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Citation

BURIK, Steven.(2020). Derrida and Asian thought. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 1-3.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/3170

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INTRODUCTION



Derrida and Asian Thought

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More than fifteen years after Jacques Derrida passed away, he remains a controversial figure in philosophy. Much maligned, both when he was alive and after his death, Derrida's relation to philosophy proper has always been an uneasy one, not least because of his relentless questioning of the notion of "philosophy proper" itself. It is this relentless interrogation of the history and presuppositions of Western philosophy that has made him an attractive figure to comparative philosophy. Many of the authors in this volume, and others beside them, have seen in Derrida a kind of thinking that refuses to play by the rules of traditional Western philosophy, while at the same time respecting those rules as well. What Derrida called the double bind is something that I believe most comparative philosophers struggle with: the need to open philosophy to its other but at the same time to guard a kind of philosophical integrity and rigor.

While it is certain that Derrida's openness towards other ways of thinking will continue to attract a large number of comparative philosophers, it is equally certain that even within comparative philosophy Derrida remains a controversial figure. For although he has constantly argued for philosophy to indeed open to its other, his own efforts in this direction have remained both sparse and checkered. On the few occasions that Derrida actually mentions other cultures, or non-Indo-European traditions of thought and languages, he either does so fleetingly without really engaging them any further, quickly returning to the deconstruction of the West itself, or, as many authors have shown, he does so without the requisite knowledge of those traditions, inevitably coming to rather hasty and unwarranted conclusions or leaving many issues unresolved. The criticism levied against Heidegger (from whom Derrida derives a lot of inspiration), that he was not really all that interested in non-Western thinking after all, could equally well apply to Derrida.

And that is not all: there is Derrida's infamous statement (again following in the footsteps of Heidegger) that there is no such thing as Chinese philosophy, recorded on his visit to China in 2001. If all the above allegations are true, then what explains the continued attraction of comparative philosophers to the figure of Derrida? It is my sincere hope that this special issue will shed some light on this. For, the contributors to this issue not only show the remarkable affinity of Derrida's thinking with non-Western thought, but in the contribution of Ning Zhang we may also find elucidations of his engagement or lack thereof with non-Western thought. In other words, this issue will not only provide the interested reader with many examples of the applicability of Derrida as an interlocutor with non-Western philosophy, but it will also seek to clarify his position

with regard to comparative or intercultural philosophy, and seek to clarify his insistence that there is no such thing as Chinese philosophy.

Ning Zhang's contribution does exactly the latter in a compilation from two interviews she held with Derrida in 1999 and 2000 respectively. In the first interview Derrida gives us a clearer insight into his ideas on the problem of intercultural exchange, especially concerning the question of translation, translatability and untranslatability, as a central issue of his work. From the second interview, we have chosen to translate the part where Derrida expresses clearly his views on the relation between philosophy and thinking. This interview also clarifies his by-now infamous statement that there is no such thing as "Chinese Philosophy." Zhang and Derrida also discuss the relation of his work to China, and for these reasons both these interviews offer a rare and fascinating opportunity to better understand how Derrida perceived himself in relation to philosophy or thinking from different cultures.

Robert Magliola's article is an effort to boost the Derrida-Buddhism dialogue. Magliola finds intersections between various strands of Mādhyamika Buddhism and Derrida's "devoiding" practices. Through a highly engaged exposition of various examples of Derrida's *stylistique* – that is of his various ways of playing with language, as forms of acting or playing out his philosophical endeavors – Magliola deftly shows how such playing out deconstructs forms of entitative thought, such as traditional ideas of identity, univocity, and correspondence theory, and how this intersects with some key ideas of Mādhyamika Buddhism.

In a comparison of the paths of thinking of Derrida, Dōgen, and Zhuangzi, Carl Olson assesses their common endeavors to do philosophy as a kind of play. He thereby attempts to answer the question of whether engaging in philosophy as a form of play actually helps or hinders the quest to overcome the representational mode of thinking. Olson shows how these three protagonists all use a playful way of doing philosophy to upset the traditional rules of philosophy and challenge common sense notions of reality and representation, with a view to enlarging their understanding of the world and our place in it, by "playing" with the minds of their readers. Differences between Derrida and the other philosophers surface, however, when attempting to answer the aforementioned question.

Rolf Elberfeld's article compares Derrida with Nishitani with regard to the notion of "place." Elberfeld finds in Derrida's treatment of *Chora* close proximities to Asian thought, and in particular to Nishitani's philosophy of place (*basho*, *tokoro*). Elberfeld argues that such notions do not refer to actual places, but point us to what is in-apparent (*das Unscheinbare*), and speaks of non-being. Both Derrida and Nishitani use such notions to refer to the limitations of the western obsession with Being and presence. Both try to open up a new dimension and experience of *thinking* which is not bound to substantialized truth; but there is a marked difference in how they understand this dimension or experience.

In my own contribution, I explore in how far it is viable to apply Derrida's thoughts regarding "trace" to Daoism. I argue that if *dao* is read in a non-metaphysical way, then the Derridean idea of "trace" will show large overlaps with *dao*. I try to show how, despite obvious historical and philosophical differences, a "trace" reading of *dao* can help develop an understanding of *dao* that would not necessarily see it as a metaphysical principle, ineffable but transcendent nonetheless, but rather as an immanent working of the patterned processes that make up both the natural and human world.

While each of the articles in this volume stands alone in its own right, one can detect some commonalities. The concepts of play or playfulness, impermanence, and trace, as well as ideas and problems concerning language and translation, and the question of what is philosophy are central concerns that feature in all of the contributions, and it is our hope that the reader will feel both challenged and inspired by the readings the authors provide here.

I wish to thank Graham Parkes for his invaluable work during the preliminary stages of this special issue. I also wish to thank the International Institute for Field-Being for their permission to republish, with substantial changes, Robert Magliola's article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).