

# Redefining Philosophy through Assimilation

Nishida Kitarō and Mou Zong-san

LAM Wing-keung

Recently James Heisig and others presented a collection of essays examining the state of the study of Japanese philosophy abroad, calling for a redefinition philosophy itself.<sup>1</sup> Since the introduction of Western philosophy in the late nineteenth century, the definition of philosophy has been reexamined not only in Japan but also in the East Asian philosophical sphere, in which China plays a central role. This paper will explore how redefinitions were worked out in these two Asian philosophical traditions, focusing especially on Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and Mou Zong-san 牟宗三 (1909–1995), the two renowned representatives of Kyoto School<sup>2</sup> and Contemporary Neo-Confucianism or “New Confucianism” 新儒教,<sup>3</sup> both of whom were actively involved in philo-

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1. See James HEISIG, ed. *Japanese Philosophy Abroad* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2004).

2. Here the I do not intend to go into debates over the definition of the “Kyoto School,” which I basically understand as a group of philosophers who more or less came under the direct philosophical influence of Nishida Kitarō.

3. In this paper, we will not enter into the debate over the definition of “New

sophical dialogue between the East and the West. There is no doubt that both redefined “philosophy” in the course of shaping their own philosophical projects, but in neither case was it a *creatio ex nihilo*. I will attempt here to demonstrate that those seeking to redefine philosophy in contemporary Japan and China, including Nishida and Mou, employed both Western and traditionally Asian ideas in creating their unique philosophies, a method we may characterize as “assimilation?”

Philosophical concepts like *junsui keiken* 純粹經驗 and *gyakutaiō* 逆対応 in Nishida are assimilations of the notions of “pure experience” and “correspondence,” though not limited to the way those terms had been addressed by William James and Daitō Kokushi 大燈国師 respectively. As for Mou, moral metaphysics is an assimilation of Kantian moral philosophy and Confucius’ idea of “inner-sage external-king 内聖外王.”

I do not mean to understand assimilation simply in terms of the reception of Western philosophers and the making of contemporary Japanese and Chinese philosophies, but would argue that it is a more fundamental and underlying activity. My question here is: How does assimilation function to redefine “philosophy,” as exemplified by the approaches of Nishida and Mou to different Asian philosophical traditions? What significance can be attributed to their assimilative gestures towards the “(Western) philosophy” taking place in the East?

In the last few decades in the West, a great deal of research has been done concerning Japanese philosophy, including comparative studies of the Japanese and Western philosophical traditions. However, not much attention has been devoted to the dialogue between Japanese philosophy and the contemporary Chinese philosophical tradition.<sup>4</sup> One of the

Confucianism.” For our purposes, New Confucianism refers to the group of philosophers who sought to revive Confucianism after the Qing Dynasty and the attack on Confucianism during the May Fourth Movement, which distinguishes them from classical Confucianism and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. Members include, but are not limited to, LIANG Shu-min 梁漱溟, XIONG Shi-li 熊十力, TANG Chun-i 唐君毅, MOU Zong-san 牟宗三, and others. See Ng Yu-kwan [儒家哲學] [The philosophy of Confucianism], (Taipei: Commercial Books, 1995), 215, 228.

4. There are a number of articles on modern Japanese and Chinese philosophical interchange, including NG Yu-kwan [當代新儒學與京都學派的比較: 牟宗三與久松真一論覺悟] [A comparative study of contemporary Neo-Confucianism and the Kyoto

aims of this essay is to begin filling this gap by exploring the possibility and significance of philosophical dialogue within the East, specifically, between Japan and China.

Although Nishida was overtly interested in a philosophical dialogue and confrontation with Western philosophy, we should not overlook the philosophical elements of the “East” contained in his overall project. In particular, attention needs to be given to how the “East” was perceived in “Japanese” philosophy. These are precisely where the main concerns of the following pages lie.

#### ASSIMILATION: A MIDWIFE FOR THE RECEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION OF PHILOSOPHY

Despite the innumerable definitions of philosophy, the word and concept of “philosophy” itself are without doubt derived from its Greek origin. Ever since “philosophy” was introduced to Japan and China, particularly in the late nineteenth century, not only the signifier—the word “philosophy”—but also the signified—the meaning of

school: Mou Zong-san and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi on liberation], in『牟宗三哲學與唐君毅哲學論』[The philosophies of Mou Zong-san and Tang Chun-i], JIANG Ryh-shin and TSE Ren-hou, eds., (Taipei: Wenjin, 1997), 243–66; reprinted in NG Yu-kwan, *The Philosophy of Confucianism*, 273–94; LIN Chen-kuo,「東方鏡映中的現代性——新儒家與京都學派的比較思想史省察」[A comparative examination of the intellectual history of New Confucianism and the Kyoto school],『當代儒學論集:傳統與創新』[Essays on contemporary Confucianism: Tradition and innovation] (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academic Sinica, 1995), 253–73, reprinted in LIN Chen-kuo,『空性與現代性:從京都學派、新儒家到多音的佛教詮釋學』[Emptiness and modernity: The Kyoto school, New Confucianism, and polyphonic Buddhist hermeneutics] (Taipei: New Century Publishing Co., 1999), 131–57, LIN Chen-kuo,「理性、空性與歷史意識:新儒家與京都學派的哲學對話」[Rationality, Emptiness and Historical Consciousness: A Philosophical Dialogue between New Confucianism and the Kyoto School]; a paper presented at an international congress on “Eastern Culture and Modern Society: Philosophical Dialogue among Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism” held at the Research Centre for Chinese Philosophy and Culture, Department of Philosophy, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 23–24 November 2006. Compared to the scholarship in the West, however, there is much room for improvement in modern Japanese and Chinese philosophical interchange.

“philosophy”—were adopted by the two Asian traditions, in which assimilation has served as a midwife for receiving Western philosophy but also for constructing it.

As is well known, the word “philosophy” was translated with two ideographic characters, *tetsu* 哲 and *gaku* 学, by Nishi Amane, and since that time has come into common use in Japanese and Chinese [哲学 in simplified Chinese and 哲學 in traditional Chinese], as well as in Korean speaking regions [철학 in Korean]. Although at first untranslated and simply transliterated into one of the Japanese syllabaries as *hirosobi* ヒロンビ, Nishi finally settled on the two ideographs to render the term. By tracing the background to his translation, we come to realize how significant a role assimilation plays when it comes to the translation into *kanji* of terms that basically originate from the Chinese tradition with its heavy reliance on Confucius thought.

In a postscript to the book *Seiriron* 『性理論』(1861) written by Tsuda Mamichi, Nishi used the term *kitetsugaku* 希哲学 to refer to “philosophy.” Trained in Confucianism, first through the study of Zhu Xi 朱子 and later of Ogyū Sorai,<sup>5</sup> it is no surprise that Nishi employed Confucius’ expressions and ideas in speaking of (Western) philosophy. Elsewhere Nishi provided other *kanji* translations for the term “philosophy,” among them, *hirosobi* 斐鹵蘇比 in *Kaidaimon* 『開題門』 *kikengaku* 希賢学, and *kyūrigaku* 窮理学 in *Hyakurenkan* 『百学連環』 As pointed out by Ōhashi Ryōsuke, there are at least three characteristic forms of the translations of Western philosophical terms into Japanese used by Nishi, namely, transliteration (e.g., *hirosobi* 斐鹵蘇比 for the phoneme “philosophy”), assimilation with Confucius ideas (e.g., *kikengaku* and *kyūrigaku* for “philosophy” and *ritaigaku* 理体学 for “ontology”), and finally, assimilation with Buddhist concepts (e.g., *nigengaku* 人間学 for “sociology”).<sup>6</sup> Except for the obvious phonetic transcriptions, his other

5. See KITANO Hiroyuki 北野裕通 「「哲学」との出会い——西周」[The encounter of “philosophy”: Nishi Amane], (Kyoto: Sekaishisōsha, 1997), 7.

6. See ŌHASHI Ryōsuke, 「西洋思想「ヒロンビ」の翻訳:西周」[The Translation of “Philosophy” of Western Thought: Amane Nishi] 『日本のなもの、ヨーロッパ的なもの』[*Japanese Stuff, European Stuff*], (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1992), 35-52.

translations are clearly assimilations of Confucius and Buddhist ideas, in particular as found in the Chinese heritage. Kitano Hiroyuki points out,

Even though the (un)translated word *hirosobi* was one of the decisions made by Nishi, it was done by relating European classical words to Confucius literature. In perusing Chinese literature, Nishi was particularly fond of employing the semantic meaning he found embedded there.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Nishi posited that Western studies of *ki* 氣 are rather advanced whereas the analysis of *ri* 理 is comparatively weak.<sup>8</sup> Obviously such interpretations of Western philosophy are carried out through a process of assimilating Neo-Confucius concepts,<sup>9</sup> namely, the use of *ki* and *ri*, into the classifications of Western philosophy.

Translating the Greek word φιλοσοφία and other Western ideas by assimilating Confucius' ideas entails both an interpretation of (Western) philosophy and the construction of philosophy. As John Maraldo suggests, rather than refer to this as "translation," this process is better called "trans-lation" to indicate "the process of mediation by which texts convey philosophical methods, problems and terminology."<sup>10</sup> As a "*sine qua non* for the practice of philosophizing,"<sup>11</sup> the method of assimilation that Nishi employed for "trans-lating" Western philosophy indicates that "philosophical" elements can also be found in non-Western traditions, notably in Confucianism and Buddhism. Although one may argue that Nishi's trans-lation remains a "Western prerogative,"<sup>12</sup> Nishi in fact reminds us that philosophy should not be perceived as a monopoly of the West; it is also widely available in the East.

7. KITANO, "The Encounter of Philosophy," 20.

8. See the citation in KITANO, "The Encounter of Philosophy," 6.

9. *Ibid.*, 8.

10. JOHN C. MARALDO, "Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy," in Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine, eds., *Japan in Tradition and Post-modern Perspectives* (Albany: SUNY, 1995), 229. See also John Maraldo, "Defining Philosophy in the Making" in *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, 237.

11. MARALDO, "Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy," 229.

12. See James HEISIG, "Redefining Defining Philosophy: An Apology for a Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy," *Japanese Philosophy Abroad*, 277.

Moreover, the activity of “trans-lating” philosophizing texts through assimilation is itself a kind of philosophical construction. Whenever “trans-lation” takes place, “the practice of philosophizing” is embedded in a “process of mediation” by assimilating Western ideas along with their respective tradition of terms, technical vocabulary, and thoughts. Using *tetsugaku* 哲学 to refer to “philosophy,” not only carries a kind of Confucian orientation, it also directs Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and other languages that make use of Chinese ideographic characters to a certain meaning that differs from the literal meaning of “philosophy,” the love of wisdom.

The word *gaku* 学, for instance, carries the sense of study or learning. Even aside from its Confucius origins and orientation, the word *gaku* tends to suggest different ideas of what it means to “philosophize,” namely, that “philosophy” has to do with study or a kind of learning. Though not completely unrelated to the Greek etymology, it adds “new” nuances to the term. In other words, whenever “trans-lation” takes place, interpretations are in play and these interpretations are themselves a kind of “philosophizing” that bring new and different connotations with them. Even if these accretions are not entirely “unique,” they are rightly considered a kind of “philosophical construction” insofar as they “convey philosophical methods, problems, and terminology.”

I do not mean to suggest here that philosophy is something created out of nothing. No matter how creative and unique the appearance and taste of a “new” cheese cake, it inevitably uses some of the “old” ingredients; you cannot make a cheese cake without cheese. Even if no ontological questions are posed, the inquiry into where the word philosophy and its meaning came from entailed, at the time of the entry of Western philosophy into the “East,” a degree of transformation, which I am here calling an “assimilation” by way of traditional language and ways of thinking. Whenever one sets out to learn a new language, one does so by translating and assimilating it into one’s mother tongue. And, in a still broader sense, assimilation is at work in cross-cultural communication.

The insistence that philosophy is not a monopoly of the West not only implies that the “activity of philosophizing” can be, and in fact has been, conducted in the East, but suggests that this latter may serve as a mir-

ror in which the Western tradition of philosophy can see itself reflected in a new way. Assimilation—the collaboration of Western philosophical words and ideas with their Japanese and Chinese counterparts—does not take place unilaterally from West to East; it involves a mutual interchange.

One thinks here of what John Cobb has to say regarding interreligious dialogue as a process of “mutual transformation” that follows on “mutual understanding”<sup>13</sup> In the course of “trans-lating” “(Western) philosophy” with Japanese and Chinese terminologies and thoughts, these latter must involve a degree of “mutual understanding” with the West and their own respective traditions. Otherwise, it is hard to understand how “trans-lation” could be possible. In the following pages, I will show how Nishida Kitarō and Mou Zong-san employ the method of “assimilation” in the course of encountering and receiving (Western) philosophy and engaging in their own philosophical constructions.

#### ASSIMILATION IN NISHIDA KITARŌ: THE BIRTH OF AN ORIGINAL PHILOSOPHY IN JAPAN

Seeing assimilation as a midwife implies something newborn. Compared to the “trans-lations” done by Nishi and Tsuda Mamichi in the early years of the Meiji era, Nishida Kitarō has been widely recognized as a world-class thinker and creator of an original philosophy. But his originality is itself an assimilation, not a simple *creatio ex nihilo*.

There is some debate as to whether to refer to Nishida as Japan’s first philosopher or not. Concerning his maiden work, *Zen no kenkyū* 『善の研究』 (An inquiry into the good), Takahashi Satomi did not hesitate to single it out as the first philosophical book in Japan since the Meiji era.

*Zen no kenkyū* carries a unique tone and flavor... This book is the first and the only philosophical book of our people since the Meiji era. I firmly believe that.<sup>14</sup>

13. John B. COBB, Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

14. TAKAHASHI Satomi 高橋里美, 「意識現象の事実とその意味——西田氏著『善の

The reason Takahashi was so confident of the importance of *Zen no kenkyū* is that he found in its ideas the kind of “originality” and “creativity” [*dokusō* 独創] that “does not merely remain a catalogue of new thoughts, but rather sustains a kind of unification [*renraku tōitsu* 連絡統一] of thought.”<sup>15</sup> Obviously there is a comparison here between the West and Japan, and perhaps of other philosophical traditions as well recognized at the time Takahashi was writing his review. As Sayūda Kiichirō commented, the discourse Nishida had framed could be properly considered “Nishida philosophy” in that it embraces a unique system [体系].<sup>16</sup>

As to whether Nishida merits the title of the first philosopher in Japan, John Maraldo offers a very persuasive comment:

Since originality cannot mean creative-ness *ex nihilo*, formative influences are sought, and then the original and the merely influential are defined in difference from one another.<sup>17</sup>

Nishida “philosophy” did not emerge out of thin air, but was born of “something,” and whatever that “something” may turn out to be, it is also to be considered an “object” of Nishida’s assimilation. Whatever “new” flavor or original ingredients, the “old” ingredients cannot simply be discounted. But what precisely are these “old” ingredients that Nishida employed in the course of his philosophical construction? What importance do they have for redefining philosophy with regard to other traditions of thought in both the West and the East?

Paging through *Zen no kenkyū*, one may be not a little surprised by the number of names of philosophers and allusions, direct or indirect, to philosophical ideas contained there. The term *junsui keiken* 純粹經驗, for

研究』を読む」[The fact and meaning of consciousness: Reading Nishida’s *Zen no kenkyū*], in FUJITA Masakatsu 藤田正勝, ed., 『西田哲学研究の歴史』[A history of the study of Nishida philosophy] 『西田哲学選集 別巻二』[*Selected works on Nishida philosophy*, supplementary vol. 2] (Kyoto: Tōeisha, 1998), 9.

15. *Ibid.*, 10.

16. SAYŪDA Kiichirō 左右田喜一郎, 「西田哲学の方法について——西田博士の教えを乞う」[On the Method of Nishida philosophy: A plea for the teachings of Dr. Nishida], quoted in FUJITA, *A History of the Study of Nishida Philosophy*, 44.

17. MARALDO, “Traditional, Textuality, and the Translation of Philosophy,” 228.



instance, is not an innovation of Nishida himself but rather a notion suggested by contemporaries of his like R. Avenarius (1843–1896), and in the *Empiriokritizismus* of E. Mach (1836–1916), and the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* of William James (1842–1910). Its implied overcoming of the subject-object duality and the accompanying critique of Descartes are also closely related to the thinking of William James.<sup>18</sup>

Another example is Nishida's assimilation of the ideas found in Plato's *Timaeus* to his philosophy of place or *basho* 場所. Even though Nishida clearly states his difference from Plato, he did admit that it is a term that he “assimilates” (倣う).<sup>19</sup> Of course, Nishida did not only employ or assimilate Western ideas, but also drew on the intellectual heritage of the East. As mentioned at the outset, the idea of *gyakutaiō* 逆対応 is an assimilation of a problem addressed by Daitō Kokushi 大燈国師. Or again, Nishida's close personal and intellectual relationship with D. T. Suzuki are reflected in his assimilation of Suzuki's logic of *soku-hi* 即非. Given the sheer number of terms and ideas that Nishida drew from the West and East, it is hard to overestimate the important role that “assimilation” played in the construction of his philosophy.

A detailed and exhaustive analysis of Nishida's assimilation of Western and Eastern philosophical ideas is clearly beyond my reach. I mean only to suggest that there is ample evidence that the originality, creativity and uniqueness of Nishida philosophy—whether in fact he is the first philosopher of Japan or not—supports our thesis that assimilation is a key ingredient in the construction of a philosophy.

Unlike contemporary conventions regarding proper citation and the identification of sources, Nishida used his sources freely, often without a trace. But he *did* use them, including in the forging of his important logic of place. In this connection we may agree with Ōhashi Ryōsuke

18. Concerning the relationship between *junsui keiken* and Western philosophical ideas, see KOSAKA Kunitsugu 小坂国継, 『《善の研究》について』[On *Zen no kenkyū*], (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2006), 474.

19. See NISHIDA Kitarō, 「かくの如きイデヤを受け取るものともいうべきものを、プラトンのティマイオスの語に倣うて場所と名づけておく。無論プラトンの空間とか、受け取る場所とかいうものと、私の場所と名づけるものと同じいと考えるのではない」 in 「場所」[Place], 『西田幾多郎全集』[Collected works of Nishida Kitarō] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003), III: 415.

that, seen from the standpoint of Western philosophy, from ancient Greece to modern times, Nishida represents a “turn in philosophy” (哲学の転回), that is to say, “a turn of place” (場所の転回).”<sup>20</sup> Insofar as such a “turn” is an example of what Thomas Kuhn called a “paradigm shift,”<sup>21</sup> the shift to the “new” requires the presence of an “old” paradigm.

Neither the question of whether Nishida deserves to be called Japan’s first philosopher nor whether his philosophy is unique affects the point I wish to argue here: that it is a construction worked out through assimilation. Far from being a mere midwife to oversee the rebirth of “Western” philosophy, neither are his constructions completely simply “newborn.” If Nishida has “redefined” philosophy while having his own “unique” philosophy, his redefinition was conducted through assimilating ideas received from East and West alike.

#### ASSIMILATION IN MOU: CONSOLIDATING THE PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND OF CONFUCIANISM

Similar to the historical events that took place in Japan, China also ended its policy of seclusion as a result of military threats from the West. The call for political reforms in the late Qing Dynasty attracted the attention of intellectuals, though without the kind of focused discussions on modernity we see among the Kyoto School philosophers. With regard to Chinese culture’s encounter with Western civilization, especially concerning the ideas of science and democracy, scholars including Liang Shu-min, Xiong Shi-li, Tang Chun-i, Mou Zong-san and others aimed at reviving Confucianism through consolidating its philosophical ground. This group of scholars later came to be considered a philosophical school, namely, Contemporary Neo-Confucianism or “New Confucianism,” as distinct from the classical Confucianism of Confucius and

20. See ŌHASHI Ryōsuke 大橋良介, 『西田哲学の世界——あるいは哲学の転回』[*The world of Nishida philosophy: A philosophical turn*], (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995).

21. See Thomas KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996, third edition).

Mencius and the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung and Ming dynasties represented by Zhu Xi and Wang Yang Ming.

The main difference of New Confucianism is its proclaimed mission of reviving Confucianism in the face of Western civilization.<sup>22</sup> Instead of resisting Western philosophy, New Confucianism scholars employed many Western philosophical ideas in the course of re-examining Chinese thought and culture, especially Confucianism. Mou Zong-san, one of the representatives of New Confucianism, drew on Kantian moral philosophy in consolidating Confucius' idea of "inner moral subjectivity" 內在道德主體性, a typical illustration of the importance of the assimilation of Western philosophy into Chinese philosophy.

In one of his writings, 『中國哲學的特質』 *The Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy*, Mou raised the basic question of whether in fact there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy.

From of old there is no such word as "philosophy" in China. The word "philosophy" came from the Greeks.... If you combine the Greek word "philosophy" [哲學] with the content of Western philosophy, one could say that fundamentally there is no Chinese philosophy.... If one speaks of religion according to the standards of Christianity, Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism would have nothing to say. If one speaks of philosophy, there is no Westernized philosophy [西方式的哲學] in China.... So what is philosophy? Philosophy is a reflection on and rational explanation of all activities relating to human nature. China has thousands of years of cultural history and, of course, a long history of activity and creativity related to human nature, as well as a history of reflection and explanation, of reason and conceptualization. How could there be no philosophy?<sup>23</sup>

By giving a broad definition to philosophy, "reflection on and rational

22. See MOU Zong-san 牟宗三, Xu Fu-guan 徐復觀, Zhang Jun-mai 張君勱, Tang Chun-i 唐君毅「中國文化與世界」[Chinese culture and the world]『說中華民族之花果飄零』[The fragmentation of Chinese culture] (Taipei: Sanmin Books, 1984), 125–92. This article is a manifesto composed by the above-mentioned scholars on Chinese culture and its relationship with Western civilization and the world.

23. MOU Zong-san, 『中國哲學的特質』[The characteristic of Chinese philosophy], (Taipei: Student Books, 1998), 1–5.

explanation of all activities relating to human nature” Mou argued that it is “ridiculous”<sup>24</sup> to claim that there is no Chinese philosophy. Although there is no word like the Greek term “philosophy” and although the content of Western philosophy is absent—in Mou’s words, no “Westernized philosophy”—from Chinese tradition, this hardly seems to provide sufficient grounds for repudiating Chinese philosophy altogether.

Chinese Philosophy emphasizes “subjectivity” [主體性] and “inner morality.” The three main streams of Chinese thought, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, all emphasize subjectivity, though only Confucianism, the mainstream of the three, gives it its particular definition as “inner morality,” that is, as moral subjectivity [道德主體性]. In contrast, Western philosophy does not pay attention to subjectivity as much as to objectivity. Its focus and development mainly have to do with “knowledge” [知識].<sup>25</sup>

I am not interested here in justifying the existence of a Chinese philosophy or arguing for its distinctive characteristics. I wish only to point out how the generalized terms in which Mou spoke of Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy serve to reconfirm the importance of assimilation in the reception and construction of philosophy in contemporary China.

Terms like “subjectivity,” “objectivity,” and “inner morality” are of course not neologisms of Mou, but rather represent an assimilation of Western philosophical concepts and of *kanji* translations made by Japanese scholars. Whether or not Mou’s generalizations concerning Western and Chinese philosophy are appropriate or not, what is obvious is that Mou did attempt to redefine “philosophy” by repudiating Westernization and asserting the “uniqueness” of Chinese philosophy. He did not agree that “philosophy” is a monopoly of the West and that Chinese philosophy therefore needed to be “Westernized.”

Dedicated to reviving Confucianism, Mou and other members of the New Confucianist movement did not merely tend to glorify the wisdom of Chinese philosophy, but endeavored to use Western philosophical

24. *Ibid.*, 5.

25. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

words and concepts to explain the characteristics of Chinese philosophy. By dubbing the contemporary renaissance movement of Chinese philosophy a “New” Confucianism, they implied there was something “old” embedded in it, both Confucian and otherwise.

What “old” ingredients did Mou pick up on? The most explicit is his assimilation of Kantian moral philosophy to Confucian moral metaphysics. Mou argued that even though the very basic concern of Confucianism is morality, this does not mean that Confucianism confines itself to mundane matters and is indifferent to metaphysics or the question of Being. Mou insisted that morality in Confucianism is not only a matter of “ought,” but also a matter of “is,” especially in its reference to *tian* 天, heaven. The classical thought of Confucius and Mencius did discuss moral metaphysics as it is typically treated in Western philosophy. Nonetheless, Mou argued, this does not mean Confucianism disregards the question altogether. Concerning the relationship between *tian* and morality, Mou saw echoes of Kant’s metaphysics of morals.

When Mencius talks about 性善, good nature, he is following the idea of *ren* 仁, benevolence, mentioned by Confucius. His analysis of good nature of course is a direct explanation of morality, however, and neither the nature nor benevolence that Confucianism refers to is confined to morality. Confucianism does not merely talk about the *ought* and deny the problem of the *is*.... Although Confucius emphasized benevolence, he never repudiates *tian*.... Accordingly, the metaphysics of morals of Confucianism does entail a kind of moral metaphysics, just as moral theology is embraced in Kant’s metaphysics of morals.<sup>26</sup>

Leaving aside the merits of Mou’s reading of Kant, it is not hard to see how Mou is attempting to “redefine” Confucianism, at least on the issue of morality, through the assimilation of Kantian philosophy. Arguing that Confucianism does not merely define morality as a matter of “ought” but also a matter of “is,” Mou asserted that Confucianism does entail metaphysical concerns.

Why does Mou need to argue that there are metaphysical elements

26. Mou Zong-san, 『中國哲學十九講』[Nineteen lectures on Chinese philosophy], (Taipei: Student Books, 1997), 75–6.

in Confucianist morality? Why is it necessary to consolidate the metaphysical ground of Confucian morality with Kantian moral philosophy? What significance does this alignment or assimilation have for Chinese philosophy in particular or philosophy in general?

As noted earlier, Mou believed there is no “Westernized philosophy” in China even as he refused to deny the presence of a “Chinese philosophy.” He believed that whatever “universal truth” there is in philosophy, it should not be confined to the West of the East, let alone to China, even though the universal is actualized in specific cultural groups:

There is an idea [觀念] that directs the activity of the Chinese [中華民族]. Whenever there is an idea, universality is there. But this idea should be expressed by substantial life, that is, by the particular tribal life [民族生命] of the Chinese [中華民族].<sup>27</sup>

It seems to me that this accounts for why Mou did not consider “moral subjectivity” the “essence” of Chinese philosophy but only its “characteristic” or “particularity.” By differentiating “universality” from “particularity,” what Mou means to say is this: Even though there is no “Westernized” way of moral metaphysics in Confucianism, this does not mean that there is no “Chinese” way of moral metaphysics. Philosophy, including the discourse of moral metaphysics, should no longer be considered a monopoly of the West. Philosophy itself should be opened up or redefined in line with the diversity of particular forms in which it is embedded in different “tribal lives,” each of them acting as a mirror reflecting and illumining “Western philosophy.”

For example, instead of confining metaphysics to things like Platonic Ideas, Aristotelian Substance, and the Christian God, Mou suggests that concepts like *ren* and *tian* may also speak to a philosophy of Being and even expose the weaknesses of Kantian moral metaphysics.

Kant speaks only of moral theology, but not of moral metaphysics. The word *moral* in moral metaphysics and moral theology is an adjective, because religion and metaphysics are based on morality.

27. MOU Zong-san, 『中西哲學之會通十四講』[Fourteen lectures on the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy] (Taipei: Student Books, 1990), 7.

Confucianism does not speak of moral theology but rather of moral metaphysics because Confucianism is not a religion.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, Mou feels no obligation to use or assimilate Kantian moral metaphysics in order to clarify Confucius moral metaphysics. Such assimilation, however, does convey a message that philosophy or the activity of philosophizing should not be confined to its Greek origins. There are indeed different and particular ways of addressing “philosophy.” Mou’s approach posits that philosophy with its Greek origin should be opened up to “others” and liberated from its confinement to the West.

#### ASSIMILATION AND DISSIMILATION: FROM MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING TO MUTUAL TRANSFORMATION

From the examples of Nishida and Mou, we may tend to conclude that assimilation only carries the function of “midwife,” that is of using “Western” philosophical language and ideas to illustrate and clarify traditional Japanese and Chinese thinking. But we should not overlook the other side of the coin of assimilation—that is, dissimilation. Concepts like *junsui keiken*, *basho*, *ren*, and *tian* may have equivalents in Western philosophy or be direct assimilations therefrom, but there are differences as well. We may assume this to be the case with all assimilation. In the “trans-lation” of “philosophy” to *tetsugaku*, of pure experience to *junsui keiken*, of *tian* to the metaphysical ground of morality, there is more at work than a simple exchange of one language for another. No matter how “accurate” the “trans-lation” is, it always carries the possibility of “mis-translation.”

At the time that Indian Buddhism entered China, for instance, *śūnyatā* was “trans-lated” into the Taoist concept, *wu* 無. There are similarities between the two concepts, but their differences should not be overlooked. Without undergoing the assimilation and by “dissimilating” its Indian origins, Buddhism might not have been widely accepted and developed in China. By the same token, assimilation may be consid-

28. MOU Zong-san, *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy*, 76.

ered a kind of “mutual understanding” in which one’s traditional way of thinking is used to take in a “foreign” idea, so that differences and mis-translations are as apparent, and as important, as the reception of novelty. That is to say, assimilation helps mutual understanding between different intellectual traditions and at the same time enhances the possibilities for philosophical advance.

Furthermore, the flow of assimilation is not confined to a single movement from West to East or East to West, but a continual flowing back and forth. For example, if we take Nishida’s reworking of the notion of *junsui keiken* into an “original” philosophical standpoint based on the repudiation of subject-object duality, the dissimilated meaning combined with what was assimilated from William James and others, need not stop in Japan but can return to attract the attention of the West and lead it to rethink ideas that originated there. Or again, in assimilating Kantian moral philosophy to the moral metaphysics of Confucianism, Mou showed how moral metaphysics could be sustained without believing in God or a religious principle. Such assimilation may be considered a consolidation of philosophical ground for Confucianism, but it also leads to a rethinking of Kant and a possible weakness in his moral metaphysics. Assimilation is never a one-way monologue, with one party active and the other passive, but is also a two-way dialogue from West to East and East to West. Such dialogue, it seems to me, leads beyond mutual understanding through assimilation to a mutual transformation through dissimilation. It is a “turn of philosophy” based on the Western tradition and returning to enhance the West. Assimilation promotes the redefinition of philosophy, releasing it from its stronghold in the West by acknowledging the many other ways of doing philosophy and constructing philosophies outside the West.

#### REDEFINING PHILOSOPHY THROUGH ASSIMILATION

Unlike Nishida, Mou does not seem to have felt the need to erect a new philosophical system to set up against Western philosophy. His principal agenda was simply to revive Chinese philosophy by consolidating the philosophical ground of Confucianism by assimilating Western



philosophical ideas. This does not mean, however, that Mou stopped at the stage of mutual understanding without proceeding to mutual transformation. In continually dissimilating Kantian moral philosophy in deference to the moral metaphysics of Confucianism, he stimulates Western philosophers to revisit their received ideas of what moral philosophy is.

The call to redefine philosophy is hardly new. It has accompanied philosophy down through the ages and in any number of forms. Throughout the history of Japanese and Chinese philosophy, especially in the modern period, assimilation is everywhere in evidence. It is hardly a novelty that originated with figures like Nishida and Mou. From the very outset of philosophy's arrival in Japan, thinkers like Nishi and Inoue made ample use of Confucian and Buddhist ideas in "trans-lating" Western ideas. Thus, to repeat, as much as we want to insist on what is new about redefining philosophy today, we can never afford to ignore the much older and more traditional aspects of the project. Nor should we forget that assimilation itself is a philosophically constructive activity. On the one hand, it plays the role of midwife, trans-lating "foreign" words and ideas through particular languages and traditional concepts; and on the other, it philosophizes texts in the course of translation. As we have seen in the examples of Nishida and Mou, we can no longer underestimate the importance of the role that assimilation plays in redefining philosophy for our own times.