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Taking Philosophy Back: A Call From the Great Wall of China

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This article is inspired by my first ever China trip in May 2018 in which I participated in a workshop at the Dalian University of Technology on American and Chinese approaches in environmental ethics and responsible innovation. The article is based on my reflections about Asian philosophical traditions and my critique of the review by Adam Briggie and Robert Frodeman of the book *Taking Philosophy Back: A Multicultural Manifesto* (Van Norden 2017).

After the philosophy workshop in Dalian, I chose to stay few more days in Beijing before flying back to the USA. Being in China for the first time, I wanted to make full use of my department's funding that supported my trip. I had enriching experiences at Beijing's historical landmarks such as the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, Beihai Park, Jingshan Park, Lama Temple, Confucius Temple, Bell and Drum Towers, Summer Palace, and Tiananmen Square. One of the world's oldest surviving civilizations, in my opinion, has tremendous lessons for the world at so many levels.

Unspoken Xenophobia

At the workshop, almost all the papers by Chinese philosophers made references to Euro-American philosophers but American philosophers' papers strictly remained Euro-American in their focus and approach. I was reminded of the Silk Road era in which hundreds of Chinese scholars traveled to India and learned Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit to translate hundreds of Buddhist and other texts into Chinese.

Most famously, Faxian and Xuan Zang traveled on foot for more than a thousand miles across China, and Central Asia to reach India. and many others followed in their footsteps and became key bridges between the two most ancient Asian civilizations. In that period, Chinese scholars turned Indian knowledge systems into uniquely Chinese systems by mixing them with Daoism and Confucianism.

Their translation was so perfect that today India has lost some of its ancient knowledge systems but thanks to Chinese preservation efforts, we still have access to that lost knowledge. Chinese ethics of translation did not have the colonizing tendencies that the Western systems sometimes have tended to demonstrate. China seems to be doing the same with Euro-American knowledge systems currently. Chinese philosophers are meticulously learning Euro-American systems and are combining this with their own indigenous systems like they did with Indic systems more than 1000 years ago.

Compared to the Chinese openness for American scholarship, we in the American philosophy departments appear pretty xenophobic. We have a long way to go to truly understand and embrace "alien" philosophical ideas and Chinese scholars are good role models for us. Almost 90% of our philosophy students, even today, do not take any course on Eastern thought.

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Aren't we producing new generations of Eurocentric scholars who continue to remain ignorant about the intellectual history of major Asian civilizations that are becoming increasingly important today? Almost all philosophy departments in Asia or elsewhere study Western thought. When will the reverse happen? Philosophy majors studying Asian thought? Today, China is already one of the biggest economies in the world and yet how long will Euro-American philosophy students be stuck in the 19th century? The students in other departments or majors such as religion, anthropology, and history are much better as they do study several major world cultures.

What Is Philosophy?

Upon reading my message based on my reflections from the Chinese trip, even with his disagreements, my colleague Professor Adam Briggie shared his (and Frodeman's) review of a recent book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* because the book makes similar arguments to mine. Inspired by the book's powerful arguments about Euro-centricity in American philosophy, I took a look at some of the philosophy courses and noticed that almost all of the philosophy courses focus only on Western philosophy.

Interacting with philosophers in China really opened my eyes to this issue and hopefully, we can together begin to rectify the Euro-centric nature of this oldest field in humanities that seems stuck in the colonial times of 19th century (when Euro-America were dominant in every way unlike today's globalized world). Luckily, many other departments/majors have diversified considerably, e.g., my own field of religious studies has "Great Religions" course that introduces all the religions, not just Western ones before a student chooses his/her specialization, of course. Similarly, anthropology, history, art history, etc. are much more inclusive. It is time to get to the oldest field that continues to resist this reformation.

We know that "philosophy" is a western term based on the terms *Philos* and *Sophia*. However, many other departments with their "western" title such as religion, art, and history have become much more inclusive, so just the Western etymological significance of philosophy should no longer be a reason for its west-only focus. The issue is also not about the "identity politics." The discussion should not devolve into a caricature of the justice issues concerning race, gender, and sexuality: identity politics is not about diversity but freedom, equality, and dignity.

I will now respond to the book-review by Adam Briggie and Robert Frodeman. In their review, both start by noting their similarity and overlaps with the project by Bryan Van Norden. Both projects started with their respective opinion pieces in the New York Times with a call for reforming professional philosophy. However, even as they note these similarities, they seem to be missing a few points. Briggie and Frodeman advocate that philosophers must engage with scientists, engineers, policy-makers, and community groups. Almost, each of these sets of people in the 19th century primarily consisted of people of Euro-American heritage, ethnicity, or nationalities.

However, in the 21st century United States, more than 25% of all scientists and engineers are from Asian and other non-Western heritage.¹ Today, religion and ecology is one of the fast-growing subfields in humanities in which we explore how different religious traditions shape the practitioners' worldviews towards their environment. I suggest that it is time to also explore similar connections between different cultural and religious backgrounds of policy makers, scientists, and engineers. And for that, philosophy courses need to look beyond Western thought.

Finally, the fourth set of people, i.e., community groups are similarly becoming increasingly diversified in the United States. In summary, Briggie and Frodeman need to revise their own project to reflect today's diversified, globalized, and pluralistic world, not just the interdisciplinary world that they already recognize in their project.

Reflections and Disagreements

The next issue I discovered in their book review is when they challenge Van Norden's approach by stating, "He tends to focus only on 'top' (via Leiter's definition) philosophy departments or PhD-granting departments. This can give a skewed picture, which is something we wonder about, given that we have two faculty members in our relatively small department focused on Southeast Asian philosophy and religion." Almost all the Asian philosophy courses are taken exclusively by religion students, *not* philosophy students.

Next, they state, "He first isolates different kinds of LCTP (Chinese, Indian, Native American, and African) and then notes how rarely each feature on the roster of philosophy departments. But it could be that when LCTP are aggregated the problem dissipates". This statement seems to be ignoring the fact that as of now philosophy departments are overwhelmingly dominated by experts *only* in Western thought. Rarely if ever a faculty is hired to teach non-Western *philosophy*.

If I compare this situation with the religion counterpart, I have noticed that there are two or sometimes three professors who focus on different eras and/or aspects of Judaism and/or Christianity but almost all religion departments have distinct individuals with expertise in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and in some cases with indigenous traditions as well. To be sure, I am not suggesting about the ethnicity or background of the person teaching different traditions, but I am simply sharing the observation that there are multiple traditions and religions represented by specialists in the religious studies department, regardless of their own personal background or ethnicity.

Similar is the case with most history departments in North America where two or three professors focus on Euro-American history with other professors focusing on South Asian (Indian), East Asian (Chinese), and other regions of the world. I am humbly requesting a similar model for American philosophy departments. Just as in other departments,

¹ <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2015/nsf15328/>

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philosophy also should not be West-only and also not “West and all the aggregated rest” either.

Further, I disagree with their statement, “We certainly would not list ourselves as specialists in any LCTP (Less Commonly Taught Philosophies), but we both draw from a variety of traditions and cultures in the classroom. We suspect this kind of practice is widespread”. This kind of sprinkling of non-Western traditions is not the way citizens of today’s globalized and pluralistic world can be prepared. This approach will continue to keep American philosophy students oblivious about the worldviews of more than three fourth of world’s population whose heritage is not based on Western thought.

So, when philosophy folks say, “we cannot cover every kind of philosophy,” they effectively end up dedicating almost 100% of their resources on the knowledge traditions of less than quarter of humankind. No other discipline is as parochial and xenophobic as this oldest humanities discipline, the discipline of religious studies has certainly moved beyond Christian theology and now includes several major world traditions and religions. One final and important criticism they make is this:

We subscribe to a different conception of philosophy. On our view, philosophy does not primarily consist of a series of problems (e.g., free will; intrinsic value) which one can take a variety of positions on. Philosophy consists of a tradition and a narrative across time. The thoughts of Hegel or Heidegger can best be understood as a rumination on an ongoing conversation involving Nietzsche, Christianity, Duns Scotus, Aristotle, Plato, etc. In short, we picture philosophy in narrative and historical terms as embedded in cultural contexts. And given that there is only so much time and so many credit hours in the degree plan, a philosophical education is understandably limited to one tradition (though, again, not exclusively – there should be room for cross-cultural comparisons).

In this quote above, I agree that philosophy is a diachronic tradition but I would like to also suggest that it is also one of the earliest globalized tradition that included the long history of interactions among several philosophical traditions. For instance, a monumental work as *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (McEvelley 2002) demonstrates the continuous exchanges between Greek and Indian philosophers?

Similarly, others have demonstrated similar exchanges between Indian and Greek Aesthetics (Gupt 1994), Christianity and Buddhism, European Enlightenment with Muslim and Indian traditions and so on. When much of the history of the Western intellectual tradition has been a history of interactions with Muslims and Asians, why must today’s American students forget all those interactions and live as if three fourth of world’s people do not exist intellectually?

In conclusion, I hope we will be as zealous about internationality of philosophy as they we have been about interdisciplinarity. It is time for philosophers to realize that the field today already has become a global village. The study of LCTP is not just about justice, diversity, or identity politics, it is about professional ethical commitment to preparing tomorrow’s students as well-rounded as possible. Philosophy professors need to just look over their

shoulders at their Religious Studies, Anthropology, and History colleagues and that will be a good beginning.

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