought.

So for me, as for Roger Ames with whom I translated the *Lunyu*, it is essential to provide a lexicon, a kind of gloss on 15 or 20 key Chinese terms that are found in these translations. In order to understand the assumptions and presuppositions of other cultures, especially in philosophy or in ethics, you have to see the kind of basic terms that are used in moral discourse. For example, we do have the terms *morals* and *ethics*—now I'm talking about English—there are a bunch of other concepts that go in there: choice, freedom, liberty, dilemma, subjective, objective, right, wrong, good, evil, rational—none of which appear in classical Chinese.

In the same way, the terms for the West don't apply to ancient Greece either. The key term for Aristotle was not *morals*; it was *arête*—*virtue*, or better, *excellences*. And he had other words like *phronesis*, *akrasia*, *logos*, and so on. That's the cluster you

need in order to understand Greek philosophy. In the medieval West, it was *honour* that was the key term, linking others like *chivalry*, *vilein*, *soke*, *sake*, *shent*, *boon*, *troth*—all those words had meaning. You know the expression *for goodness sake*. What is this *sake*? In the medieval, it had a very definite meaning. *Soke* and *sake* were different: *sake* was something that you owed to the other, and *soke* was something he owed to you. If you read *The Canterbury Tales*, you will see those words, and that's how they evaluated conduct.

Let us take a look at India—*moksha* is there the key term, and *karma*, *dharma*, *samsara*, *nirvana*—you need those terms if you want to discuss ethics in India. It is not surprising, because every culture, and sometimes the same culture in different periods of time, has its concepts that are basic to any discussion of human conduct.

What I try to do in my work, is to take *ren* 仁, *shu* 恕, *xiao* 孝, *xin* 心, *dao* 道, and *de* 德—those terms—and show how they link together for the Chinese to discuss how to describe, analyze, and evaluate human conduct. It is a different set of concepts. In Sanskrit nobody would think of translating *dharma* or *karma* anymore, we just have to learn to use those words. A problem with the Chinese is, so many of them are spelled the same way. How many *zhi*'s, *si*'s, *xin*'s are there? It makes it a little bit more difficult, which makes all the more reason for the need of the gloss.

In Roger Ames's and my translation of *Lunyu* the only term we glossed was *tian* 天, because we really don't like the word *Heaven* for *tian*, because you just cannot get *Heaven*, especially with a capital *H*, without thinking of Christianity or Egypt. There is a causal sequence to Heaven. *Tian* can mean *nature*, and other times it means the *starry heaven*, *Himmel*. We shouldn't have translated *ren* either. We should have left that one in our transliteration too.

That is the way, I think, the future translations will go, until we get the key set of concepts that we can understand the Chinese with. You need the gloss, for example for *li* 礼, you need it for *yi* 義. You can't just say *reverence* or *appropriateness*; you can't say simply *ritual*, or *worship*, *manners*, *polite*, *civil*, *rites*, because it contains all of those things. How do you convey the meaning of *yi*? You can describe that it's hallowed preparing the animal for slaughter: the character contains a sheep 羊 and a hand 手 holding an axe 戈. So it's the attempt to purify oneself in preparing for sacrifice. I think it has to be known in there, because the word that we end up in our translation is *appropriate* for *yi*. You always do what's appropriate, not what's just righteous, because that, of course, reminds us of the Bible, or at least it does for us.

The righteous, the true, the correct—they suggest the absolute right. Whereas *appropriate* suggests appropriate communication for the context, and that what's necessary for the Chinese. So perhaps translators in 100 years from now will see us in the same way we see the missionaries of 100 years ago, I don't know. But right now

this seems to me the best way to go—to do a gloss of fifteen or twenty terms and then proceed with the translations from there and maybe only transliterate a few of them. If you look at the translations that Roger and I did, you will see we always include the key Chinese term when we put it in English, and it is there all the time, so everybody who knows Chinese can see exactly what we're doing all the time. A lot of people have said that was very useful for them. That's a short answer to your question.

V.S. *As a translator, when you leave some term not translated in the text, the way you did with tian, do you consider it the loss of the translator that he wasn't able to translate it into his own language? Or maybe it has to be done with some terms in order not to impose any external meaning on them?*

H.R. Some people say that is just the lazy way out. In some sense, I have some sympathy for that, because English obviously is very rich, stretchable language. Even a word like *stretchable* is stretching English a little bit. But on the other hand, I think it is imperative that some people just come to terms with those Chinese terms, in the same sense as people have to come to terms with the concepts of *karma* or *dharma*. There is no other way of translating them.

V.S. *Or also terms like ethics, which is neither genuinely English, nor Lithuanian.*

H.R. Right, *ethos* originally did not mean what it means today either, it meant something different. Or let's say *mores*, from which we get *morals*, also meant something like customs of the tribe. I came upon this when I was trying to figure out what word translates as *morals* in Chinese. Some people used *yi*, some people used *li*...

L.P. *also de...*

H.R. That's right. But none of those really work. Other people would say to me: you can't have a word-for-word translation; you should just look for the closest approximation and then go on. But it's not just the term or concept *morals* that I argue is not in the texts. There are no close approximations in ancient Chinese for *freedom* or *liberty*. There is not even a clear analogy for *ought* or *choice*. Remember Fingarette's major claim. It really surprised me when I first read it. He talks about the concept of *choice*. Given that the Chinese use the notion of the path, the road, the *Dao*, you would surely think about the concept of a *dilemma*, the clear metaphor for choice being a fork in a road or a crossroad. Now, there is a word *xing* 行, meaning *crossroads*, and the ancient form of writing the graph is exactly a crossroads; yet no Chinese ever used the metaphor of a crossroad to talk about choice or dilemmas. There is only the Way and the ditch, that's all. Either you follow the Way, commit yourself to it, or you fall by the wayside and become the *xiaoren* 小人.

That's really important to me, because it suggests that learning ethics, learning the Confucian way of life, does not solely involve pure rationality for what *we* would

consider making choices. So it is not simply that there is no word for morals; there is no close approximation for any of the words that are necessary for us to talk about moral problems in contemporary English. I suspect in Lithuanian you have words that are a lot like *right* and *wrong*, *choice* and *ought*, but then you have some that are unique ones, I assume. So for understanding the moral theories or moral views of Lithuanians, we would require glosses of those terms for which there is no precise rendering into English.

That is a very good way to learn about other cultures in my opinion. What their concepts are like—the *concept clusters*. That is why I came up with that particular term. You don't just look for the key word—*morals* or *arête*—you look for all the related terms or concepts that fall under it as well. Then you are coming to terms with understanding the other culture.

L.P. *What were the main difficulties while translating Lunyu and Xiaojing 孝经?*

H.R. First of all, it was a delight to work with Roger Ames, because he is a splendid scholar and fellow philosopher, careful, playful and easy to collaborate with. Even on those rare occasions when our views were far apart on some issue, our egos never got in the way of their resolution. We've done four things together now, two articles and two books, and more is in the offing. We usually divide the labour: I do the heavy lifting for some parts and he does so for the others. Then we just swap our labour back and forth and refine each other's work until we're both happy with the way the material comes together.

What causes the most difficulty? I would say sophisticating the introduction to our translation, if that's what we are doing. The text itself, especially the *Xiaojing*, is actually a fairly simple and straightforward text. Most children in classical and imperial China who learned to read knew the *Xiaojing* before they were 10 years old, right after the *San zi jing*, and the *Qian jing*, the *Thousand Character Classic*. There are only 480 + different characters in the whole text. Occasionally, the two of us had to tussle for a word. You know the word *cai* 才—for example in *san cai* 三才 from chapter 7 in the *Xiaojing*. What word should be used for it? Three *talents*? In the end, we did use *talents* in our translation.

We also decided not to call the *Xiaojing* the *Classic of Filial Piety*, but rather *The Chinese Classic of Familial Reverence*. We did that because every time we mention *piety* to a student they tend to think of something Christian, like the pious Christian. It is not what the term means in the Chinese sense. *Reverence for family things* we think comes closer to what *xiao* means than *piety* does. You can't easily divorce the word *piety* from its Christian connotations in contemporary English, I think. Happily Roger and I almost always share highly similar intuitions about our native language for purposes of translation from the Chinese, all the more remarkable for him having

grown up in the Canadian far west (British Columbia) while I was raised in the US Midwest (Chicago).

Thus, refining the introduction, deciding what to put in and what to put in the glossary was important and caused the most difficulties. We did not want the glossary so long that people would get bored before they got to the end of it. On the other hand, we wanted to put in enough terms so readers could understand that when talking about loyalty to one's parents, for example, it is not merely unquestioning obedience to everything parents ever say or do. Working collaboratively, in sum, is a splendid way of conducting scholarship, in my view, and it is also thoroughly enjoyable when you are working with someone you both respect and like.

L.P. *And it is also a very Chinese way of working.*

H.R. Oh, yes.

L.P. *You have also translated Leibniz's works on China, so I think you are interested in the perception of China in the West. I would therefore like to ask about the status of Confucianism as a world religion today. In the 70s and 80s of the last century there were many interpreters of Confucianism, for example Tu Weiming, who wanted to present Confucianism as a world religion. What has changed in the interpretation of Confucianism as a world religion in the 21st century?*

H.R. That is hard to answer, because my own view of the Confucians has always been somewhat different from Tu Weiming's and others, as much as I respect his perspective. There are certain things about Confucianism that I can say, however, that would be hard for Tu Weiming to say because I am not a Chinese while Tu is. You have heard in my talks or read in my articles how I consistently and sharply criticize my own government from a classical Confucian perspective. Tu Weiming cannot easily do that, because there would be a lot of people who would get mad and tell him he should go back where he came from, which they could not say to me in the same way.

At the same time, there is much that Tu Weiming can say to a Chinese audience that they would pay closer attention to than they would to me—even if we were to say the same things. I think, however, that on many issues there is a growing agreement among scholars that Confucianism is not just conservative, reactionary, and something that we ought to put out to the past. There are still a lot of people who want to use the facts of Chinese history as a way of putting down Confucianism, which strikes me as silly. There are a lot of good reasons for questioning Christianity. But just as the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Thirty Year's War should not make you stop being a Christian, neither should the many sorry facts of Chinese imperial history cause one to not take Confucianism seriously—especially when it can be seen that most of those sorry facts are unequivocally condemned in the classical writings.

For myself, there are several key reasons for pressing the Confucian case. First, I think the Confucian vision does hit very closely a number of our intuitions about who we are as human beings, how we define ourselves in relation to others. I think it accords perhaps even more closely with our intuitions of what it is to be a human than anything current in the West, especially in my homeland, the U.S.A.

Two, I believe Confucianism is an authentic spiritual tradition, but one that requires no theological beliefs. You don't have to accept any theology, for example that Confucius walked on water, that Moses received instructions directly from God, or that he parted the Red Sea. You don't have to accept the theology of Allah providing in Heaven, or *devas* in Hinduism. Buddhism is a little different, but even there you must accept the notion of *karma*, *anatman*, *moksha*, and the like in order to fully appreciate Buddhist theology and philosophy and psychology. Confucianism requires no beliefs of that nature.

Still a third reason is that it does provide a way for finding meaning, dignity, and contentment in *this* life, not in some transcendental realm.

And a fourth reason that I press the Confucian persuasion is that if you are a pious Christian, or a good Jew, a good Muslim, a good Hindu, you can still learn things from Confucianism without having to give up your adherence to the other faith tradition. It is not *either/or*.

To sum this up, I think it is time to go beyond thinking it is merely important to learn *about* Confucianism or about China. What I try to press is that it is now necessary to entertain seriously the possibility that we may have important things to learn *from* China and *from* Confucianism. Of course nobody denies that there are a lot of things that have to be learned *about* China, but my emphasis is now different: there are things we should be learning *from* them—especially from the authors and editors of the classical canon.

V.S. *I think in order to be able to learn from someone, from some culture, one has to find some basis, some foundation where you would find that other culture somewhat close to you. You said that the Confucian way of thinking sometimes hits our understanding and our intuitions about the world and human beings very closely. Thus my question would be this: where should we look for that common basis, common foundation that would unite Christian and Confucian ways? Being individual human beings, where do we have to start from in order to be able to investigate what differences those different cultural milieus produce in us?*

H.R. Two things stand out, although there are others as well. One thing shared, for example, between Christians—especially Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox—and most Jewish believers and appropriately pious Muslims, is the importance of ritual, tradition and history. Everyone should be able to resonate with

rituals that are performed in the observances of these religious activities. Another commonality is the roles that people live (I don't like the verb *play* in this context), no matter how distinctive, every culture has the idea of sons or daughters. The same holds for the concept of parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, and more. Those roles have cross-cultural applicability, and hence might serve well as a foundation for a new kind of ethical cross-cultural dialogue.

The Confucian persuasion, I think, provides insights into those roles, what may approximate what I call *homoversals*, because I don't want to use the term universal. That again comes from some of my Chomskyan training in generative linguistics. What I mean by *homoversal* is that 'for all human beings, mentally and physically constituted as they are'. I am not seeking universals—which supposedly will hold 'throughout the universe'—but want to concentrate on the human condition solely, seeking ethical commonalities. The way one expresses reverence or affection for grandparents, the way one is as a friend, the way teachers and students interact, and particular kinds of rituals and traditions people have, of course, are what make each culture unique. But there are no tradition-less or ritual-less cultures. And there are no cultures without sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, and grandparents, and friends, and teachers, at least those categories, if not others.

V.S. *Maybe then Confucianism is that common ground where different cultures can meet?*

H.R. One of reasons why I press the Confucian persuasion as hard and as consistently as I do is because I do think that it has a major contribution to make to enhancing dialogue that is truly cross-cultural. There is not enough of that yet. Too much ostensibly cross-cultural dialogue has simply been the West lecturing to the rest of the world about what kind of lives all people should aspire to achieving, based largely on concepts of civil rights, abstract law, and people as models solely of *homo economicus*. Perhaps re-grounding the idea of interacting with each other in terms of family, clan, place and time can assist us in keeping what is good and valuable in the concepts of law, rights, and economics while excising those aspects which are bringing the contemporary world ever closer to disaster.

V.S. *When people agree with universalities in ethics or moral philosophy, they do it because they believe, or at least want to believe, that universal law is a way to overcome the powerful ones. If there is a universal law, it obviously applies to the powerful ones too. Your way of looking at the Confucian moral system avoids talking about universalities. It instead acknowledges particularities. What then in the Confucian moral view prevents the strong ones from becoming plain immoralists and putting it as Trasymachus did, saying that justice is the justice of the stronger ones?*

H.R. Clearly, Confucius himself saw the law as inappropriate as a way of educating people and having them be productive members of society. He wanted to do away with

cases. He thought the idea of ruling by administrative law and punishments was not a way for human beings to interact with each other. And I think there is a good deal of justification for this very deep suspicion, because the system of law tends to keep whatever stability and order that you have at present. And if what you have at present is a good deal of social injustice and inequality, then the law maintains the inequality and the injustice. Take a quick example about free speech: both Bill Gates and I can take out a full page ad in a newspaper to express our opinion on some matter. But there is a difference. Gates pays for his ad out of the petty cash in his pocket, while I have to sell my house to pay for mine. It is not equal and can't be under the present system.

Also, when you don't have the thought of law and punishment quite as prominent, people have to rely more on their ability to persuade others rather than command them. It is the law, says the policeman. He has a gun and can shoot you if you don't do what he says. The judge is the one who tells you are you going to jail. At times the law is a good thing, and obviously we need some laws. But if the only way to think about people behaving decently is by being threatened with punishment, I don't think you are going to achieve a good society that way, and I believe history, East and West, shows this to be largely true.

So if you combine the fact that the law tends to protect the rich and it is being extended as the rich get richer and wealth is being concentrated in fewer hands, then, again, I believe we may profit from entertaining the Confucian vision.

We are moving from the philosophical toward the political level now. If someone says I will tax the rich if elected, very, very few of the rich will give him or her any campaign money to run for office. The magnitude of the extent to which money drives elections in supposedly democratic nations like the United States especially, is almost beyond comprehension for people who live in small countries. A little news article says that television and radio ads are going to exceed 100 million dollars each, just for primary elections. That is before the real election. And where do you get that kind of money except from the very wealthy? Now if five of us spend 2,000 dollars each to have breakfast with a candidate, we can tell him our concerns, and he will have 10,000 dollars for his next ad. How do we get that candidate to listen to us, if we have 5 dollars each for things like that? At all times while I am trying hard to be a philosopher, I am always also keenly aware that I am an American. And America is responsible for so much mischief in this world. So I am always trying to combine philosophy with a little bit of politics.

The ultimate answer philosophically to your question is that—going back to the hierarchy—there is hierarchy even with friends. Even though I am a teacher and you are a student, if we are out in the street, you become the benefactor and I

the beneficiary, because you know this wonderful city and I don't, and I don't speak Lithuanian and you do. Now, if we are talking about reading Chinese texts—I am a benefactor and you are the beneficiary. Ultimately though, it is also a religious matter. If I exercise authority in authoritarian ways, if I diminish you when I am in a benefactor position, then I will not make any religious or spiritual progress at all according to Confucianism. That is why I say one has to see Confucianism ultimately as a spiritual discipline: the notion of self-cultivation—it is not just moral, it is also religious. You can see it most clearly in Mencius: I have not only the responsibility to help you, but I have a responsibility to myself to come to *enjoy* helping you. That is the development that takes place first with my own children, then with others, expanding all the time. This is in the end neither moral nor political, but spiritual.

V.S. *Is it being ultimately in the world and being connected to the world?*

H.R. Yes. And through rituals connected to the past world, too. And by handing on the rituals to our beneficiaries we are connected to the future, too.

V.S. *To finish this interview, I am always inspired by the people whom I call my teachers, when I have the chance and luck to talk with them or to read their works. Could you tell us about your teachers, your sources of inspiration that keep you doing what you have been doing so long and so successfully?*

H.R. Of my Chinese teachers, there would be three names: the first one would be Robert Crawford, my first teacher of things Chinese. My first systematic acquaintance with Chinese history came from him. My Chinese philosophy teacher was Vincent Shi—Shi Youzhong was his Chinese name. My major mentor was Helmut Wilhelm, the son of Richard Wilhelm, translator of the *Yijing* and a major *Yijing* scholar himself. I have also profited from having the noted philosopher/scholar of religion Huston Smith as my close friend for many years. But certainly my greatest inspiration philosophically, intellectually, and politically overall has been Noam Chomsky, when I had the great good fortune to spend 2 years of post-doctoral studies and research in linguistics and philosophy with him at MIT. He has been the greatest intellectual and moral influence on my academic life, in the way I think of what it means to be a human being, the proper conduct of research, politics, what a decent society should be like, and more. He has been a great inspiration for me ever since we first met in 1968.

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