Review of Kurtz: The Discovery of Chinese Logic

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At the heart of Joachim Kurtz’s new book is the remarkable fact that up until 1898, no Chinese or foreign scholar had so much as claimed that the Chinese tradition contained explicit concern with logic; and yet scarcely a decade later, it was broadly accepted in Chinese scholarly circles that early China had seen sophisticated developments in logic. Within another few decades, in fact, a consensus was emerging that China had a two-millennia-long tradition of logical thought. How was this possible? What meanings did “logic” have for the various actors in this “discovery of Chinese logic”? What does this genealogy of the discourse of “Chinese logic” suggest, furthermore, about how we should reconfigure the global history of logic or about the universality of logic? The book has much to teach us about all these topics, and it does so on the basis of an extraordinary feat of scholarship. Every claim, every detail is backed up by the meticulous reading of primary texts and an encyclopedic grasp of secondary literatures in Chinese and several other languages. The book includes a fifty-page Appendix documenting the ways in which a whole range of technical logical vocabulary was translated in each of thirty different early-twentieth-century logic textbooks and dictionaries: in this and other ways, it doubles as a sourcebook that scholars will be able to mine for many years. Kurtz’s work is an undeniably impressive achievement, and one that—in the context of current Chinese scholarship on the topic—stakes out and defends a controversial thesis. It thus marks a major milestone in our understanding of Chinese logic.
Scholarship on the “history of Chinese logic” today, most of it in Chinese, ranges from extremely valuable to quite exaggerated studies of explicit reflection on topics similar to those discussed in traditional European logic. Kurtz’s concern is elsewhere—on which more in a moment—but he does provide a helpful sketch of this history in his first few pages. Early Chinese interest in logical problems emerged from thinking about the methods of debate; Kurtz notes that “problems like the relation between ‘names’ and ‘objects,’ criteria of identity and difference, or standards of right/true (shi) and wrong/false (fei) were discussed across all ideological divides” (p. 3). Focus on logical questions petered out after the founding of the Qin empire in 221 BCE, but was revitalized half a millennium later in the context of Neo-Daoist “Dark Learning (xuanxue).” The introduction of sophisticated Buddhist reflections on reasoning in the seventh and eighth centuries then led to new heights of logical thought, but Kurtz notes that it failed to arouse much interest outside of the confines of Buddhist religious communities. Partly because of the connection between logical disputation and moral volatility, explicit focus on reasoning lost its vitality as the Neo-Confucian revival got underway in the eleventh century.

All this Kurtz recounts in a few pages, as his real interest lies in explaining the dramatic emergence of logical discourse in China at the start of the twentieth century. What was the role, he asks, of efforts by Jesuit and then Protestant missionaries to introduce European logic in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries? Two extensive chapters survey the individuals, their motivations, the texts they produced, and their Chinese reception involved in both these extended encounters. Kurtz’s detailed argument is aimed at establishing two primary theses. First, while the translators faced many challenges and succeeded only imperfectly, the logical concepts that they were trying to express did come
through: an interested reader would have been able to make sense of the ideas. European logical concepts and the Chinese language were not “incommensurable.” Second, the need for linguistic innovation was not the only hurdle standing in the way of the “naturalization” of European logical discourse: also necessary was a meaningful context to which the translations could contribute. Both Jesuit and Protestant translators saw the introduction of logic as either a direct or at least indirect strategy toward the conversion of their Chinese interlocutors, and this understanding of logic’s point colored their interpretive efforts in various ways. As Kurtz pointedly says about one of the Jesuits’ translation, “Working one’s way through the wealth of new terms and ideas introduced in the Mingli tan required sustained and tenacious effort. But why should any literatus without prior Christian inclinations take such pains when all he could hope for was to find the ‘one and only Truth’ of a foreign God” (p. 65)? The sudden surge of interest in European logic comes only when Chinese intellectuals come to see it as having a positive significance. Kurtz places considerable emphasis on the role of Yan Fu, the subject of Chapter Three. Partly through studying in England in 1878-9 and encountering J. S. Mill’s interpretation of logic, Yan Fu becomes convinced that logic is the key to scientific and sociopolitical progress (p. 151). As Kurtz tells the story, the details of Yan’s understanding of logic and even the specific content of his 1905 translation of Mill’s System of Logic were considerably less important than Yan’s enthusiastic propaganda on logic’s behalf. Many different ideas began circulating about what “logic” was, some of them extremely murky, but the process of naturalizing “logic” had definitely begun.

Chapter Four presents extensive documentation of the rapid naturalization process that follows. The main focus of Kurtz’s analysis is on the host of new textbooks that are
published in the first decade of the twentieth century in response to both popular demand and an abrupt embrace of logic as part of university curricula. Kurtz shows that almost all of the textbooks are based on Japanese models, which helps to standardize Chinese logical vocabulary. (The vast range of translations used in earlier works is another of the book’s themes; Chapter Four and the Appendix show that by 1910, much of the terminology was becoming settled.) Kurtz shows that the textbooks cluster around two main sources of influence: Jevons and other British logicians who favor a lean science of reasoning, and German psychologism, according to which logic is a science studying the ways that humans actually think (p. 206).

As European-derived logical concepts rapidly become part of the Chinese vocabulary and culture, what Kurtz describes as a “second intracultural process of translation” begins, namely the articulation of China’s own heritage of explicit logical reflection. Kurtz emphasizes that it was far from obvious to Chinese or foreign scholars around the turn of the century that China had any tradition of logic to be unearthed, but before long Chinese thinkers like Liu Shipei, Zhang Binglin, Liang Qichao, and Wang Guowei were revisiting late-classical texts like the Mohist Canons and the Confucian text *Xunzi*. As Kurtz summarizes, the four pioneers all agreed that explicit evidence of logical theorizing could be found such texts. They diverged, though, on what the significance of this discovery might be. Liu Shipei hoped for an amalgamation of logic (the “science of names,” in his understanding) and traditional Chinese philology. Zhang Binglin was perhaps the most creative, working to articulate a Chinese (especially Buddhist) approach to logic that might incorporate European logic as well, but his work was limited in part by the religious context in which he employed it. Liang Qichao “squeezed the scattered fragments of ancient
China’s logical genius into a rough and ready-made frame of Western-derived concepts, without scrupling over the interpretive violence the process entailed” (p. 336). For Wang Guowei, finally, the early but abortive Chinese interest in logic was simply a historical fascination, suitable only for cataloguing and storing in an archive. As Kurtz concludes, though, “hardly any scholar with a sustained interest in Chinese logic supported Wang’s critical assessment, most likely because it sounds like a premature last word on a discourse that was just coming into existence” (p. 337).

The book’s Epilogue offers a short assessment of the subsequent discourse on Chinese logic that has grown from these roots. Two main approaches can be discerned, in addition to which Kurtz adds his own alternative. First, there are efforts by thinkers like Hu Shi and Zhang Shizhao to study—and more systematically articulate—China’s own logical theories, and Western logical theories, in light of one another with the aim of developing modern philosophy in a more globally responsible way. Though Hu Shi primarily focused on the re-interpretation of Chinese logic and philosophy in terms of modern (Western) philosophy, he also called for the interpretation of modern philosophy “in terms of the native systems of China” (p. 347). Zhang hoped for a weaving together of the two into a single science, “thus opening a new page for this discipline” (p. 351). In short, both sought a kind of symmetry between the authority and role of Western and Chinese philosophy, respectively.¹ A second approach has been to try to articulate an independent identity for Chinese logic: that is, to see it as a fundamentally distinct enterprise from European (or Indian, for that matter) logic. For example, Zhang Dongsun argued in 1939 that Chinese

¹ Based on their actual achievements, though, Kurtz sees them as still participating in a Western-dominated discourse (p. 353). On the goal of symmetry in comparative philosophy, see Shun, Kwong-loi., “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections.” Journal of Chinese Philosophy 36:3 (2009), pp. 455-78.
thought as a whole, as well as its inherent logic, was “fundamentally non-Aristotelian” because of the different grammatical structures in which it is expressed. Chinese logic, says Zhang, is one of “correlation” rather than “identity,” and relies on analogy rather than deduction as its primary mode of inference (pp. 356-7). Finally, Kurtz’s own provocative suggestions are well worth our attention. He acknowledges some value in work done by the heirs of Hu Shi and Zhang Shizhao: scholars who continue to focus on better understanding ancient Chinese logical thought vis-à-vis European logic, with the goal of contributing the development of a contemporary, more global, logic. Still, Kurtz has real doubts about the modernist and Eurocentric assumptions that he sees as underlying such efforts. He worries that such work tends to show that China ultimately has little to contribute to a global history or contemporary theory of logic. Kurtz submits that an alternative, “de-modernized” viewpoint would “scrutinize argumentative practices”—wherever they are found, including education, law, canonical studies, and so on—“and try to recover the implicit and explicit standards of validity embodied in them” (p. 363). Such work could at the very least complement existing studies of the theoretical aspects of Chinese logic, and quite possibly push those theoretical studies in new directions. In all, this could contribute to a “more credibly global history of truth and rationality in which China eventually comes to claim its rightful place” (p. 365).

My discussion of The Discovery of Chinese Logic has been largely expository because I find the interpretations and arguments of Kurtz’s core chapters to be compelling. With regard to the larger frame within which he presents his argument, I have three supplementary suggestions. First, while I agree with Kurtz that his study shows that there were no principled linguistic barriers to the expression of European logical concepts in
Chinese, his argument about the need for a “meaningful context” if the translations were to find any audience actually fits extremely well with the nuanced treatment of incommensurability as a social as well as linguistic phenomenon by scholars like Mario Biagioli. Second, while Kurtz is again correct that successful handling of the copula’s logical function by early translators suggests that Chinese philosophy is not subject to any linguistic determinism (p. 77), he may overly downplay the possibility that Chinese philosophy has a distinctive orientation connected, at least in part, to ways in which the Chinese language encouraged term-based rather than proposition-based analyses. Perhaps we need not go as far as Zhang Dongsun’s broad-based distinction between Chinese and Western philosophy, but certainly a range of contemporary analysts have argued for distinctive Chinese philosophies of action, language, and metaphysics: in this context, a distinctive approach to logic should not be at all surprising. Finally, while I take seriously the potential for Kurtz’s suggested research program to contribute to a more genuinely global history of logic, his “anti-modernism” may be too strong when it comes to the global philosophy of logic. It is true that we live at a time when the danger persists that efforts at cross-traditional philosophical work will be distorted by continued Western dominance of the language and institutions of academic philosophy, but this is also a time when opportunities for resisting such hegemony and proceeding in a more “symmetrical” fashion are rapidly emerging. Kurtz’s tale makes clear the multifarious motivations surrounding

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the “discovery” of Chinese logic, which should caution us to consider our own. At the same time, the creativity and ambition of the many scholars he studies are themselves inspirations that may be equally relevant to the contemporary moment.