

# Comparison paradox, comparative situation and inter-paradigmaticity: a methodological reflection on cross-cultural philosophical comparison

Xianglong Zhang, Peking University, China

Article originally published in  
"Comparative Philosophy",  
V. 1 (2010), n. 1, pp. 90-105,  
<http://www.comparativephilosophy.org>  
Reprinted with permission

**ABSTRACT.** It is commonly believed that philosophical comparison depends on having some common measure or standard between and above the compared parts. The paper is to show that the foregoing common belief is incorrect and therewith to inquire into the possibility of cross-cultural philosophical comparison. First, the "comparison paradox" will be expounded. It is a theoretical difficulty for the philosophical tendency represented by Plato's theory of Ideas to justify comparative activities. Further, the connection of the comparative paradox with the obstacles met by cross-cultural philosophical comparisons will be demonstrated. It will be shown that to attribute the difficulty of cross-cultural comparisons to incommensurability of traditions is irrelevant and misleading. It is to be argued that the original possibility of comparison depends on the "comparative situation", i.e., the mechanism of meaning-production that functions in a non-universalistic and anonymous way. A philosophical paradigm does facilitate the attendance of such a situation, but it is also possible for the situation to emerge between paradigms in a gamesome way. Accordingly, the genuine comparison at issue will not originate primarily and merely on the level of concepts and propositions, but can only be achieved through inter-paradigmatic conditions, where we have the sharp awareness of a paradigm's boundary from which we can attempt to achieve situational communication with another paradigm. In light of this, the perspective of a philosophical comparison differs not only from the traditional or universalistic one, but also from Gadamer's hermeneutics, such as the doctrine of "fusion of horizons". The new perspective finds an illustration in Heidegger's relations with Daoism.

**KEYWORDS:** *Comparative paradox, Comparative situation, Heidegger's attitude towards Dao, Incommensurability, Inter-paradigmaticity*

With respect to cross-cultural philosophical comparisons, two attitudes can be identified: one is optimistic, the other pessimistic. The former overlooks the special obstacles in such comparisons, taking them as feasible as the comparison within one tradition. The latter, because of being aware of the difficulty of the so-called “incommensurability” between philosophical traditions, denies the possibility of the comparison. However, we do recognize that there have been some successful cross-cultural philosophical comparisons such as that between Indian Buddhism and the Chinese Dao-oriented tradition, which differs profoundly from the efforts guided by the aforementioned attitudes. What is taken for granted by the two attitudes is that significant philosophical comparison must be done between concepts and propositions in accordance with a universalizable “common measure” or standard. If no common measure exists, then the attempt for comparison amounts to building architecture on sand. This idea hinders methodological cross-cultural comparison, since there is no universally valid standard between alienated traditions. To show that this shared presupposition is untenable, I will start from a reflection on Plato’s doctrine of comparative possibility which entails a “comparison paradox”. We will then try to find what is required for a genuine comparison as well as a philosophical comparison. A “paradigm” does facilitate philosophical comparison in itself, not mainly because it provides some common standard, but rather its encouraging of an emergence of a comparative situation. As far as the situation appears and functions, comparison is evoked. In this new perspective, therefore, inter-paradigmatic comparison may not be impossible if the situation is not totally rejected at the interval.

### **Comparison paradox**

Plato, the most influential philosopher in the history of western philosophy, establishes a universal and substantial reason for the possibility of comparison. In one of his works, *Phaedo*, he writes:

“Then you too wouldn’t accept anyone’s saying that one person was larger than another by a head, and the smaller was smaller by the same thing; but you’d protest that you for your part will say only that everything larger than something else is larger by nothing but largeness, and largeness is the

reason for its being larger; and that the smaller is smaller by nothing but smallness, and smallness is the reason for its being smaller.” (Plato, *Phaedo*, 100e-101a)

Plato is talking about a comparison, namely, between one person being larger or smaller *than* another person. It seems that all of us are able to make such comparisons, but how shall we provide a “reason” for this comparative “ability”? Plato’s answer is that a comparative act depends on the Ideas (*eidōs*, *idea*) as “largeness” and “smallness”. In other words, the comparative act will not consist of the experience of the two compared things (e.g., seeing or touching A and B). There must be a third item of a higher order (e.g., “largeness”) to make the recognition of “A is larger than B” possible. It is “largeness” or “smallness”, being self-dependent and universally valid, that allows for a common measure or pivot for comparison which makes the experience of “A is larger than B” possible. Otherwise, how would you know that A is larger - instead of whiter, darker, prettier, etc. - than B? If you have A and B, among many other items, but not the Idea of “largeness” itself, then how can you possess the experience of “A is larger than B”?

The problem with Plato’s account is that it fails to explain the ability of making a *comparison* in a final sense. Even if we accept his theory of Ideas, we would only know that “A is large”, where A participates in “largeness”, but not that “A is larger than B”, since the phrase “larger... than” implies that “A is large” and “B is small”. We also know that Plato views “largeness” and “smallness” as radically distinct from each other and cannot coexist in one situation at the same time. If we admit that “largeness” and “smallness” attend the same comparison, then the “common measure” that Plato believes constitute the experience of comparison will disappear. So, we cannot make a genuine comparison in the Platonic framework. Furthermore, the expression “A is as large as B”, taken as a comparison, implies the possibility that “A is larger (smaller) than B”.

The difficulty of “comparison” made through definite Ideas can be expressed more concisely as follows:

1. Any comparison must be accomplished by finding the sameness or difference between two items (A/B).
2. On the one hand, finding “sameness”, or what can be viewed

as “the same” according to a common measure, has nothing to do with comparison because any comparison can never arise in the pure sameness.

3. On the other hand, it is also impossible to find any difference between two items, for according to Plato, the difference can only be found through a common measure. Consequently, the so-called “difference” that is found in the Platonic framework, such as the “large” or the “small”, is no longer a difference but a common point (largeness or smallness of things).\*
4. In conclusion, a genuine comparison is impossible.

\* Plato views “difference as such” as an “Idea” (*Sophist*, 255e), which comes into being by participating or sharing the Idea of “being” (259e). Therefore, difference has its own being. But it does not explain the difference *in comparison*. As for the Idea of “difference”, we can ask: *is it different from itself?* Answering this question will result in a “paradox of difference”, whether the answer is yes or no, it will lead to its opposition. But as regards to the difference *in comparison*, the same question cannot be asked, for it has no “self” [of its Idea].

Indeed, this “comparison paradox”<sup>1</sup> can be expressed even more concisely:

Any comparison will demand the simultaneous presence of “sameness” and “difference”. This will negate the common measure or the pivot of comparison in Platonic perspective, and thus make comparison impossible.

The same paradox is recognized by Zhuang Zi (莊子) who writes in the second chapter of his book:

“Whom shall we ask to produce the right decision? We may ask someone who agrees with you; but since he agrees with you, how can he make the decision? We may ask someone who agrees with me; but since he agrees with me, how can he make the decision? We may ask someone who agrees with both you and me, but since he agrees with both you and me, how can he make the decision? We may ask someone who differs from both you and me, but since he differs from

1. The term “paradox” or “antinomy” is used in a less strict way to refer to a radical dilemma that cannot be overcome by taking any direction, be it forward or backward

both you and me, how can he make the decision?” (Zhuang Zi, 1989, p. 53)

The “decision” that Zhuang Zi mentions means that the arbitration of the controversy between you and me naturally needs the comparison between the opinions of both sides as a prerequisite. Zhuang Zi shows that it is impossible to accomplish a comparison and hence an arbitration if we deal with the sameness and difference separately.

### **The paradox of comparative philosophy**

The “comparison paradox” is deeply implanted between different philosophies. In the tradition of Western philosophy and the enterprise of philosophical comparison, which on a large scale pursues explicitly or implicitly the Platonic “commensurability”, “philosophy” is mainly viewed as an effort of thinking that inquires fundamental problems by reflecting on and constructing individual concepts or propositions (or a system of concepts or propositions). Consequently, this tradition has been seeking to establish certain universal standards, foundations or premises from which all beings must obey. In such a framework of thinking, cross-cultural philosophical comparison cannot avoid the comparison paradox since the possibility of comparison will depend on the universality that provides common measure for the compared sides. For instance, the comparison between Western and Chinese philosophy, which is advocated by Zong-san Mou (牟宗三) is constrained by this kind of framework. Mou holds that:

“Ideas ... will become universal when they become concepts. But this kind of universality, from a Chinese viewpoint, bears its own peculiarities from the beginning of its civilization ... Consequently, there are Chinese as well as Western philosophy ... which can be communicated, however, through their universality. Communication means universality, and from here a common understanding is possible. There will be no common understanding if there is no universality.” (Mou, 1997, 3-5)

It is clear that Mou, among many other philosophers who share this view, believes that universal concepts guarantee sufficient comparison (i.e., “communication”).

When we compare two philosophical doctrines, e.g., C and D, what we are trying to do, in the most basic sense, is find their sameness and difference. Even an implicit comparison, i.e., interpreting D from the viewpoint and method of C without mentioning C itself, cannot be reasonably justified without the recognition of their sameness and difference. When we are talking about the sameness and difference of C and D, it is important to consider what common measure or standard of comparison we are appealing to. But can we truly appeal to a common measure in order to obtain a meaningful comparison? These problems are not often directly addressed, but how we solve them, whether explicitly or implicitly, will influence the quality of comparison. Most of the time, we speak of sameness and difference in light of the measure we are accustomed to, such as, with an early introduction of Buddhism to the Chinese world. Scholars or monks apply the method of *ge-yi* (格義, obtaining the meaning of alien terms by analogy with what we know) in order to translate and comprehend Buddhist terms in virtue of the compared Daoist terms. On the contrary, in the period of a “paradigm shift”, it is also possible to speak of sameness and difference in light of the measure provided by the other side, such as what took place in the process of reversed *ge-yi* (*fan-xiang-ge-yi* 反向格義) in China since the twentieth century (Liu, 2007). However, as the comparative paradox shows, not all of these comparisons are genuine. As a result, many cases of comparison between Chinese and Western philosophy are not entirely satisfying, and this problem cannot be solved by simply mastering the literature of both sides or by being more tolerant of the foreign view. Surely we can learn to be erudite and tolerant, and discover some apparent similarities or differences, but this does not mean that we will find pivots of comparison that can help resolve genuine philosophical problems with full constructive engagement. Once we try to compare philosophical thoughts according to a certain imagined universal standard, we will therefore either exceed or fail to achieve the *middle* pivotal junction by which they are connected. Accordingly, “incommensurability” is not the proper expression of difficulty that lies with philosophical comparison. If “commensurability” is taken as the common measure or universal standard in comparison, then it is not only irrelevant but misleading when dealing with the issue of possibility of philosophical comparison.

## Comparative situation

Although it is difficult in theory to make a comparison, in everyday-life we experience, and often do make, successful comparisons. Comparison is the prerequisite of recognition, and consequently of any meaning, consciousness, or perception. As structuralism maintains, differentiations constitute the meanings of a language (Saussure, 1985, pp. 164-165 and 167-168). This differentiation, however, cannot be ideally assimilated, i.e., differences made according to a common standard or Idea. Meanwhile, it is not totally separable from similarity either.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is the differentiation *in* comparison.

When I see some dates on a high tree and several bamboo rods lying at the foot of the tree, I take the longest rod to get the dates without any kind of idealized thinking. In such an act, I successfully accomplish a comparison. The so-called “successful comparison” refers to those comparative acts that produce the meanings or have the effects that would not have appeared in unilateral or non-comparative acts. I call the structure which makes the comparison successful a *comparative situation*.

The following question now arises: how does a comparative situation appear, especially with respect to different philosophies? Let us first reflect on the mechanism of the comparison paradox. Plato claims that a successful comparison depends on the transcendent common measure, e.g., “largeness”, to which the compared items refer.

However, as argued above, the experience of the comparison “A is larger than B” cannot be formed simply by participating in “largeness” because the experience of “larger than” implies in itself “smaller than”; and a simultaneous experience of “larger” and “smaller” is unimaginable according to the theory of Ideas and rules of formal logic, for there is no Idea that can be large and small *at the same time*.\*

\* Plato, in order to avoid the weak point that Idealism lacks genuine “difference” and “non-being”, argues in the *Sophist* that “highness and non-highness have the same measure of existencell” (258a). But as the first footnote points out, even if he can accomplish this argument, which is actually flawed and far-fetched, the possibility of the co-existence of “highness and non-highness” in the experience of comparison remains unjustified in his theory.

2. Saussure thinks that the basic differentiation is opposition. Opposition, such as “père/mère” (father/mother), “Nacht/Nächte” (night/nights) implies rather than presupposes certain similarity (Saussure, 1995, pp. 166-169)

Accordingly, if philosophy is nothing but the result of idealization or conceptualization, and if the comparisons of philosophical doctrines can only be accomplished on a conceptual level, then there will not be any fruitful comparison. It still belongs to where the comparison paradox can be applied.

Is it necessarily contradictory and meaningless if “the large and the small” appear in the same experience? Of course not. Otherwise no fruitful comparative experience will occur. We all know it is possible, and it even takes place from time to time. Furthermore, it will not work if we understand the co-existence of “A and non-A” as a dialectic synthesis, i.e., as the development of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis”, for this already presupposes a comparison, but not the other way around. One fact is that the application of dialectic in the philosophical researches of mainland China, during the last sixty years, did not bring about any prosperity to cross-cultural philosophical comparison, but rather, popularity of philosophical West-centrism.

In the traditional philosophical mainstream, concepts (e.g., the concept of “highness”) come into being either by themselves or by abstraction, and thus contain a hard and essentially idealized core, demanding distribution (universal applicability) and identification. If concepts are not distributed or limited, this can only be caused by adding more concepts to previous ones, but not by an act of comparison. For example, if we add “middle”, “extremely”, or “not” to the concept “high”, we respectively obtain the following concepts: “middle high”, “extremely high”, or “not high”. For this reason, the theory of *genos* elucidated in Plato’s *Sophist*, though it shows a profound motive to save the “plurality” of phenomena, cannot enter into the dynamic phenomenal process of comparison due to its method of grasping dichotomies like “similarity/difference” or “being/non-being” by “definition” and “conceptual division”.

A “comparative situation” can be understood as a meaningful comparison without appealing to a higher measure. We can say “Ming Yao (姚明) (2.29m) is taller than Michael Jordan (1.98m)” as soon as we see them standing together. It has nothing to do with participating in the Idea of “tallness”, but simply with the experience of this concrete comparative situation. Someone may argue that this situation presupposes many accumulated experiences, e.g., childhood learning experiences, in which the capacity of recognition and using a language is acquired, which imply the meaning-acquisition

of the concept “tallness”. This explanation, though correct for the most part, is false in the last assumption. The more we trace our experiences back to our childhood, the less there could be any ideal model or measure, and the more important a comparative situation becomes. So how do we *begin* learning the use of the term “tall”? Is it by referring to a tall thing or the Idea of “tallness”? In either case, how do we learn this very notion of “reference”? Is it possible to refer to “reference” itself in order to learn “to refer”? In a comparative situation we can experience “taller than...” and “shorter than...” simultaneously because we do not just see A or B alone, even less see them by first looking at “tallness” or “shortness”, but simultaneously see A, B, *and*... Here the ellipsis is indispensable and more important than what is explicitly said. It means that everything else is being experienced by us in an indistinct, marginal, and hidden mode. This plural-dimensional, clear-boundary-lacking field of experience, and occasional confrontation of items, render “A is taller than B” as a prominent phenomenon that is directly experienced. This is the way in which people learn and accomplish comparisons without presupposing an Idealized common measure or non-contextual definition based on conceptual content. Indeed, we can (and do) know that “A is taller than B” without knowing what “tallness” in itself is, just as we can, and only can, learn to ride a bike without knowing what “riding a bike” in itself consists of. A situation is primarily a “space-time horizon” or “field”, i.e., the potential and non-objectifiable stream of space-time experience flowing from the past to future, and the inner and exterior lived region accompanying every experience (there are other things beside, behind, and between A and B...). It can also be viewed as an indistinct, potential and all-related net that precedes all identifiable objects or subjects. The relational things that we experience are just the manifested or prominent parts of this anonymously functioning horizon. A comparative situation is no doubt just one of such a situation.

### **Philosophical comparative situation emerging in the inter-paradigmatic condition**

A philosophical comparative situation emerges when it earns its own comparison situation. Therefore, the key methodology of philosophical comparison is to enter into its comparative situation,

rather than anything else. It first means that cross-cultural comparisons cannot be limited to concepts, propositions, or philosophical arguments since total dependence on them may cause a divorce from comparison situations, which in turn may lead to the comparison paradox. Secondly, the comparison should not be made *only* through a ready-made framework as the cross-cultural *ge-yi* (or its reversion) does. Certain kinds of *ge-yi* may be an inevitable stage in the history of trans-cultural intercourse, but there will not be any genuine and pregnant comparison if we constrict ourselves to them.

We may find that in one major philosophical tradition or paradigm, comparisons made between philosophical concepts and arguments are feasible and sometimes significant. For instance, Aristotle and Hegel made quite a few comparisons of the philosophies before them. In Chinese Buddhism, *pan-jiao* (判教), or judging the superiority of various Buddhist schools by comparing them, was a powerful way to promote the philosophical sensitivity of the Buddhist monks. However, from these facts it cannot be asserted that successful comparisons should be attributed to the common standards or rules that the paradigm provides. A paradigm is not equal to a set of conceptual rules or common standards for its composition and function is richer and deeper than a system of rules.

Scientific paradigms, according to which Thomas S. Kuhn made the notion of a “paradigm” significant, not only to the study of the history of science but also to humanities, are “the community’s paradigms, revealed in its textbooks, lectures, and laboratory exercises” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 43). They differ from a system of rules or standards since “paradigms may be prior to, more binding, and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 46). A scientist acquires a paradigm “through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature often without quite knowing or needing to know what characteristics have given these models the status of community paradigms” (Kuhn 1962, p. 46). So, a paradigm can guide scientists’ researches or make them convergent on their identifying objects and relations, not primarily by establishing common rules or standards but by providing a “network” of models of study which have a “family resemblance” among them\* (Kuhn, 1962, pp. 43-46).

\* Kuhn illustrates his idea of a paradigm's function by incorporating one of Wittgenstein's key terms in his *Philosophical Investigations*, namely, "family resemblance". At the point where people fail to find a common essence for a term or action such as "language" or "game", Wittgenstein proposes "family resemblances" (*Familienähnlichkeit*) to explain what it is that holds all of these various cases together. For instance, why do we call various activities a "game"? He writes: "We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing [among the various activities we call "game"]... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than family resemblances; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. ... And I shall say: "games" form a family. And the strength of the thread [a term's identity] does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres" (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Although a set of common rules may be abstracted from a paradigm, where they may function during a normal period of research, there is no guarantee that the unanimity among scientists about how to understand and apply these rules will be established. Considering that Wittgenstein's central ideas, e.g., his notion of language-games and forms of life, are imminently connected to the idea of "family resemblance", which must have impacted Kuhn, we may reasonably assume that the paradigm takes the situational structure of human life as its precondition.

Following Kuhn, we may say that a philosophical paradigm stands between originally situated experience of human life and the total conceptualization of it. Without the experience, the paradigm shall lose its motive; without moderate or pragmatic conceptualization of the experience, philosophical approaches will fail to form a continued tradition. Because of the overwhelming influence of Plato, the paradigm of traditional Western philosophy has always been in danger of being over-conceptualized.

A philosophical paradigm is revealed through learning a language, an education in humanities (including philosophy and history), general education, life-experiences, conceptual systems, and so on. One who conducts a philosophical comparison within a paradigm does not first need to know a set of rules or standard. So the paradigm may not merely allow but also in a sense encourage the function

of a comparison situation, if people do not make it too abstract or common-rule-oriented. However, this facility for the presence of a comparison situation is missing in cross-cultural comparisons where they are performed beyond a paradigm. Therefore, the difficulty of cross-cultural comparison does not come from the absence of common rules between paradigms, since there is no final need for such rules or measures even in the comparisons within one paradigm. The obstacle should rather be due to the seldom attendance of a comparative situation caused by the heterogeneity of participants' experiences in different paradigms.

In order to solve this problem, some scholars have advanced a series of significant suggestions, such as, "implicit comparison" (Carine Defoort), "pluralized comparison" (Bo Mou 牟博), comparisons from linguistic comparisons - i.e., the awareness of translation effects, the comparisons of grammar, semantics and pragmatics between different languages - to philosophical comparisons (Roger Ames), and so on. The reason that these comparisons can improve the conceptual and propositional mode of traditional comparison is, to some extent, due to their ability to offset the separation from comparative situation. For example, linguistic and translation comparisons, which involve the analysis of certain key words and lead to philosophical comparison, have the effect of immersing one's self in foreign languages and contexts, whereby the sameness and difference between concepts and propositions exposed in the following comparison will emerge more naturally. As a result, there will be a greater chance to earn the comparative situation.

These improved strategies of comparison, however, still cannot significantly enhance the possibility of an emergence of a comparative situation. Linguistic and translation comparisons, for example, will still be constrained by the conceptual framework of the one who makes these comparisons, especially when the attempt to transform them into philosophical comparisons is being made. Consequently, if we are not aware of this constraint or danger and in no way respond to it, there may likely be a conceptual, situation-lacking comparison. Even a bilingual or multilingual philosophical scholar cannot ensure that he is making genuine philosophical comparisons because as soon as a reflective linguistic consideration is summoned, and philosophical contrasts made, the vigor of context will decline immediately. What remains is simply grammar, semantics and pragmatics that can be objectified. How to deal with them seems

3. So-called “creoles” or “pidgins” are “hybridized” languages created by people who, though speaking different languages, live together in a long time, to solve the problem of basic communication, e.g., Neo-Melanesian created in New Guinea (Diamond, 1993)

to be a problem of different conceptual positions. For instance, by observing the same Chinese language there will be opposite conclusions, such as, with Chinese philosophy as either having no awareness of truth (e.g., Chad Hansen) or having its own awareness of truth that is different from its Western counterpart (e.g., Chenyang Li 李晨陽). Furthermore, this problem is not overcome in principle even if we form a “middle” language between two languages (“creoles” or “pidgins”)<sup>3</sup> because it is then a new language and not a language between different languages that may have a significant effect on comparison. In the same way, “implicit comparison” and comparisons between cultures and lifestyles, in most cases, are not “situationalized” but constrained by one paradigm. For this reason, the globalization or the uniformity of languages and lifestyles will not necessarily give rise to the emergence of a comparative situation and hence have its philosophical effects. Rather, it is more likely to result in the dominance of certain systems of ideas, the damage of those non-dominant traditions and the consequent destruction of inter-culturality.

What gesture of thinking, then, is more helpful towards the emergence of a philosophical comparative situation? If we realize that a paradigm, including its moderate conceptualization, is inevitable to *philosophical* comparison, and that the conceptual dimension of the paradigm, especially the common-rule-oriented view of paradigm, somehow covers up the original comparative situation, then a methodological self-awareness, namely, “towards *inter-paradigmaticity*” may be more desirable. As stated earlier, philosophical comparison, as the comparison of thoughts and doctrines, is derived from certain philosophical paradigm and the conceptual systems within it. In other words, it must be constrained by certain linguistic, cultural or philosophical structures of meaning-concept production and maintenance. On the other hand, cross-cultural comparison requires the appearance of a comparative situation beyond one paradigm, and therefore cannot be completely dominated by a single philosophical paradigm. Therefore, the philosophical comparison at issue must achieve the inter-paradigmatic condition in order to activate the cross-cultural comparative situation.

But does the inter-paradigmatic condition really exist? Is there comparative situation in the condition? The so-called “inter-paradigmaticity” is a conscious state that, although abiding in

one paradigm, is strongly aware of the heterogeneous and even threatening presence of other paradigms; an awareness prior to the so-called “fusion of horizons”,\* and nevertheless manages to maintain a marginal albeit authentic existence at the interval of paradigms by certain non-conceptual, non-universalistic means, such as, various forms of language-games (including translation) or spontaneous modes of conscious acts.

\* The “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*) is the key term of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. It indicates the successful understanding between two or more agents.

“*[U]nderstanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 306). For Gadamer, “The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 302). “The concept of horizon suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand ... not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 305).

The difference between the two theories, the fusion of horizons and the inter-paradigmaticity, lies primarily in recognizing the inter-paradigmatic reality. Gadamer is unaware of the profound limitation of paradigm to the inter-paradigmatic understanding, or the ontological meaning of the *otherness*. In this respect, Martin Heidegger, especially Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida are much more sensitive than him. Thus Gadamer is blind at what is really needed for a cross-cultural comparative understanding. His views of “horizon”, “prejudice”, “fusion”, etc. are too explicit, conceptual and objectifiable. His interpretation overlooks the hidden, non-visible and non-objectifiable dimension of the horizon which is emphasized by the author of this paper. His focus is merely put on opening the horizon to the past or traditional text (Gadamer 1989, pp. 304-7) and thence “rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 305), and so his discussion of understanding is fundamentally limited to one tradition with its language, history and past.

Why do we expect the existence of a certain philosophical consciousness rather than mere irrational arbitrariness at the interval of paradigms? The discussion above provides some clue. A

4. Cf. the doctrine of “field of perception” or “field of phenomena” in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1996), and the doctrine of stream of consciousness in William James’ *Principles of Psychology* (James, 1981)

paradigm does not exhaust human sense-making activities. Instead, the paradigm needs the potential field of experience or the stream of consciousness as a precondition<sup>4</sup>. As a result, it is possible for us to experience a marginal but deeper comparative situation than what is available in a paradigm by tracing back to its origins. For a similar reason, though trans-cultural languages (e.g., Chinese and Sanskrit, Chinese and Greek or German) are incommensurable, it is not impossible to translate texts, including philosophically profound ones, in one way or another between those languages and related paradigms. Speaking more illustratively, entering into inter-paradigmaticity means getting back to the native-land (*Heimat*) of a paradigm in order to experience the concealed nativeness (*Heimlichkeit*) or nativity (*Nativität*) of the interval where the cross-cultural, comparative philosophical situation might appear. Because of the *fundamental* potentiality of the inter-(ness) or between-(ness), the inter-paradigmaticity will not show itself as the higher voice or the universal mind immune to contamination caused by the paradigm, but rather enable the inter- or trans-condition with the paradigm. Therefore, any trans-cultural translation can never be guaranteed and there will always be possibilities to reconstruct them reasonably, just as how cross-cultural philosophical comparisons possess no doubtless certainty, but always *on the way* to establish itself and reach the fittest for the time being. In brief, at the interval, “it” (from the worst to the best) is always being possible without a fixed controller. And that is exactly the meaning of a comparative situation.

In short, it is the dynamic structure of meaning-genesis or the potential, non-objectifiable stream of space-time experience plus paradigmatic footing that gives rise to the inter-paradigmaticity, but its own existence *cannot* be paradigmaticized. If we ignore the first half of this expression, relativism or the strong claim of “incomparability” will arise. If we ignore the second half, then rationalism or universalism will emerge; a blind belief that comparison is always possible by appealing to some super-paradigmatic universality. From this viewpoint, a philosophical comparative situation may attend at the level of inter-paradigmaticity, and consequently making it possible for cross-cultural philosophical comparisons to bear paradigmatic emergence presupposes the recognition of the boundary of this very paradigm. The illusion that this situational comparison can be pursued solely on the level of conceptual

expression, epistemological (subject-knowing-object) thinking, and one/none paradigm should be deleted. For this reason, the “fusion of horizons” advocated by Gadamer’s hermeneutics, compared with an “inter-paradigmatic comparative situation”, is still too optimistic and facile. We have to know that in many cases the encounters between philosophical paradigms of alienated cultures with “prejudices”<sup>\*</sup> will not result in the emergence of a comparative situation.

\* “Prejudice” (*Vorurteil*) is another important term used by Gadamer. It is a non-closed forejudging that constitutes the foreground or background of the hermeneutic horizon. Everyone starts interpretative or comprehensive action with such a prejudice but it will encounter, say, “the actual meaning of the text” (Gadamer 1989, p. 269) and therefore fuse itself with the other side. In this way, the presence (the prejudice) and past (the text) merge in such a way that the tension between the two sides allows for a successful understanding. The problem of his interpretation of the pre-judged horizon is that the non-propositional and anonymous features given to the horizon by Husserl and Heidegger (it is from them that Gadamer gets the term), is almost lost. “Actually prejudice means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 270). The current paper on the contrary argues that the chance for the prejudice, having been a *judgment* already, to be appropriately rectified by the other side (e.g., text in other paradigm) and fused with it in a cross-cultural confrontation, is extremely slight. The “method and truth” of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is irrelevant to the possibility of comparison which we are looking for.

The reason is not simply that one’s own horizon is not fully opened, or lacks the intention to open the horizon (as what happened in the twentieth century with the “reversed *ge-yi*” - see second section for the irrelevance of this intention), but the absence of recognizing the inter-paradigmatic characteristics of cross-cultural comparison. In this view, inter-paradigmatic comparisons have no tendency towards a historical relativism which Gadamer’s hermeneutics imply because this kind of “relativism” appears only on the level of propositional assertions or judgments.

### **An exemple of inter-paradigmatic comparison: Heidegger's attitude towards Dao**

Successful philosophical comparisons, as, the Sino-Indian philosophical comparison which gave birth to Zen Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, bears the disposition of noticing the radical difference between two paradigms, admitting each other implicitly or even critically, abandoning the illusion of *ge-yi*, standing in a paradigm yet not being totally limited by it, and constituting the comparison both creatively and conservatively (tracing back to its own tradition) in a dynamic situation. To illustrate this point, consider one case in the twentieth century, namely, the philosophical comparison made by Heidegger between his thinking and Chinese Daoism. It can hardly be said to be a perfectly successful example, but at least in some respects the demands of inter-paradigmatic comparisons are felt and responded.

No later than the beginning of the 1930s, Heidegger shows a strong interest in the Daoism of Lao Zi (老子) and Zhuang Zi, which influenced his *Kehre* (his turning away from his early stage of philosophy to his later stage), and manifested itself many times afterwards (Zhang, 2009, p. 71 and notes 1-2). The *Kehre* was first expressed in Heidegger's essay *On the Essence of Truth* (1930) and displayed a shift on his view on truth. The light (opening)-oriented view of truth (*a-letheia*) in *Being and Time* (1927) was turned to a light (opening)-black (concealing)-complementing one. This change was affected or at least significantly accompanied by his encounter with a Daoist view of *yin* (black)-*yang* (light) relation, especially his reading and translation of a line in the 28th chapter of *Lao Zi* (Zhang, 2009, p. 71; Zhang, 2007, chapter 12). These facts support the belief that Heidegger's interest was genuine and even had a considerable impact on his thought (May, 1996, chapter 4). Meanwhile, in some other circumstances, he emphasized the profound difference between Western and Eastern cultures and philosophies, including Daoism, and even made westernizing claims like "Only a God can save us" that demands a return to the origins of the Western world. Accordingly, some literal-minded commentators judge that Heidegger's interest in Daoism is not serious and even superficial. In fact, both apparent contradictory attitudes are indispensable for the experience of a genuine philosophical comparison. Let's take a look at the following paragraph:

“Das Wort Ereignis soll jetzt, aus der gewiesenen Sache her gedacht, als Leitwort im Dienst des Denkens sprechen. Als so gedachtes Leitwort läßt es sich so wenig übersetzen wie das griechische Leitwort λόγος und das chinesische *Dao*.<sup>5</sup>” (Heidegger, 1957)

(The words event of appropriation, thought of in terms of the matter indicated, should now speak as a key term in the service of thinking. As such a key term, it can no more be translated than the Greek λόγος or the Chinese *Dao*) (Heidegger, 1957).

We can see that Heidegger’s emphasis on “the Chinese *Dao*” is so strong that he juxtaposes it with Greek *logos* and the key word “Ereignis” in his later works. At the same time, however, he asserts that this “*Dao*” is *almost untranslatable*, i.e., it cannot be translated into Western languages without distorting its original meaning. This observation shows his high sensitivity to the non-conceptual and non-propositional feature of inter-paradigmaticity. Nevertheless, his recognition of the constraint presented by the paradigm of language-philosophy goes *hand in hand* with his effort to communicate with the Chinese *Dao* inter-paradigmatically. For example, in the same year (1957) he wrote that:

“Das Leitwort im dichtenden Denken des Laotse lautet *Dao* und bedeutet “eigentlich” Weg. Weil man jedoch den Weg leicht nur äußerlich vorstellt als die Verbindungsstrecke zwischen zwei Orten, hat man in der Übereilung unser Wort “Weg” für ungeeignet befunden, das zu nennen, was *Dao* sagt. Man übersetzt *Dao* deshalb durch Vernunft, Geist, Raison, Sinn, Logos.

Indes könnte der *Dao* der alles be-weegende Weg sein, dasjenige, woraus wir erst zu denken vermögen, was Vernunft, Geist, Sinn, Logos, eigentlich, d.h. aus ihrem eigenen Wesen her sagen möchten. Vielleicht verbirgt sich im Wort “Weg”, *Dao*, das Geheimnis aller Geheimnisse des denkenden Sagens” (Heidegger, 1959, p. 198)<sup>6</sup>.

(The key word in Laotse’s poetic thinking is *Dao*, which “properly speaking” means way. But because we are prone to think of “way” superficially, as a stretch connecting two places, our word “way” has all too rashly been considered

5. The German and English texts render “道” as “Tao”. For the sake of unifying format in this journal, “道” is presented as “*Dao*” without exception.

6. This citation is from the lectures titled “Das Wesen der Sprache” (*The Nature of Language*) which Heidegger gave in Dec, 1957 and Feb, 1958 at the University of Freiburg

unfit to name what Dao says. *Dao* is then translated as *reason*, *mind*, *raison*, *meaning*, *logos*.

Yet *Dao* could be the way that gives all ways, the very source of our power to think what reason, mind, meaning, *logos* properly mean to say properly, by their proper nature. Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying conceals itself in the word “way”, *Dao*. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 92).

7. “Dao” (道) is a key term in ancient Chinese philosophy and basically means the ultimate truth and reality. Its etymology is “way” (Shuo-Wen-Jie-Zi), and derives from it the meanings of dredging (a river), guiding, rule, principle and speaking

Heidegger seems to give a translation of *Dao* or *Tao* (道),<sup>7</sup> “Way (Weg)” and its variations. But if we observe carefully, we will find that his translation is not the conceptual, super-paradigmatic “one-to-one” translation (that is why he refuses to provide previous *ge-yi* translations, such as, “reason”, “spirit”, “understanding” etc.). Rather, his venture is to try to probe its multiple meanings, especially what can be intuited and compared in the context, and translate them on a situational basis after sensing the “*dichtend* (poeticizing and creating)” nature of *Dao* in *Dao-De-Jing* (《道德經》) or *Lao Zi* (《老子》). We know that the translation of poems (*Ge-dicht*) present the most obstinate linguistic paradigmatic obstacles, which can only be overcome by the tentative *dichtend* way of translation, i.e., by seeking certain inter-paradigmatic and gamesomely expressions that may (or may not) work.

In order to enter a cross-cultural comparative situation, Heidegger first tries to remove or omit those elements in the term “way” that still can be objectified and transformed into a higher-rank principle, e.g., the element of “route” by which “way” is often superficially said to mean the connection between two locations (*Verbindungsstrecke*), and by which “way” is translated abstractly and “intellectually”. Then he attributes the more dynamic and self-constituting meaning of “the way that gives or opens all ways (*der alles be-wegende Weg*)” to the *Dao* of “way”. Consequently, our understanding of this “way” is inseparable from the constituting process and situation that makes it appear. The generative comparative situation therefore looms between Lao Zi’s “*Dao*” in Chinese and Heidegger’s “*der alles be-wegende Weg* (the way that gives or opens all ways)” in German, and thus the linear translational strategy is abandoned<sup>8</sup>. “*Dao*” has no longer been viewed as one of the highest philosophical concepts, no matter logical, semantic, metaphysical, cosmological or ethical, because it is inseparable from its concrete comparative situation or the meaning-becoming process. In this way, Heidegger continues:

8. Roger Ames and David Hall in their translation of *Dao-De-Jing* also translate *Dao* as “way-making” (Ames, Hall, 2003)

“Vielleicht verbirgt sich im Wort “Weg”, Dao, das Geheimnis aller Geheimnisse des denkenden Sagens”.

Perhaps the mystery of mysteries of thoughtful Saying [thinking speaking] conceals itself in the word “way”, Dao”.

It can be viewed either as another attempt of translation, i.e., to translate “Dao” as “the mystery ... of Saying”, “the origin of speaking”, or as the expression of the inter-paradigmaticity of this “*Dao*” translation “thinking speaking (*denkendes Sagen*)”. The phrase “thinking speaking” means that thinking never leaves speaking, and consequently the linguistic paradigmatic limits of this thinking can always be made aware; meanwhile, speaking never leaves thinking, and therefore speaking is a process of dis-covering something fundamentally meaningful, i.e., what is constituted and presented directly in the inter-paradigmatic condition. And the so-called “the mystery of mysteries (*das Geheimnis aller Geheimnisse*)” refers to the inter-paradigmaticity of the “thinking speaking”, which shows the nonlinearity, waiting-in-hiding and anonymous occurrence. Furthermore, the very way in which it appears in such a context or comparative situation, as “the mystery of mysteries”, gives rise to the impulse of comparing it with “the most mysterious mystery (*xuan-zhi-you-xuan 玄之又玄*)” in the first chapter of *Dao-De-Jing*<sup>9</sup>.

This comparison is a thinking-speaking comparison that takes place in the philosophical comparative situation. Indeed, “inter-paradigmaticity” can also be properly described as “the most mysterious mystery”.

## Acknowledgements

The author of this paper is indebted to three anonymous referees who gave both critical and constructive suggestions that entail quite a few improving efforts from the author. The first draft of the paper was written in Chinese; the English translation of this draft was made by Jun Li and revised by the author.

9. Richard Wilhelm's German translation renders 玄之又玄 in the first chapter as “des Geheimnisses noch tieferes Geheimnis” (Wilhelm, 1978, S. 41). This translation was first published in 1911 (Jena edition)

All URLs checked  
June 2010

## References

- Ames Roger, Hall David, Lao Tzi (2003), *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant. A Philosophical Translation*, New York, Ballantine Books
- Diamond Jared (1993), *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal*, New York, Harper Perennial
- Gadamer Hans-Georg (1989), *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, New York, Crossroad
- Heidegger Martin (1971), *On the Way to Language*, New York, Harper & Row
- Heidegger Martin (1959), *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfullingen, G. Neske
- Heidegger Martin (1957), *Indentität und Differenz*, Pfullingen, G. Neske
- James William (1981), *The Principles of Psychology*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press
- Kuhn Thomas (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press
- Liu Xiao-gan (2007), *Fan-Xiang-Ge-Yi-Yu-Zhong-Guo-Zhe-Xue-Yan-Jiu-De-Kun-Nan* ["Reverse Geyi" and the Dilemma in the Study of Chinese Philosophy], in *Zhong-Guo-Zhe-Xue-Yu-Wen-Hua* [Chinese Philosophy and Culture], V.1, Guilin, Guang-Xi-Shi-Fan-Da-Xue-Chu-Ban-She, pp. 10-36
- May Reinhard (1996), *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on his Work*, trans. Graham Parkes, London & New York, Routledge
- Merleau-Ponty Maurice (1996), *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith, London, Routledge
- Mou Zhong-san (1997), *Zhong-Xi-Zhe-Xue-Zhi-Hui-Tong-Shi-Si-Jiang* [Fourteen Lectures on the Common Ground of Chinese and Western Philosophy], Shanghai, Shang-Hai-Gu-Ji-Chu-Ban-She
- Plato (1996), *Phaedo*. Trans. David Gallop, Oxford

Saussure Ferdinand (1995), *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Editions Payot & Rivages

Saussure Ferdinand (1985), *Pu-Tong-Yu-Yan-Xue-Jiao-Cheng (Cours de linguistique générale)*, Beijing, Shang-Wu-Yin-Shu-Guan

Wilhelm Richard (1978), *Laotse, T[DJ]ao Te King, Das Buch des Alten vom Sinn und Leben*, Duesseldorf, Eugen Diederichs Verlag

Wittgenstein Ludwig (1958), *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell

Zhang Xiang-long (2009), *The Coming Time "Between" Being and Daoist Emptiness: An Analysis on Heidegger's Article Inquiring the Uniqueness of the Poet via the Lao Zi*, "Philosophy East & West", V. 59, n.1

Zhang Xiang-long (2007), *Hai-De-Ge-Er-Zhuan [Biography of Heidegger]*, Beijing, Shang-Wu-Yin-Shu-Guan

Zhuang Zi (1989), *A Daoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. Trans. Fung You-lan, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press

## Sintesi

È possibile la comparazione, e quindi la comunicazione, tra dottrine filosofiche diverse? Rispondere a questa domanda richiama, in prima istanza, la cosiddetta incommensurabilità dei sistemi filosofici e costituisce un approccio filosofico-gnoseologico al tema dell'inter-culturalità.

L'incommensurabilità dei termini di un paragone è un tema di derivazione platonica; secondo il platonismo, infatti, un confronto tra due termini richiede il riferimento all'idea, standard sovraordinato, rispetto al quale giudichiamo i termini in relazione. Solo mediante il riferimento all'idea di grandezza e a quella di piccolezza possiamo stabilire, per esempio, che "A è grande" e "B è piccolo". Il passaggio logico successivo, però, secondo il quale "A è più grande di B", implica l'utilizzo simultaneo di grandezza e piccolezza, ovvero la compresenza di due idee, impossibile e contraddittoria nel

sistema platonico. Se, dunque, la filosofia va intesa come pura idea e concetto e il confronto tra dottrine diverse può avvenire solo a livello concettuale, allora non può darsi una comparazione efficace tra sistemi.

D'altro canto, nonostante tale apparente contraddittorietà logica, è di tutta evidenza che la comparazione tra fenomeni avviene ed è, piuttosto, tra i principali meccanismi della conoscenza. Nella prassi, cioè, esiste una "situazione di comparazione", o comparazione situata (*comparative situation*), ovvero una struttura, o ambiente, che permette la comparazione senza il ricorso a concetti trascendenti. Possiamo dire, infatti, che A è più grande di B anche se non possediamo il concetto astratto di "grandezza" e "piccolezza" e, al contrario, acquisiamo tali concetti a partire dalla serie delle comparazioni di cui facciamo esperienza, astraendo da esse una categoria. Questo modo pluri-dimensionale dell'esperienza si rivela, dunque, più originario della considerazione separata delle cose come concetti assoluti e ne costituisce la premessa gnoseologica.

Proseguendo, il ricorso al concetto di paradigma, nel senso di Thomas S. Kuhn, permette di fare un passo ulteriore. Il paradigma per Kuhn identifica un insieme complesso di norme, leggi e strumenti, accettati universalmente da una comunità scientifica, non esauribili in un mero insieme di regole esplicite. Esso definisce una tradizione di ricerca, emersa dall'esperienza e modificabile nel tempo, che garantisce la comprensione e la comunicabilità tra chi opera all'interno di uno stesso paradigma. Tale idea di paradigma si pone a metà strada tra l'esperienza situata e la pura concettualizzazione di essa. La comparazione tra i termini interni ad un medesimo paradigma non richiede il ricorso a categorie superiori, per cui è legittimo interrogarsi su come si proceda nel caso di una comparazione tra elementi appartenenti a paradigmi discreti. Un esempio è costituito dalle traduzioni e comparazioni linguistiche, che implicano l'analisi di vocaboli e il confronto dei significati, in cui la somiglianza/differenza tra concetti emerge naturalmente, aumentando la possibilità di attivare una "comparative situation". Il problema della comparazione tra sistemi filosofici diversi, in questa ottica, dipenderebbe proprio dalla scarsità di effettive occasioni in cui elementi appartenenti a paradigmi diversi si confrontano, più che dall'incommensurabilità dei sistemi.

Occorre allora orientare la ricerca verso il concetto di inter-paradigmaticità, ovvero lo spazio che intercorre tra i paradigmi costituiti. La comparazione tra dottrine filosofiche può avvenire, infatti, solo in uno spazio non riconducibile ad alcun paradigma esistente, uno spazio intermedio, in cui operi la creazione di senso. Si tratta di una dimensione della coscienza, non quindi una dimensione irrazionale, che si richiama, da un lato, al sostrato indifferenziato dell'esperienza da cui emergono i paradigmi e, dall'altro, alla razionalità che produce i paradigmi stessi. L'inter-paradigmaticità permette di attivare il confronto tra sistemi filosofici diversi e fornisce un approccio gnoseologico al tema dell'intercultura che, a differenza della

*gadameriana “fusione degli orizzonti”, riconosce a pieno le difficoltà connesse alla conoscenza reciproca delle culture. Un esempio di tale ricerca inter-paradigmatica tra pensiero occidentale e filosofia cinese, risale ai primi anni ‘30 del Novecento, quando il filosofo tedesco Martin Heidegger ha tentato, nei suoi studi sul Dao o Tao, di porre la propria riflessione a livello inter-paradigmatico, tendenza manifesta nei tentativi di “traduzione” dei termini della filosofia cinese mediante locuzioni sfumate non riconducibili direttamente ai termini del paradigma filosofico occidentale.*