

THE PHILOSOPHICAL VALUE OF THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE OF NATURAL HISTORY¹: IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEO-ARISTOTELISM

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ABSTRACT. *From the perspective of knowledge-type theory, the dominant morphology of human knowledge can be classified into three categories: (1) natural history knowledge (ancient times), (2) mathematical science knowledge (modern times) and (3) Science, Technology and Society knowledge (STS-k) which is characteristic for contemporary era. Natural history knowledge insists on holism and organicism. Mathematical science emphasizes the accuracy of experimental data and the stringency of logic. STS-k as a transdisciplinary knowledge-type stresses a constructive principle. The evolution of these three knowledge-types directly concerns the understanding of philosophy and the destiny of different philosophies. Philosophy is an old learning, and it possesses the characteristics of natural history. Due to the influence of modern mathematical science, contemporary philosophy has become the metaphysics of epistemology, which is deviated from its original nature. The contemporary rise of STS-k provided the basic conditions for philosophy's recuperation of the basic principles of natural history knowledge and the growth of their practical application. China is a great nation which cultivates the tradition of natural history knowledge. Classical Chinese philosophy possesses its basic principles which are characterized by practicality, embodied character, and which include collective cognitive and ethical approaches. They all are unique in human history and have special significance. Therefore, we can as reconsider the value of Chinese philosophy, as reconstruct (at least, interpret) the other contemporary philosophies of mankind in the perspective of natural history knowledge.*

KEYWORDS: *philosophy; Chinese praxis philosophy; natural history knowledge; mathematical science; Science, Technology and Society knowledge (STS-k)*

¹ “Natural history” or “natural history knowledge” is used in the work in the meaning of the type and body of knowledge (to a great extent of naturalist essence) that contains the approaches of cognition and the knowing itself of natural facts and laws. This is firstly the methodology of cognition and type of knowledge, but the body of knowledge as well, which is assimilated (during historical development) in written records and human (societal) experience, and which essentially includes the use of systematic forms and philosophical explanations of natural causes.

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Introduction

The method of morphology was shifted to the field of social science in the 20th century. The concepts of social formation, ideology and culture formation have evolved (Halbwachs, 2005:3–12), and knowledge form (type) is also a product of this movement. Using the method of morphology, French philosopher Michel Foucault set up a genealogy, and proposed his famous theory of Episteme (knowledge-type theory) [Foucault, 2001:2]. This theory holds that the discussion about the whole of human knowledge, precisely in the knowledge-type theory sense, is more normal (although unusual) than a traditional discussion. In the perspective of knowledge-type theory, the dominating morphology of human knowledge can be distributed into three categories: (1) natural history knowledge (ancient times), (2) mathematical science knowledge (modern times) and (3) Science, Technology and Society knowledge (STS-k) in contemporary era (Liu 2012:35–39). From the perspective of Aristotelism¹, the transition and development of these types of culture directly influences not only the understanding of philosophy but also concerns the destiny of different philosophies. In this approach, natural history knowledge has a profound significance.

1. The natural history tradition of human knowledge

Literally, Natural History allows us to identify many things, which leads humans to “know more names of birds, animals and plants”, as Confucius said (Confucius, 2006:268). Westerners call it Natural History ; in Chinese, it is called the history of nature (Zi-Ran Shi, ”自然史”) or physiography (Zi-Ran Zhi,”自然志” or Bo-Wu Zhi, ”博物志”), which means the macroscopic observation and classification of nature, including aspects of modern academic disciplines, such as astronomy, geology, geography, meteorology, biology and anthropology (Liu 2012:76–99).

According to the characteristics of production and activity of the ancients, Natural History (as a type of ancient knowledge) is produced mainly in the following aspects: (1) life experience, especially the feeling and embodied knowledge of daily activities; (2) labor cooperation of collective or ethnic groups; (3) the heritage of ancient experience; and (4) knowledge classification, which is the main target of natural history, wherein all kinds of knowledge are classified due to the knowledge

¹ The neologism “Aristotelism” is accepted in the Biocosmological Association (instead of the common “Aristotelianism”), signifying the direct relation to Aristotle’s original Naturalist Organicism.

genealogy.

As nature history is founded on the most basic life experience of the ancients, it has many features, such as naturalness, closeness, embodiment, individuality, materiality and aboriginality, which are the fundamentality and roots which are directly related to living. *Naturalness* means that most knowledge of natural science is obtained naturally because obtaining this knowledge happens naturally with human survival. *Closeness* means that this knowledge is the knowledge that surrounded human, and it is practical. *Embodiment* means that the ancients faced an enchanting world, and the expression of its content was attached and emotional. As the range of activities of the ancients was limited, *aboriginality* means that the knowledge they gained is typical “local” knowledge with obvious local and native characteristic. In actuality, it is the life knowledge of the natives. The knowledge that is in accordance with the living habits of the locals and their social order is the wisdom of the idea that “Each place has its streams that flow in from all over the country”. Therefore, natural history is the knowledge (in accordance with the production of Agricultural Age) mainly obtained by observation. Provided that observation does not change the object of observation, observation obtains the information of the object naturally. As a result, in the view of natural history, everything has brilliancy and can represent itself.

In human intellectual history, the tradition of natural history knowledge is a research paradigm that is much older than the current mathematical tradition and which for a long time occupied a leading position in the classical era. The so-called modern scientific revolution (associated with the names of Copernicus and Newton) was ultimately the subversion of the tradition of natural history knowledge (named the tradition of natural philosophy at that time) to the tradition of mathematical science.

The following four characters of natural history knowledge deserve our attention:

- First, from the onset, natural history knowledge, although being an ancient and primitive type of knowledge, was (and is) also the original form of general knowledge. In other words, all modern subjects have a long history of natural history;

- Second, because it is essential for the practical use by people – much of the modern knowledge retains the characteristics of natural history. This is especially true for the technological practical knowledge which types need manual operation. Example is the clinical practice of medicine which is still a manual technology to a certain extent and needs experience; similar to the use of electricity and technical specifications, and the practice of geology and astronomy;

- Third, as a way of thinking, natural history knowledge belongs to holism rather than reductionism, and organic theory rather than a mechanism, as well as pluralism rather than monism;

- Fourth, due to the low level of mathematics in ancient times, most of the original natural history knowledge is bound together with other knowledge. Therefore, from the perspective of natural history knowledge, nothing in the world is

useless; it's like a forest, in which nothing can be abandoned casually. In various periods of time, the emphasis of the society will be different; therefore, knowledge characteristics will be systematically diverse. For example, where there is an obvious increase in material wealth and a generally stable social structure, the relationship between mankind, the environment and the ethical principles are rising as the leading factor, which is a basic means that form a way to the sustainable development of communities.

In this way, we found that natural history knowledge (although being an ancient paradigm of knowledge) is not the dominant knowledge. Substantially, it is tolerant and honest, and it would not declare (in the name of progress) that the other types of knowledge are illegitimate. Natural history knowledge is an organic worldview. This stance and attitude encourages constructive dialogue, and it can promote communication and cooperation; it is a model of harmonious culture. When we consider the spirit of natural history knowledge as the basis of exploratory programs and the theory of natural world – we arrive at radically viewpoints than modern mathematical learning. Thus, this approach can become an important propellant for modern thought and dialogue. This is also essential to the complete understanding of the philosophy of the ages.

2. Philosophy as natural history knowledge

Philosophy is a very old knowledge, as religion and art. Philosophy experiences three forms of knowledge and is deeply rooted in the human tradition of natural history knowledge. At present, philosophy is affected by modern science, while in the past it had the characteristics of natural history knowledge. Mathematical science thrives currently by virtue of the so-called modern scientific revolution. Natural history knowledge has been marginalized, and it is now in a forgotten state, and such a situation leads us to a series of aphasia of metaphysical questions. At the same time, many major settled points of debate in the history of philosophy depend on an interpretation of the world by means of the methods and attitudes incorporated in the natural history knowledge.

In late ancient Greece, philosophy was called Metaphysics (after the Physics) rather than Meta-mathematics (after the Mathematics). At that time, when physics (from Ancient Greek: φύσις physis “nature”) meant the study of nature and naturalist laws (natural philosophy), it continued to retain the characteristics of natural history knowledge. In turn, in fact, modern philosophy is deprived of the study of naturalist issues.

In comparison, physics (nature) is “Many”, while mathematics is “One”. There was a debate between “One” and “Many” in ancient Greek Philosophy, which actually reflected the seed of debate between the natural history paradigm and the mathematical science paradigm. As a result, we can see that Aristotle is not only a founder of metaphysics but also a master of natural history knowledge.

Originally, ancient mathematics and physics were separate, and strictly scientific train of thoughts was mainly mathematics. Until modern times, mathematics and

physics were combined together, forming the physics of the mathematics paradigm, and the modern scientific revolution took place.

Mathematical science is the type of knowledge that is formed by processing experience, obtained through physics, in a mathematical way. Mathematical science includes various normal modern sciences. In mathematical science, the world itself is divided into two realms: of presentative (experiential) physical multiplicity and the abstract (idealistic) mathematics; generally, however, the world is turned into images of mathematics. The character of egocentricity in this program is too strong; therefore this type of knowledge has intense exclusiveness and result in a type of struggling culture (against nature). In modern times, it has raised tremendous struggle between tradition and modernization in many area of human knowledge. Due to the ascension of its status, mathematical science required the scientific philosophy (philosophical scientification). However, firstly, people must set up a foundation in epistemology for a philosophy that at the scientificization of philosophy. From the standpoint of Heidegger, such philosophy has deviated from the nature of philosophy and needs to be deconstructed. In contemporary times, the rise of STS-k provides the basic conditions for the recovery of natural philosophy that deals with natural history knowledge as the essential way of obtaining and using knowledge.

Science, technology and society knowledge (STS-k) has risen abruptly for the persistent ailment of mathematical science. STS-k is based on the triangular region that consists of the science, technology and society as its endpoint (Liu 2012:35–39), and it emphasizes that the system that consists these three components has a new nature. The characteristics of the new system include three independent and irreconcilable endpoints that must be explained. This shows that STS-k itself is a multiple and composite category; each component cannot be replaced by another but must be mutually integrated. A fundamental trait of science, technology and society is to return to human nature (humanity); that is to say, science and society are inseparable from human existence and essence. The fundamental impact of government intervention on STS-k is returning of humanity, that is, science is inseparable from the nature of society and human existence. Its existence and use must take into consideration natural conditions of the practical and active human being.

The development of essentially includes the constructive principles of natural history knowledge. STS-k development stresses symbiosis, mutual benefit and win-win effects in axiology. It insists on the compatibility, mutual respect and praise and appreciation in methodology, and also emphasizes diversity of coexistence and respect for others in ontological dimension. All this reflects the natural history characteristics of the world. As the reflection and embodiment of this situation, philosophy should get rid of the fetter of mathematical science, return to its tradition of natural history knowledge and show its characters and feelings of natural history. Therefore, the rediscovery and return of natural history knowledge can offer not only some complementary explanation that is different from mathematical science, but equally the essential contributions to the effective activity of the contemporary

discipline of philosophy, and introduce new substantive philosophical principles. Natural history knowledge systematically deals with many philosophical problems and their argumentation and summarizes the ages of philosophical experience and knowledge.

3. Chinese philosophy of praxis – as a full experience of natural history knowledge

The reviving of natural history knowledge encourages us to rethink philosophy and the metaphysical history of many national cultures. Naturally, we focus on Chinese philosophy. We got used to reflect upon Chinese philosophy from the perspective of the mathematical philosophical tradition, from Plato to Hegel. On the contrary, criticism of Chinese philosophy always has the opposite direction. Essentially, in his *Introduction of Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger argued that original philosophy had not serious differences with this tradition, but also had basic (more ancient) traditions that can be traced back to Heraclitus. Nowadays, the mission is to restore the natural history knowledge and its philosophy in the original sense.

We cannot say that there is no relationship between Heidegger's thought and Chinese philosophy. According to some researches from the comparative history of philosophy, the restorative tradition is similar to the ancient tradition of Chinese philosophy. Otherwise, we cannot tell why later Heidegger followed the tendency of Chinese philosophy. As we know, Heidegger, focused on and studied Chinese philosophy (from its medieval period), especially the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Therefore, Chinese wisdom should belong to the ancient philosophical tradition.

Ancient Chinese philosophy has a long anti-intellectual tradition, which denies intellectual metaphysics (the tradition of intellectual theory). In ancient China, there were meanings "Philosopher" and "Philosophy", which also suggest that the Chinese ancestors consider philosophy both as learning or a subject-matter, and also as an attitude and a way of life. Chuang-tzu once said, "There is true man and then there is true knowledge." (Chuang-tzu 2010:95) The unique content and form of Chinese philosophy mainly displays the discussion of three types of relationships: heaven-man, groups-oneself and body-mind. The discussion has a broad correspondence with Western philosophy, which concerns other relationships: man-nature, man-society and man-oneself. However, the aim of Chinese philosophy is not to become a theoretical discipline, but to be mostly practical. This goal is emphasizing the personal praxis and seeking for the cultivation of human morality. This approach correlates with the ancient Greek philosophy that regards philosophy as a life-style. (Pierre Hadot, 2012:51)

Rising of the contemporary Chinese praxis philosophy is essentially the returning to the old natural history wisdom. This recurrence is a type of "Love of Wisdom" and is a process of protecting its roots and fixing its foundation.

China is the oldest agricultural country; it is also one of the greatest nations with a profound tradition of natural history knowledge in human history.

China's experience of natural history knowledge possesses practicality, inherent character, collective cognition and ethics. All this is a deep-rooted indispensable tradition (Zhonglin Liu 2007), which is distinct in the history of mankind and has profound implications. This type of wisdom is higher than types offered to us by popular Western philosophies. Although it is not historically unique, it is at least the last of its kind remaining. Hence, it has great value and significance. It suggests us not only to reconsider philosophy, especially Chinese philosophy, but also reconstruct contemporary philosophy from the perspective of natural history. Substantially, these perspectives of philosophy development (of Integralist essence) are accomplished in their multiformity; they are parallel and synchronous with current multifarious worldview.

Philosophies in the 20th century share a common character of rebellion against the philosophy of identity. However, the vast majority of schools emphasize that philosophy should return to regarding the individual human life and existent experience. This is likewise a turn to philosophies of difference and diversity. Chinese philosophy of praxis provides such a basic experience, so it is valuable with respect to fighting against the dictate of contemporary scientific and technological experiences.

The modality of Chinese naturalistic experience includes the following experience:

- First, *historical* experience. This tradition has passed through the blood relationship and is based on ancestor worship, which ensures continuity of context. It plays an active role till nowadays. The old Chinese proverb says: “old mills passed from generation to generation”.

- Second, *humanistic* experience. Due to the lack of monotheism in China, grasping of essences and acquiring of practical experience is reflected mainly in the relationships between mankind and the environment, groups and oneself, and body and mind. It has the characteristic of morality and self-cultivation. And thus it forms the experience and principles of ethics education and collective coexistence – the global experience and the principle of harmony.

- Third, *physical* experience. It indicates the embodied experience that is transmitted by the artisans' tradition. The ancient Chinese had the tradition of despising texts and denying knowledge. However, they paid much attention to their behavior with respect to morality. From this, effective forms of preaching that lead to good practical life become the fundamental form of the Chinese (in respect to behavior) basic principles and embodied experience.

- Fourth, *Internal* experience. This refers mainly to the spiritual experience. Because of the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese culture formed its own Zen with local characteristics during the Tang dynasty, entirely turning inward during the Song dynasty and, further, until the Ming dynasty. At this time, the convergence of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism was realized and heart-mind theory was formed. Heart-mind theory emphasizes the individual's inner experience and spiritual cognition, and from this realm, the culture of self-cultivation was shaped to achieve

the height of traditional ideology.

•Fifth, experience of *canonical texts*. China is one of the four great ancient civilizations; the characters' ancient forms are basically maintained up to date. These characters are converged with the forms of Confucian classics, history, philosophy and literature, thus recording all our national, domestic and personal experiences of all generations. They passed from generation to generation and are as vast as the misty ocean. Nevertheless, this is far from the entire body of Chinese literature. A large number of pseudo-histories, anecdotes and ethnic minority documents are lost. Less than 1% of unrecorded experiences transmitted orally and behaviorally is preserved, most of them have disappeared. Nevertheless, it is also the most abundant and resplendent treasure of wisdom in the world, which is worth of study and reference.

Conclusion: Reviving Chinese experience in natural ways

China is a country with a long and continuous tradition of natural history knowledge that can provide the most important traditional resources to answer modern problems. However, natural history knowledge has its own way of existence and extension. It exists as a whole and has its prominent attributes. If we are looking for the factors which are beneficial to the present situation only according to the model of modernity, then it is just a way of following the “reverse analogical interpretation” path. However, this path, in metaphor, can lead to a situation that is actually “killing the goose that lays the golden eggs”. In order to revive the wisdom of Chinese natural history knowledge, therefore, we must investigate how to develop a new education method and an inheritance form according to the principles of natural history knowledge.

First, we should advocate and establish senses of natural history knowledge, and promote the spirit of natural history knowledge in the general cultural milieu. The so-called natural history feeling or natural history spirit is also a constructive (Integralist) general atmosphere. It is based on the acceptance and acknowledgement of a situation and something that has existed already, and it is an attitude, norm, criterion and system of action to improve things and systems by nonviolent denial.

Second, traditional culture education should be developed as a whole, and should be included in elementary education and life-long education systems. There are large amounts of natural history resources in the knowledge history of all nationalities, and they are the first-hand experience of the interaction between nature and humans. However, this type of education should be conducted through systematic practice and percept rather than torn into pieces. Modern science and technology are mostly knowledge and skills, whereas the natural history knowledge is related to the meaning of humanities concerns, so the reforming of the present science education is indeed a return to the natural history education. Essentially, in this, natural history principles are deeply compatible with the rational (super)system of knowledge developed by Aristotle nearly 25 centuries ago. Nowadays, Aristotle's principles of Naturalist Organicism are the basis for the development of Biocosmological

Association.

Third, reviving the experience of Chinese natural history knowledge should be put into action, because practicality is the fundamental characteristics of Chinese ancient culture. Putting the oral truth into practice is not only a tradition in China but also a basic criterion for evaluating a person. Therefore, drawing together the advocacy of morality with the practical execution of moral principles should again come to the frontline of intellectual activity, in realizing historical (evolutionary) transformations and development.

Currently, the global cultural life has become connected as a whole Organicist entity. Intercultural communication and sharing about a common destiny has become the reality. And this development requires more cooperation and tolerance for human survival. Thus, revival of the experience of Chinese natural history knowledge cannot be exclusive, like an isolated incident. Essentially, it is internally consistent with the modern neo-Aristotelian movements including the agency of the Biocosmological Association. We can foresee that the interaction between Chinese natural history knowledge and modern culture will substantially promote the integration of mankind's wisdom, thus realizing a major contribution to the approaching of new future harmonious (longed-for) global and local civilizations.

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