

The Concept of *Zhonghua* in Modern Chinese Philosophy and its Cosmological Implications

Sergii Rudenko

Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, Professor, Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology (Maoming, Guangdong Province, China); Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Kyiv, Ukraine)
E-mail: rudenkosrg@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9069-0989>

Rudenko, Sergii (2023) The Concept of *Zhonghua* in Modern Chinese Philosophy and its Cosmological Implications. *Philosophy and Cosmology*, Volume 30, 116-124. <https://doi.org/10.29202/phil-cosm/30/11>

This article presents the results of a study of both Western and Far Eastern narratives of philosophical cosmology. The task of the study was to analyse the essential characteristics of philosophical cosmology in both Western and Far Eastern paradigms. This was made possible by clarifying the distinction between astronomy and cosmology, on the one hand, and philosophy and philosophical cosmology, on the other. The Greek word “κόσμος” is both etymologically and semantically different from the concept of “space.” If space has only one characteristic, it is an extension, and then the cosmos, being a phenomenon that is not static but dynamic, has internal forces and a movement towards self-organisation and harmonisation. A person does not live in space, but in the world; such is the point of view of philosophical cosmology, which means that different cultures may have their own cosmology, which will need to be different. It is in this difference of philosophical cosmologies that the richness of philosophy is seen; by studying other cosmological worldviews, one can better understand one's own. Scholars, including Weimin Sun, Robert Cummings Neville, and others, agree on the need to intensify interest in Chinese cosmology and its basic concepts. One such concept is Zhonghua. Modern Chinese philosophy is a combination of Marxist philosophy, traditional Chinese philosophy, and Western philosophy. One of the tasks of a modern researcher in China is to find possible points of contact, and common features in order to demonstrate the possible well-functioning cooperation of these currents. In addition, common features are found primarily in cosmology.

Keywords: The Concept of Zhonghua, Chinese Philosophy, Chinese Cosmology, Chinese Marxism, Cosmos, World

Received: 19 November 2022 / Accepted: 22 December 2022 / Published: 5 February 2023

Introduction

One of the modern sciences, astronomy, has a subsection: cosmology. This scientific discipline studies theories of the origin and development of the world. The question is that the concept of the world cannot be reduced solely to the universe in terms of astronomy. To designate the space of the universe in English, the term “space” is used, which is devoid of any characteristics other than extension. This stretch can be in the usual three dimensions or, mathematically speaking, in more or fewer dimensions. From an astronomical point of view, outer space is quite rightly called space because it contains an almost negligible amount of baryonic matter. Almost all matter that can be interacted with is baryonic, non-baryonic matter, neutrinos, free electrons, dark matter, supersymmetric particles, axions, and black holes (Shull et al., 2012). Predominantly, all space is emptiness. However, in this case, the philosophical consideration of the world must recognise the absurdity of its own questioning because all existential questions would be addressed to the void. Thus, philosophical cosmology originated in antiquity and was engaged in the study of the physical aspects of the world and its metaphysical essence (Bazaluk, 2022). One of the first philosophical problems in the history of philosophy was the search for the primary element; the ancient sages wondered about the origin of the world. In their studies, they came to different versions; some of them were purely metaphysical, such as the appearance of the first exclusively theoretical construct – *Apeiron* (ἄπειρον), and others were on the border of the physical and metaphysical, such as the natural philosophy of the five elements. Asking the question about the origin of the world, the ancient sages, in fact, put human at the centre of philosophising. Human was perceived as a logical element of the universe; he was like an element of a complex and harmonious system. The ancient Greeks deified nature; they saw in it signs of harmony. For example, a broken amphora made by human hands will not reassemble itself from the parts into a whole, but in nature, everything is restored on its own. A new tree grows in place of a felled tree; it is an oak that grows from a planted acorn. Everything in nature is harmonious and logical.

A person exists not just in space: a person is not a geometric point that has coordinates; rather, a person lives in the world, and this world is harmonious. In philosophy, to refer to this phenomenon, the concept of “cosmos” is used; this is a world that exists harmoniously due to laws and principles. It is not limited to physical manifestations; it contains various spheres of being. That is why philosophical cosmology deals with the study of the world as a cosmos. That is why for philosophical cosmology, the astronomical concept of the cosmos is obligatory, but not an exhaustive concept. John D. Barrow, Frank J. Tipler, Claus Beisbart, Gianfranco Bertone, Hooper Dan, Joseph Silk, and many others succeeded in exploring the philosophical principles of cosmology. Today, it is a popular scientific direction, the purpose of which is interdisciplinary research using the conceptual apparatus and methodology of physics, astronomy, and cosmology, as well as philosophy, cultural studies, and history. In this regard, research is not limited to the Western scientific paradigm but goes beyond it into the field of transdisciplinary research. This, in turn, makes it possible to study the cosmos from different angles, not only in the sense of its Greek etymology, but also taking into account other non-Western cultures.

In his article *New Projects in Chinese Philosophy* (2010), researcher Robert Cummings Neville believes that cultural diversity is necessary for a complete understanding of the philosophical meaning of being:

“the global philosophical situation needs the contributions of Chinese philosophers. Contemporary cosmogony needs the Chinese emphasis on creativity as novelty and on understanding as moving from the simple or indeterminate to the complex or determinate. Contemporary cosmology needs the Chinese emphasis on the value of nature and the understanding of human society as part of nature. The contemporary understanding of the origins of human nature needs the Chinese emphasis on ritual in semiotics such that we can understand the evolution of the human as a matter of learning, as well as success at passing on genes. Contemporary practices of global philosophy need the Chinese understanding of ritual to bring together incommensurate cultures. The contemporary political and moral situation needs a Chinese analysis of its conflicts as functions of adequate and inadequate rituals, with the invention of more civilised rituals that make living with conflict possible. These are all urgent philosophical needs, in somewhat different senses of urgency” (Neville, 2010: 54).

The fourth and fifth projects in his article concern cosmogony and philosophical cosmology. The representative of the Boston Confucian movement, Robert Cummings Neville, is known as an American philosopher and theologian. He is currently Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Theology at Boston University. He is the author of books such as *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God* (1968), *The Tao and the Daimon: Segments of a Religious Enquiry* (1982), *The Cosmology of Freedom* (1995), *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (2000), *Seasons of the Christian Life* (2016), and many others. In his book *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God* (1968), Neville tries through the dualism of essence and existence to explain the problematic nature of the concept of space for philosophical cosmology: “Within cosmology, both what is to be explained, the cosmos, find what explains, the axiomatic system, do not recognise any difference between their determinate natures and their reality. If a substance, for instance, has a distinction between its essence and its existence, then the principles of the cosmological system should account for both elements – essence and existence, or nature and reality” (Neville, 1992: 161).

Weimin Sun, in his article *Features of Chinese Cosmology* (2012), both agrees and disagrees with the views of Robert Cummings Neville, analysing point-by-point his theses on Chinese philosophy and Chinese cosmology: “This does not imply that I agree with Neville on how these issues are classified or how they should be tackled. I do think these issues are important, and I agree with Neville that a good understanding of Chinese cosmology and cosmology is not just valuable for understanding Chinese culture, but also for resolving many contemporary challenges we face today, whether in Chinese culture or other cultures” (Sun, 2012: 133). Despite the similarities and differences in the ideas of Weimin Sun and his colleague Robert Cummings Neville, both clearly saw the prospects for development and the growing interest in Chinese cosmology. Weimin Sun writes that his research aims to “identify some unique features of Chinese cosmogony and cosmology, and to outline some directions for future research on these issues. As a result, many details will be omitted. Hopefully, we’ll see a comprehensive and systematic explication of Chinese cosmogony and cosmology in the near future” (Sun, 2012: 133).

Zhonghua’s structure and conceptual model

Linda Jaivin, in her book *The Shortest History of China: From the Ancient Dynasties to a Modern Superpower—A Retelling for Our Times* (2021), creates a unique mosaic of such

diverse events in Chinese history, and does it concisely but very richly. This 2021 study has received many positive reviews from scholars of Chinese history and Chinese mentality: “Chinese history simmers with larger-than-life characters, philosophical arguments and political intrigues, military conflicts and social upheavals, artistic invention, and technological innovation. It progresses in twists, turns, leaps, and returns. Chinese historical records are long and deep, stretching back at least 3,500 years. Their themes and lessons, as well as the memories of wounds and triumphs, pulsate under the surface of contemporary Chinese life, language, culture, and politics” (Jaivin, 2021: 1).

The word “China” first appeared in the English language in the 16th century, through Portuguese. The word apparently derives from references to the ancient Qin dynasty. The word “Qin” (秦) is the name of the dynasty that unified China; the state existed for many centuries. “In Chinese, the most common expression for China in the sense of a nation is *Zhōngguó* 中國 (中国 in simplified characters – more on those shortly). This expression dates back three thousand years to the ancient compilation of poetry, *The Book of Odes*, *Shījīng* 詩經. *Zhōng* 中 means middle or centre. The second character, *guó* 國, contains a mouth, *kǒu* 口, representing the people, and a dagger-axe, *gē* 戈, signifying defence, within an enclosure, *wéi* 圍. *Guo* originally referred to a fortified city, only later coming to mean a kingdom and finally a nation-state” (Jaivin, 2021: 5). *Zhongguo* is regularly translated as “Middle Kingdom.” *Zhong* initially referred to the centre of the kingdom or city rather than indicating that the kingdom was at the centre of the world. However, there is another meaning of this term, which Linda Jaivin mentions. “Another popular way to refer to China is *Zhōnghuá* 中華. *Huá* 華 can signify splendour, radiance, or prosperity... *Zhonghua* is less about a specific territory than a civilisation, encompassing notions of myth, legend, history, and culture... The outline maps that appear in this book are not of the PRC but of territory that either is now or at one time has been part of something understood as *Zhongguo* or *Zhonghua*” (Jaivin, 2021: 5).

Based on the etymology of these two terms, it becomes obvious that the Chinese worldview in different periods of history with different intensities was characterised by ideas about its central position. Moreover, this central position was determined not only geographically, in the sense that China was at the centre of the civilised world, surrounded by less developed peoples, but also at the centre of culture, politics, and philosophy. *Huá* 華 means radiance, and like any radiance, it must have a source, a point from which the rays emanate. This principle created a binary picture of not just politics, but the whole world order; it determined the existence of a certain order of things in the world which is quite logical to define the concept of space. Depending on the historical context, Sinocentrism can refer either to the ethnocentrism of Han society and culture or to the modern concept of *Zhonghua minzu*. This concept ceased to exist in the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, in the 21st century, these ideas have gained new relevance, as R. James Ferguson and Rosita Dellios write in their book, *The Politics and Philosophy of Chinese Power: The Timeless and the Timely* (2016). There are a great many ethnic groups and nationalities in China, and such a large number is necessarily accompanied by some problems: “With these ongoing challenges, it is not surprising that the PRC has had to mobilise both inclusive and reactive patterns of nationalism and ‘Chineseness’ (*Zhonghua minzu*) in its modern narratives” (Ferguson and Dellios, 2016).

This worldview largely determined the development of science in Chinese society. It is known that Chinese astronomy is one of the oldest sciences in the world. Astronomical observations are mentioned in the famous *The Book of Documents* (*Shūjīng*) (Sun and

Kistemaker, 1997). Researcher Sun Xiaochun, in the chapter *Crossing the Boundaries Between Heaven and Man: Astronomy in Ancient China*, in the book *Astronomy Across Cultures. Science Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Science* (2000), writes about the peculiarities of Chinese astronomy and cosmology. These features are associated with a different worldview, which must always be taken into account, and which is very important for understanding the structures of thinking of representatives of other cultures. “The main purpose of Chinese astronomy was to study the correlation between man and the universe. The universe was conceived not as an object independent of man but as a counterpart and mirror of human society. There is a certain harmony and proportion between the heavens and man; the order and pattern of the universe prevails in the world, and changes in the heavens are correlated with changes in the world. This cosmological view made Chinese astronomy the most highly regarded science by state rulers. Astronomy in Ancient China thus had a heavy political component” (Sun, 2000: 425). Chinese astronomy is essentially closer to cosmology as it is closely connected with culture, philosophy, and politics. “In the global conversation, there are three main strategies for answering this question, nearly all of which find representative expressions in most of the major philosophical and religious cultures. One is that the cosmos, under whatever description science gives it, is created by a God who is not part of that cosmos in any ordinary sense. This strategy has had little play in Chinese philosophical discussions, since the worship of Shangdi gave way to awe at Heaven and its partner Earth back in the time of the Zhou. Many Chinese philosophers today, however, are friendly to Western process philosophy, whose God is very much a determinate being who is conceived to account for the order of things, as the Confucian idea of Heaven was supposed to do.” (Neville, 2010: 49).

Zhonghua's Concept in Chinese Marxism and Fundamentals of the Belt and Road Initiative

In modern science, the attitude towards astrology, alchemy, and other sciences that are traditionally considered unscientific is changing. This is primarily due to a change in attitude towards the historical heritage of scientists of the past, and their research in the field of astrology is perceived as a logical stage in the development of scientific knowledge. The Greek natural philosophy of the Pre-Socratics, from the point of view of modern experimental science, looks like nothing more than alchemy, but the teachings of these ancient Greek philosophers are considered a valuable heritage of science. “Chinese cosmology was highly philosophical, but it was conceived on the basis of correlative thinking, not on the analytical and logical thinking of modern science. Thus, it inevitably limited the development of Chinese astronomy. The cosmology could not produce useful geometrical models for calendrical astronomy. Chinese calendrical astronomy remained observational and empirical; astronomical calculations were based on arithmetic and algebra” (Sun, 2000: 452). It is worth mentioning Christopher Cullen’s *Astronomy and Mathematics in Ancient China: The Zhou bi suan jing* (1996), in which the author describes the mathematical and observational principles of ancient Chinese astronomy during the Han dynasty (Cullen, 1996).

On the one hand, Chinese cosmology is closely connected with national culture and traditions, but on the other hand, China is open to becoming acquainted with the philosophical heritage of the rest of the world, in particular Europe. “Of course, contemporary Chinese philosophers have looked out the window at Western philosophical traditions, as their predecessors did at South Asian traditions a millennium and a half earlier. In fact, one of the most important twentieth-century dynamics was the rejection of the Chinese traditions

in China in favour of the Western philosophy of Marxism. As a result, however, many contemporary Chinese philosophers have turned back to the classical Chinese traditions in order to show them to be better than the Western, or to reprimatinate them so that they can compete in contemporary global philosophical discussions” (Neville, 2010: 46-47).

Philosophical discourse in China demonstrates a unique commitment to tradition and an interest in modern achievements, but this state contains a number of conflicting principles. For example, the traditional teachings of Confucius were perceived, at different times, as an important legacy. This doctrine is adjacent to the European philosophical trend of Marxism, representing a unique combination. “Early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founders once deemed traditional political philosophies such as Confucianism and Legalism as inappropriate for building a modern, democratic China. Under Mao Zedong, Confucianism was first extolled, and then it gradually became an object of condemnation to be purged from society. Since the 1980s, Confucian studies and ceremonies began to revive, and today’s CCP has taken one step further to seek to implant Confucianism into its official ideology, Marxism” (Lam, 2018: 47).

Modern Chinese philosophy includes three main aspects: Marxist philosophy, Chinese traditional philosophy, and Western philosophy. “The history of Marxist philosophy is seen as a linear process of development, namely, the founding period of Marxist philosophy (Marx, Engels) – the period of dissemination during the Second International (Kautsky, Bernstein) – Soviet Russian Marxist philosophy (Lenin, Stalin) – Chinese Marxist philosophy (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping). Such a unilinear narrative model excludes many unorthodox Marxist philosophers of different historical periods, and its unquestionable theoretical attitude prevents us from properly judging the thoughts of these Marxist philosophers” (Zhou and Ye, 2022: 52). In recent years, Chinese philosophers have been working to integrate the core principles of Marxism with traditional Chinese culture. This became a kind of philosophical strategy. Within this general trend, the interaction between Marxist philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy is a promising direction. Researchers Hongyin Zhou and Jiabin Ye in their article *Doing Philosophy Comparatively in China: Constructive Engagement between Marxist, Western, and Chinese Traditional Philosophy (2000-2022)* (2022) point out the themes common to these two areas, the first of which is cosmology and Zhonghua. “Many scholars in the discipline of Marxist philosophy have conducted in-depth discussions on the similarities between Marxist philosophy and Chinese traditional philosophy. Here are some examples: (1) Similarity in cosmology. He Zhonghua (何中華) argues that Chinese traditional philosophy emphasises ‘the unity of Heaven and man’ (天人合一), while Marxist philosophy emphasises the unity of the ‘naturalisation of man’ (人的自然化) and the ‘humanisation of nature’ (自然的人化)” (Zhou and Ye, 2022: 56). In this context, the authors refer to the work *He Zhonghua: How the Integration of Marxism and Confucianism Becomes Possible* (2018).

One Belt, One Road (OBOR, 一帶一路) is China’s global infrastructure development initiative, adopted by the Chinese government in 2013. This initiative provides for investments in almost 70 countries around the world. It is fair to say that this project largely determines the foreign policy of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping. The initiative was included in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China in 2017. “In 2016, the BRI was further integrated into China’s national economic blueprint. It was designated as the leading programme for the new vision of China’s opening-up policy outlined in China’s 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) in March. There is one chapter in the plan that focuses exclusively on the BRI (NDRC 2016). Four months after the first BRF was held in May 2017, the BRI was written into the constitution of the Communist Party of China

at the Party's 19th Congress in October 2017. This action implied that the BRI is one of the key foreign policies in the Party's long-term grand plan, and that politically it will be carried out even after President Xi is no longer in power" (He, 2019: 5).

The Chinese government calls this initiative an attempt to improve regional ties, promote the development of culture and the economy, and quite heuristic goals – to bring a brighter future. The project has a completion date of 2049, marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The OBOR has both supporters and critics; some experts tend to think that this plan is aimed at creating a Sinocentric international trading network. Sinocentrism grew out of Asiacentrism, which was intended to be an alternative to Eurocentrism. Despite numerous controversies surrounding it, and numerous attempts to get rid of its influence, Eurocentrism retains its influence, shaping the ideas of historians about world history and the historical and cultural achievements of different peoples. Although modern Eurocentrism is radically different from the Eurocentrism of the 19th and 20th centuries, largely due to its tolerance and loyalty to other cultures, it still exists in the scientific narrative. In addition, this is even though there are all prerequisites for establishing an alternative to Asiacentrism. "Asiatic paradigm was introduced to China in the 1920s when the dominant Eurocentric theories concerning Chinese ethnogenesis and the origins of Chinese civilisation marked West Asia as the cradle for human civilisation and maintained that the Chinese were descendants of migrants from the 'West'" (Yen, 2014: 588).

The existing OBOR initiative is designed, in addition to obvious economic reasons, to form a new worldview paradigm: the philosophy of Sinocentrism. It contributes to the establishment in the minds of the people of the image of China as a kind of political, economic, cultural, spiritual, and philosophical centre – the centre from which, like the rays of the sun, the rays of trade and cultural routes diverge. In this context, the important philosophical question about the place of humans in the world and their relationship sounds completely different. Being at the centre of the economic initiative, China is bringing *Zhonghua's* philosophy back to life.

Discussion and conclusions

The word *Zhong* 中 refers to the centre of the kingdom or city, and *Huá* 華 can signify splendour, radiance, or prosperity. That is why *Zhonghua* is a specific territory rather than a civilisation, encompassing notions of myth, legend, history, and culture. This is a philosophical concept that explains the universe and the location of man in it. In contrast to Eurocentrism, which has its roots in ancient times in which man was perceived as something different from nature, nature itself was perceived geometrically and mathematically. In other cultures, the development of philosophical thought followed a different path, such as in China, where, like in ancient Greece, there was astronomy and its own cosmology. It differed from the European in its close connection with the metaphysical world, spiritual culture, and politics. If the legacy of ancient Greek philosophy gave science the concept of *Ecumene* (οἰκουμένη), literally meaning the inhabited Earth, the world – that is, the lands known to mankind as a whole. We also found a similar concept in non-Western cultures, such as the concept of *Zhonghua* (中華). This is a cosmological term different from the Western type of cosmology, and accordingly, any anthropocentrism will be interpreted differently. However, in this cultural and philosophical pluralism lies the value of universal spiritual heritage, since together they enrich universal civilisation. Such steps forward are fixed in mutual interest by cultural, political, and philosophical heritage. Modern Chinese philosophy combines features of traditional Chinese philosophy, the philosophy of Marxism, and modern Western

philosophy. In addition, initiatives like OBOR are capable of changing the perception of the world, changing accents, and adding multipolarity, not only in economics and politics but also in culture and philosophy.

References

- Bazaluk, Oleg (2022) Philosophy of the cosmos for a discursive “thinking through” of the chronology of the universe. *Philosophy and Cosmology*, 28. <https://doi.org/10.29202/phil-cosm/28/1>
- Cullen, Christopher (1996) *Astronomy and Mathematics in Ancient China: The Zhou bi suan jing*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferguson, R. James and Rosita Dellios (2016) *The Politics and Philosophy of Chinese Power: The Timeless and the Timely*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- He, Alex (2019) The Belt and Road Initiative: Motivations, financing, expansion, and challenges of Xi’s ever-expanding strategy. *CIGI Papers*, Volume 225, 1-26.
- He, Zhonghua (2018) How the Integration of Marxism and Confucianism Becomes Possible. *Literature, History, and Philosophy*, Volume 2, 5-30.
- Jaivin, Linda (2021) *The Shortest History of China: From the Ancient Dynasties to a Modern Superpower—A Retelling for Our Times*. New York, NY: Experiment LLC.
- Lam, Willy Wo-Lap (2018) *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Neville, Robert Cummings (1992) *God the Creator: On the Transcendence and Presence of God*. Albany, NY: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.
- Neville, Robert Cummings (2010) New Projects in Chinese Philosophy. *The Pluralist*, Volume 5, 45-56. <https://doi.org/10.1353/plu.2010.0000>
- Shull, J. Michael, Smith, Britton D., and Charles W. Danforth (2012) The Baryon Census in a Multiphase Intergalactic Medium: 30% of the Baryons may still be Missing. *The Astrophysical Journal*, Volume 759. <https://doi.org/10.1088/2F0004-637X/2F759/2F1/2F23>
- Sun, Weimin (2012) Features of Chinese Cosmology. *Journal of East-West Thought*, Volume 2, 133-144.
- Sun, Xiaochun (2000) Crossing the Boundaries Between Heaven and Man: Astronomy in Ancient China. In: Selin, H., Xiaochun, S. (Eds.) *Astronomy Across Cultures. Science Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Science, Volume 1*. Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-4179-6_15
- Sun, Xiaochun and Jacob Kistemaker (1997) *The Chinese Sky during the Han – Constellating Stars & Society*. Leiden: Brill.
- Yen, Hsiao-pei (2014) Evolutionary Asiacentrism, Peking Man, and the Origins of Sinocentric Ethno-Nationalism. *Journal of the History of Biology*, Volume 47, 585-625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10739-014-9381-4>
- Zhou, Hongyin and Jiabin Ye (2022) Doing Philosophy Comparatively in China: Constructive Engagement between Marxist, Western, and Chinese Traditional Philosophy (2000-2022). *Comparative Philosophy*, Volume 13, 50-61. [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2022\).130208](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2022).130208)