

Becoming Human: Li Zehou's Ethics. By Jana S. Rošker. Leiden: Brill, 2020. Pp. xiv + 332. €25.00/\$25.00.

Li Zehou 李澤厚 is one of today's most prominent Chinese thinkers—and yet, he is hardly adequately known in the Western world. Born in 1930 (now over 90 years old), he shaped the intellectual debates in China from the 1950s to this day. Although he moved to the United States around twenty years ago, he still publishes mostly in Chinese and, thus, continues to exert a considerable influence on the Chinese intellectual world—inside and outside of China.

In China, Li Zehou first came to prominence as one of the leading scholars in aesthetics. Even in the ideologically rather rigid period of the 1950s (between 1956 and 1962), aesthetics was a field that allowed for a relatively free debate—within the confines of a Marxist materialist approach to aesthetics. After the Cultural Revolution, during which aesthetics ceased to exist as a topic of discussion, China experienced in the 1980s an unprecedented “aesthetics craze” (*meixue re* 美學熱), again mainly brought about by the writings of Li Zehou. He was the towering intellectual figure of this period. On the one hand, he introduced new concepts such as “subjectality,” derived from a fusion of Kantian and Marxian ideas, and, on the other, he offered stimulating interpretations of the Chinese artistic tradition in his widely read *The Path of Beauty* (*Mei de licheng* 美的歷程) for which he had employed ideas from Marx to Clive Bell and Susanne Langer.¹ This craze was facilitated by the political thaw after Mao's death in 1976. Furthermore, his coinage of other concepts, such as “sedimentation” (*jidian* 積澱) as a fusion of the social with the individual in a historical process, resulting in a “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構), significantly enriched the academic debates of that period. These ideas led the way to a broader debate to include politics and culture—the “culture craze” (*wenhua re* 文化熱) of the 1990s.

Hence, Li Zehou's fame—also outside of China—rests mostly on his books on aesthetics.² Little is known of his writings on ethics. But, also in this field,

¹ Li Zehou, *Mei de licheng* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981); Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, trans. Gong Lizeng (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994).

² See also the translation of his book, *Huaxia meixue* 華夏美學 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1988), into English by Maija Bell Samei as *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

he became prominent in China shortly after the Cultural Revolution with his highly influential book on Kant: *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* 批判哲學的批判：康德述評 (Critique of the critical philosophy: A new approach to Kant).³ Meanwhile, mainly through the effort of Roger T. Ames, Peter Hershock, and Jia Jinhua 賈晉華, who arranged a conference at the University of Hawai'i in 2015 on the topic of "Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy" and published its proceedings,⁴ the whole range of Li Zehou's impact on modern Chinese thought came into view. In the wake of this conference, translations of his major theoretical works (apart from aesthetics) began to appear in English, such as the translations of the above-mentioned *Pipan zhexue de pipan* by J. H. Allan and C. Ahn as *A New Approach to Kant: A Confucian-Marxist's Viewpoint*;⁵ of his seminal *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* 中國古代思想史論 by Andrew Lambert as *The History of Classical Chinese Thought*;⁶ and of *You wu dao li, shi li gui ren* 由巫到禮，釋禮歸仁 by Robert A. Carleo as *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humaneness*.⁷ Hence, Li Zehou's extensive writings have just begun to receive modest attention in the West.

For this reason, an introduction to Li's ethical thought, such as the book under review here, is a greatly needed contribution, as it illuminates facets of his thought that have, thus far, not been adequately dealt with by Western scholars. Its author, Jana Rošker, professor at the University of Ljubljana, is one of the leading Western scholars on modern Chinese philosophy and also on Li Zehou's thought. Already in 2019, she published *Following His Own Path: Li*

³ Li Zehou, *Pipan zhexue de pipan: Kangde shuping* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1979).

⁴ Roger T. Ames and Jinhua Jia, eds., *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018).

⁵ Li Zehou, *A New Approach to Kant: A Confucian-Marxist's Viewpoint*, trans. Jeanne Haizhen Allan and Christopher Ahn (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

⁶ Li Zehou, *Zhongguo gudai sixiangshi lun* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985); Li Zehou, *The History of Classical Chinese Thought*, trans. Andrew Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁷ Li Zehou, *You wu dao li, shi li gui ren* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2015); Li Zehou, *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humaneness*, trans. Robert A. Carleo III (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy,⁸ in which she critically introduces his philosophical system and offers the first comprehensive overview and exegesis of his work.⁹

Becoming Human begins with a brief introduction to Li Zehou, his life and work, as well as a useful survey of the state of Western scholarship on Li Zhou and the major sources for Rošker's book on Li's ethics: the aforementioned books on Kant and Shamanism, his *Lunlixue gangyao* 倫理學綱要 (Outline of ethics) in 2010,¹⁰ *Huiying Sangde'er ji qita* 回應桑德爾及其他 (A response to Michael Sandel and other matters) in 2014,¹¹ and *Shenme shi daode? Li Zehou lunlixue taolun ban shilu* 甚麼是道德？李澤厚倫理學討論班實錄 (What is morality? A record of Li Zehou's ethics seminar) in 2015.¹² Following this brief introduction, chapter 1, "The Importance of Ethics," presents on five pages the basic incentives for Li's endeavour on ethics: He aims at no less than a "transformative creation" of the Chinese Confucian tradition, which he wants to enrich through aspects derived mostly from Kant and Marx, but also others, to contribute "to a development of a new global ethics for the entire humankind" (p. 1). This is certainly not a minor undertaking, and we will have to see if these prospects still stand up at the end of the book. Basic to his concept of ethics—in contrast to Kant—is his view that human moral capacities are not innate or a *priori*, "but should rather be seen as products of history and education" (p. 1). This is a thought that will be referred to again and again in the book.

Chapter 2, "General Philosophical System and Crucial Concepts," presents the basic ideas of Li Zehou's system of ethics, that is, first of all, his "anthropo-historical ontology" (*renleixue lishi bentu lun* 人類學歷史本體論), understood as

⁸ The title is taken from one of Li's own essays: *Zou wo zijide lu* 走我自己的路 (Following my own path) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1986).

⁹ Jana S. Rošker, *Following His Own Path: Li Zehou and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Li Zehou, *Lunlixue gangyao* (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 2010).

¹¹ Li Zehou, *Huiying Sangde'er ji qita* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2014); Li Zehou, "A Response to Michael Sandel and Other Matters," trans. Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Robert A. Carleo III, *Philosophy East and West* 66.4 (Oct. 2016): 1068–1147.

¹² Li Zehou, *Shenme shi daode? Li Zehou lunlixue taolun ban shilu* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015).

“a kind of post-Marxist methodological tool” (p. 7). This means that he accepts—and uses—a few Marxist ideas, such as his historical materialism as well as the elementary configuration of material vs ideational (or spiritual) superstructure. A further thread running through his entire system of thought is the Marxist idea (taken from his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”) of “humanization of nature” (*ziran de renhua* 自然的人化),¹³ which he complements and enriches, though, with the corresponding Daoist notion of “naturalization of humans” (*ren de ziranhua* 人的自然化). This means, “in contrast to Marx, who has accentuated the relation between human beings and the external nature, Li understood the concept of the humanization of nature as a process that was not only directed toward the external, but also toward their internal realms” (p. 8). For this reason, the above two complementary notions constitute what Li understands as “humanness”—for him a modern interpretation of the traditional Chinese concept of “human nature” (*renxing* 人性).

Crucial to Li Zehou’s thought is the already mentioned notion of “sedimentation,” seen by Li as “the accumulations and deposits of the social, rational, and historical in the individual through the process of humanizing nature” (p. 14). He distinguishes between three levels of sedimentation: The basic (and largest) layer is the “sedimentation of species” (*wuzhong jidian* 物種積澱), including “universal forms that are common to all people.” The second is the layer of “cultural sedimentation” (*wenhua jidian* 文化積澱), which consists of “forms that are formed by specific thought and behavioral patterns . . . shared by people belonging to particular cultures.” The third and thinnest layer is that of “individual sedimentation” (*geti jidian* 個體積澱), which consists of “our intimate worldviews, value systems, habits emotions, as well as individual modes of thinking and feeling” (p. 14). Regarding ethics, Li’s theory of sedimentation tries to explain how, through the “accumulation and condensation of experience,” the social and individual environment—in a complementary and correlative manner—shape morality in the human mind. Dismissing (Kantian) ideas of “innate” or “transcendental” morality—or the notion of “immanent transcendence,” held by modern New Confucians—he explains the process of the gaining of a human moral mind as “the empirical . . . being transformed into the transcendental” (*jingyan bian xianyan* 經驗變先驗, p. 18).

¹³ This important term is missing in the index.

Another neologism coined by Li Zehou and central to his thought is “subjectality” (*zbutixing* 主體性). Rošker explains the difference between subjectivity (*zhuguanxing* 主觀性) and subjectality as the former being an epistemological term and the latter an ontological one. She offers, as an additional explanation of “subjectality,” the existing English term “subjectness” (p. 21). Li’s understanding of “subjectality,” i.e., of the human subject, as an “active, autonomous agent” revolves around the idea of “practice,” again taken from Marx’s “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”: Practice is for Li a materially productive activity, such as making and employing tools.

The last two important notions introduced in this chapter are his “one-world view,” with which he dismisses traditional Western notions of a second (and higher) transcendent, intangible world (connected to God or such), and the—very Chinese—idea of employing the “proper measure” (*du* 度) when confronting situations, which is inherent to the classical Confucian notion of “taking the middle way” (*zhongyong zhi dao* 中庸之道). This means to deal “with situations differently according to their particular conditions”—thus emphasizing the particular vs the universal (or abstract principles, p. 30).

In the next two chapters (3, “Ethical Thought: an Overview,” and 4, “Ethics and Morality”), Li’s ethical system begins to take more contours. Whereas Western philosophers usually take morality as “norms guiding human social behaviour” (i.e., practice) and, thus, understand ethics as an academic discipline dealing with morality (i.e., theory), Li Zehou understands the two concepts quite differently. For him, ethics is “a system of regulating inter-human relationships and human actions in the particular network of associations and connections,” whereas morality “belongs to the internal psychological forms and values of particular individuals” (pp. 35–36). Hence, for him “ethics is external and consists of systems, customs, norms, rituals, laws, etc.,” whereas morality “is internal and embraces will, ideas or concepts, and emotions” (p. 36). This is a distinction that is—for someone trained in Western thought—not easy to follow. One is reminded that the understanding of these terms greatly relies on the respective language in which they are used. As an example, Rošker refers to Hegel’s differentiation between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität* (p. 63). In Chinese, morality is translated as *Daode* (道德)—combining two central philosophical concepts, the “Way” and its “Power,” to a very meaningful compound. Ethics, on the other hand, is translated as *lunli* 倫理, which can be understood as

“principles of human relationships,” whereby the term “human relationships” refers to a central Confucian concept, namely the “five central human relationships” (*wulun* 五倫).¹⁴ This might be the reason why Li is led to his path of giving the two terms his very special meanings. With reference to the Chinese translation of ethics as “principles of human relationships,” Li also considers the Chinese (or East Asian) “paradigm of social interactions” of “relationalism” (*guanxizhuyi* 關係主義) to be a relevant alternative to individualism that is dominant in Western thought (p. 48).

In this context, it is noticeable, at least for those familiar with ways of reasoning in the neo-Confucian tradition (particularly of the Song dynasty) that much of Li’s argumentative pattern appears quite similar to those. When the Song philosophers distinguish according to the “substance-function” pattern between a *ti* (體) or *yong* (用) aspect of a particular thought—or according to the distinction between “public” (*gong* 公) and “private” (*si* 私)—Li does the same, by distinguishing, for example, “public social virtues” (*shehuixing gongde* 社會性公德) vs “private religious morality” (*zongjiaoxing side* 宗教性私德, p. 73), or external vs internal aspects (*viz.* ethics and morality); collective vs individual, or instrumental vs psychological; among others.

Li’s system can be described as a “fusion of the Kantian and Confucian ethics” (p. 39), in which the highlight, though, is on the Confucian aspects. Hence, Li dismisses the Kantian notion of “transcendental practical reason” (p. 40), instead emphasizing a Confucian “pragmatic reason” (*shiyong lixing* 實用理性, p. 41) which operates within a so-called emotio-rational structure (*qingli jiegou* 情理結構), thus getting to the idea of “reasoned emotions” (p. 38). In chapter 5, “Epistemological Approaches and Ontological Foundations,” it becomes clear that Li, in fact, in sharp contrast to Kant, bases his ethics not on human reason, but on human emotions. First of all, it is important to know that there is no rigorous separation between the two in traditional Chinese thought. Moreover, Li considers emotion to be the “basic ontological ground of all human life” (p. 113). Hence, he coined the term “emotion-based substance” (*qing benti* 情本體) as one of his core concepts. For Li, human emotions are the starting point of morality and they manifest themselves, very

¹⁴ Between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers and sisters, as well as between friends.

much according to the Confucian tradition, “in ritualistic aspects of daily life” (p. 116), as well as in daily human affairs. Therefore, he argues that they can be seen in (classical Confucian) concepts such as “sincerity, respect, affection, loyalty, trustworthiness” (p. 116), and others, which all hint to human emotional states and not to rational or abstract concepts.

The discussion of the terms “emotion-based substance” and “anthropo-historical ontology” gives the reviewer an opportunity to say a few words about the terminology used, not only by Li Zehou, but by modern Chinese intellectuals in general. Whereas in Western languages such as English or German, the usage of the term “ontology” (*benti lun* 本體論), literally “theory of original substance/*noumenon*,” is very much restricted to philosophical specialists, in China today, the term seems to experience an inflationary usage (both in its nominal and adjectival sense). In addition, the root of the term, *benti*, has a range of meanings such as “original substance,” “root,” “ultimate reality,” and, last but not least, “*noumenon*”—the latter in contrast to the phenomena of the visible world (p. 112). When one muses about the grounds for the infatuation of the Chinese with this terminology, what comes to mind is again the connection to traditional neo-Confucian thought, that is, the importance of the “substance-function” pattern (*ti-yong* 體用) as an explanation of this predilection. Be that as it may, the association raised by this term in the mind of the Chinese reader must be quite different from those of Westerners when they refer in English to either “substance,” “*noumenon*,” or “ontology.” Here it becomes again apparent, as was already visible in the context of the translations of the terms “ethics” and “morality” into Chinese, and as pointed out long ago by both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, how language affects the ways in which its respective speakers conceptualize their world—a view of linguistic relativity which is also known as the “Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.”

Chapter 6, “Harmony and Justice,” first discusses crucial differences between Western and traditional Chinese ethics, such as individualism and relationalism. Li Zehou views traditional Chinese ethics as a “relational virtue ethics” (*guanxizhuyi de meide lunli* 關係主義的美德倫理, p. 128), and, as mentioned before, he still sees much value in this tradition with family relationships at its centre. However, as Rošker has it, the “traditional emphasis upon family emotion as both the root and the substance of moral competency must (and can only) be revived on a basis of steady legal regulations in order to

prevent misuse of intimate relationships” (p. 137), such as all forms of political corruption.

The chapter further discusses crucial aspects of political philosophy in Chinese–Western comparison, in particular the position of justice and harmony in their respective traditions. As is well known, the West values justice, whereas China emphasizes harmony. Although for Li, with his emphasis on contexts and emotions, “harmony is higher than justice,” the former “would not replace justice but merely regulate it” (p. 138), particularly through employing the “proper measure” (*du*), also with respect to treating the gap between the rich and poor “in accordance with particular situations and contexts” (p. 145).

These ideas lead to a discussion of utilitarianism and communitarianism, especially to his response to the ideas of Michael Sandel. At first, one would think, as stated by Tu Weiming 杜維明 and other modern New Confucians, that there is much overlapping of communitarian and Confucian—and hence also Li Zehou’s—thought. For this reason, it is interesting to note that Li dismisses Sandel’s communitarianism as irrelevant for China, preferring liberalism as an alternative (p. 149). For him, communitarianism, although emphasizing small communities and relationships, holds the danger of leading us “back to the domination and prevailing authority of traditional values, ideologies, and customs” (p. 151).

As it becomes clear, though, through the footnotes on pages 146 and 147, Li must have given Sandel a very selective reading; hence, further engagements might reveal more common ground (p. 154). Be that as it may, the understanding—or better misunderstanding or misreading—of Sandel is somehow paradigmatic for the problems occurring in the cross-cultural encounter of Western and Chinese thought and gives rise to some general observations. Li relies mostly on Confucianism as well as on Kant, Hegel, and (the early) Marx. Li is quite acquainted with the Western tradition, though in a selective way (this also, apparently, applies for his reading of Sandel), whereas we can safely assume that Michael Sandel, if at all, has only a shallow knowledge of Chinese thought (not to mention the command of the other’s respective language). Last but not least, Sandel has the fame of a “rock-star” philosopher in the West, whereas Li, in the West, is only known to some sinologists. Given the scarcity of translations of Li’s works into English, it is very likely that Sandel is not much acquainted with Li Zehou’s thought.

Hence, considering the asymmetry between the two, the question arises how a fruitful conversation is at all possible and, if it occurs, whether it is not like the Chinese proverbial “dialogue between chickens and ducks” (*ji tong ya jiang* 雞同鴨講).

In spite of these specific shortcomings, Li’s erudition and acquaintance with Western thought is still stupendous, as can be seen in the last chapters of Rošker’s book. In chapter 7, “Humanization of Inner Nature,” she deals with important topics, such as “the shaping of free will and the role of moral emotions” (p. 169ff), discusses “the forgotten significance of rituality” (p. 197ff), and elaborates on the topic of “transformation of the empirical into the transcendental” (p. 182ff). Chapter 8, “Inspirations, Combinations and Critiques,” is particularly interesting as it deals with the sources of Li’s ideas, as well as his critical discussions of various thinkers and schools of thought, beginning with the classical Confucian tradition, covering also modern New Confucianism (which he sharply criticizes), then moving on to Kant, Marx, and other Western philosophers, such as (among others) Dewey, Heidegger, and John Rawls.

The last chapter (9, “Theoretical and Methodological Innovations”) begins with another stress on the importance of Li’s specific distinction between ethics and morality. Apart from reiterating many of Li’s basic points, Rošker also attempts to characterize Li’s system of ethics in comparison to other ethical schools of thought. He appears closest to a tradition of “evolutionary ethics” (p. 283), but there are also similarities to (and overlappings with) other ethical theories, such as virtue ethics (in this context, Li dismisses the concept of “role ethics” that Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames have brought up, insisting that this is nothing but “virtue ethics,” p. 290), and utilitarian and deontological ethics. The specific character of Li’s thought is, however, its grounding in the Confucian tradition—which he wants to be creatively transformed. Although Li is not a Hegelian, at least not in the strict sense, he appears, similarly, to be a system builder of thought. This system is innovative, interesting, very idiosyncratic, and, thus, not always easy to follow (also not entirely worked out yet), particularly not for those who are not acquainted with the specific Chinese background. For this reason, it remains to be seen if Western philosophers will feel invited to engage with his thought on a deeper level. Only when such conversations between Eastern and Western philosophers occur can their thought have a truly global significance and impact!

Li's system of ethics cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of his aesthetics and of the Confucian tradition in general. A quote by Rošker at the end may highlight how these trains of thought come together—as it perfectly catches the core idea of classical Confucianism—and Li Zehou's blending of ethics and aesthetics:

In the ancient Chinese worldview, nature, heaven, and earth were permeated with positive feelings that affirmed the value, the goodness, and the beauty of life. In its very essence, this attitude was by no means scientific, nor cognitive or philosophical, but purely emotional and aesthetic. Therefore, Confucianism is much more than merely ethical teaching. Although it cannot be regarded as a religion, it still far surpassed the scope of ethical regulations and thereby achieved the highest realm of the unity of heaven (nature) and humans, which is comparable to a religious experience. According to Li, this is the realm of the aesthetic. (p. 104)

Rošker's book is concluded with an appendix of Li's general scheme of ethics, an extensive bibliography, particularly of Li's writings and translations into English (one of his articles in English is missing from the list: "Human Nature and Human Future: A Combination of Marx and Confucius"¹⁵). Very useful are the two indexes of proper names and of specific terms, phrases, and titles (Chinese-English). To note a minor mistake that occurs on p. 218 (also in the index on p. 323): "deconstruction" is not accompanied with the correct Chinese term (*jiegou* 解構) but with (the homophone) 結構, the term for "structure." Hence, it is not clear if this is a misprint or a misreading.

Becoming Human is a very balanced, useful, and stimulating exposition of Li Zehou's ethics. It is also the first attempt to present his thinking on this significant topic to a Western audience. In this respect, it serves an important purpose and very much deserves to be studied. While it is—due to its complex matter—not always easy to read, is sometimes somewhat repetitive, and could have benefited from a little more careful copy-editing, it is, on the whole, a successful presentation of a complex subject matter. On top of it, one cannot

¹⁵ In Karl-Heinz Pohl, ed., *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 129–44.

but admire the author's familiarity not only with Li Zehou's extensive writings in all fields, but also with the entire Western and Chinese philosophical traditions. It is indispensable for any further engagement with Li's thought.

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Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India. By Andrew B. Liu. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 344. \$50.00.

On page 1, Andrew Liu writes that Wu Juenong 吳覺農 (1897–1989) who had a reputation “as the foremost authority on tea in China” in the twentieth century had learned about tea cultivation in Shizuoka from 1918 to 1921. About ten years later, my uncle Clement Hakim had departed from his homeland in Egypt to study tea cultivation in Shizuoka. I doubt that Wu knew my uncle who was perhaps the only Westerner in the area, but they shared a period of living in Shizuoka. After six years in Japan, Clement moved to New York City, and, after World War II, founded the Hakim Tea Corporation, one of the US's largest tea importing companies. The business's success prompted Clement to invite his brother-in-law (and my father) to manage the office in New York while he travelled to Asia and, increasingly, to Africa and Latin America to purchase tea. Tea changed my life, and now that I think about it, was it an accident that my first published article concerned the tea and horse trade between Ming China and Inner Asia?

Liu has a greater interest than Shizuoka or the history of tea. He focuses on the tea wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—that is, the competition between China and Assam as suppliers for the tea market. His greatest concern goes beyond the actual competition into a consideration of the development of capitalism in the two countries. Asserting that capitalism existed before industrialization, he bases his views on the tea-growers'