“How to Compare?” – On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy

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Abstract

From early on, comparative philosophy has had on offer a high variety of goals, approaches and methodologies. Such high variety is still today a trademark of the discipline, and it is not uncommon of representatives of one camp in comparative philosophy to think of those in other camps as not really being about ‘comparative philosophy’. Much of the disagreement arguably has to do with methodological problems related to the concept of comparison and with the widely prevailing but unwarranted assumption that comparative philosophy should be about comparing ‘culturally different philosophies’. This paper seeks to problematize this assumption by clarifying conceptually the notions of ‘comparative philosophy’ and of ‘comparison’, by showing the prevalence of the assumption in recent second-order discussions of methodology in comparative philosophy and its restraining implications in a randomly selected contribution of ‘Chinese philosophy’. At the end, a rallying call for a (self-)critical comparative philosophy is issued.

In becoming self-critical, comparative philosophy has among its problems the task of examining its own comparisons, its own philosophies of comparison, and of critically comparing its comparisons.

Archie Bahm (1977: 11)

Comparative philosophy has always been a contested subject matter of scholarly study. Some scholars have pointed out that in the end all philosophy cannot but be comparative and that therefore comparative philosophy as a subdiscipline in its own right is a myth. The notion of “comparative philosophy” under such a reading would be pleonastic, and irreparably so. If true, this would mean that any discussion of the methodology of comparative philosophy had to coincide with a discussion of the methodology of philosophy. Yet other scholars have claimed that comparative philosophy is different from other philosophy, that it is rather one distinguishable subdiscipline among other subdisciplines of philosophy with an object and methods clearly of its own. If true, then any discussion of the methodology of comparative philosophy would have to be more specialized (perhaps narrower and broader at the same time) than a discussion of the methodology of philosophy. In either case, historically speaking, there are unmistakably many instances of comparative philosophy avant la lettre, that is, at the end of the 19th century. A comprehensive discussion of methodology in comparative philosophy would thus have to take its starting point at some or another point in time in the more distant past, although it would still be a highly contestable matter where, when, and what to begin with.

The methodological issues of concern to the following discussion, however, arguably have taken on a different quality and importance once the endeavor developed the self-consciousness and momentum to run under a name of its own, that is, comparative philosophy, and once it found itself slowly but surely institutionalized as a subdiscipline in terms of specialized studies, journals and text books, professional organizations and conferences. Having a name of its own
may be a prerequisite for the possibility of meta-methodological issues, which seem only to arise in a strict sense if they can be said to be about some same matter. In other words, some agreement about being engaged in one and the same endeavor of comparative philosophy (at least on a general level) is a prerequisite for disagreement about method, that is, about “how to compare” (on the specific level), which in turn is what grants the possibility of there being a plurality of methods.

A focus on comparative philosophy après la lettre is also warranted for another reason. Comparative studies in general emerged in the 19th century in a world marked by colonialism. This historical socio-political background would perhaps remain hidden if one were to downplay the coming about of the notion of comparative philosophy as merely a minor event in the history of comparative philosophy. Mind that the first extant uses of the notion have been traced by Halbfass (1997: 298) to the works of Virchend Raghavji Gandhi (1864–1901) and Brajendra Nath Seal (1864–1938) – and it is probably from there that the notion found its way into the writings of the French Indologist Paul Masson-Oursel (1882–1956). Masson-Oursel was the first to present an explicit second-order discussion of comparative philosophy in his “Objet et méthode de la philosophie comparée” (1911) and later wrote a volume entitled La philosophie comparée (1923) that was to resound internationally by way of its translation into English in 1926, which is the one publication that stands at the beginning of most current histories of comparative philosophy (a notable exception is a volume in Chinese that to my knowledge presents the most extensive history of comparative philosophy and that begins with Liang Shuming, cf. Feng and Xing). Despite the scant attention that the colonialist background often receives in specialized circles, it seems obvious that comparative philosophy as an academic endeavor is also and in many regards an outcome of colonialism.

Yet, with Masson-Oursel, there was not yet an awareness and acceptance of a plurality of methods. In his essay of 1911, he defined the scope of the discipline as “the comparative study of philosophical ideas, to whatever civilization they might belong” (541), bemoaned the discredit in which comparison was held in philosophy because of earlier efforts that had been altogether “hasty, arbitrary and devoid of scientific interest” (541), and called out for a “rigorous method” (543) that he – true to his background of Comtean positivism – described as “positive and critical” as well as “empirical and rational” (548). For Masson-Oursel, “Hindu philosophy” and “the sages of China” represented entire filiations of thinkers each forming a “relatively parallel and sufficiently independent series” (542). The method that he propagated, however, was not specific to comparative philosophy, but rather amounted to a kind of positivist comparativism applicable to all sorts of research objects. Clearly, for Masson-Oursel, as already the title of his essay indicates, there was one object and only one right method to research that object.

The topic of a plurality of methods came to assume center stage in English much later and in a completely different geographical locus. In Hawaii, Charles A. Moore had founded the East–West Philosophers’ conference (the first was held in 1939) and also, after the Second World War, the journal Philosophy East and West (in 1951). The journal, in its first three years of existence, ran a series of articles on philosophical synthesis that not only brought to the table Masson-Oursel and a remarkable group of philosophers (including Dewey, Radhakrishnan, Santayana, Hocking, Dasgupta, Mukerji, and Suzuki), but that also showcased the plurality of methods in comparative philosophy. Moore himself, in an exchange with Laurence J. Roşán, made it his point that “the method of comparative philosophy must be conceived of pluralistically rather than monistically” (77) and that “Mr. Roşán’s suggested method …, too, however, like all methods has its limitations and difficulties” (77–8). The journal also featured Kwee Swan Liat, based at Leiden, who distinguished eight different approaches in comparative philosophy (1951: 12–5), which he went to discuss at length in his doctoral thesis on the Methods of Comparative Philosophy (1953).
Ever since, discussions about methods in comparative philosophy have continued, and the field in general has advanced in many regards. But what about the methodological state of comparative philosophy today? Has the field advanced in that regard? The aim of the present article, in short, is to answer this question. Before discussing the state of the field, some conceptual clarifications about the notion of comparative philosophy are in order, as they will help organize and find a vocabulary for my discussion of the methodological state of the discipline. When discussing the field, I introduce my main contention that the today habitually taken assumption that comparative philosophy is to compare “culturally different philosophies” not only predetermines and constrains the array of possible methods and approaches considerably, but also possibly undermines some crucial innovative and self-critical potential of the discipline. To specify why this assumption may be obstructive to comparative philosophy as philosophy, I turn to the example of Mou Zongsan’s reading and criticism of Immanuel Kant on the point of intellectual intuition. I end with some notes on why a comparative philosophy that draws on “cultures” only might be problematical and issue a rallying call for a (self-)critical comparative philosophy.

1. Conceptual Clarifications

It is unclear what precisely comparative philosophy is about. The problem partly lies in the notion itself, comparative philosophy, which is underdetermined. It leaves open the possibility of either being about a kind of philosophy that distinguishes itself from other kinds of philosophies by its use of comparison or being about a discipline devoted to the comparison of philosophies – which may but need not proceed from within philosophy, but, for instance, could proceed from within historiography or sociology (Randal Collins’s massive The Sociology of Philosophies comes to mind). Wilhelm Halbfass makes the same point about the ambiguity in the expression comparative philosophy asking whether “philosophy is the subject or the object of comparing” (1988: 433). In each case, there seems to be some important piece of information missing, since the notion, comparative philosophy, does not say what it is that separates one philosophy from another (if it is about the comparison of philosophies) or what it is that separates philosophical comparison from other forms of comparison (if it is about comparing philosophically). Of course, the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and practitioners may precisely understand the subject matter of the discipline to be the philosophical comparison of philosophies.

From this point of view, it is not at all astonishing that comparative philosophers have variously filled in these missing pieces of information, particularly regarding the question of what separates one philosophy from another, turning, for example, to different peoples and their mentalities, traditions, civilizations, cultures, nations, languages, textual corpora or authors, or any one combination thereof. One’s choice in this regard may be made explicit or rest implicit, and it may be precise or vague. Not to be mistaken, it is not obvious that the explicit and precise is always preferable; some have explicitly spoken out in favor of vagueness. What is obvious is that a choice is being made each time someone sets out to do comparative philosophy – and it is usually not difficult at all to find out what choice has been made in a given scholarly piece.

Comparative philosophy, simply by virtue of being “comparative”, in one way or another involves a series of aspects, which may be analytically distinguished in just any comparison. At least four such aspects are distinguished in standard conceptualizations: (i) a comparison is always done by someone; (ii) at least two relata (comparata) are compared; (iii) the comparata are compared in some common respect (tertium comparationis); and (iv) the result of a comparison is a relation between the comparata based on the chosen respect. To this, a fifth aspect might
be added, what I call the “pre-comparative tertium”, which refers to a point of commonality that is posited or asserted in the determination of the comparata as that which is to be compared. Of course, the point of commonality is itself expressive of a claim of resemblance or dissemblance (or of identity or difference) and thus is also the result of prior comparison(s): “pre-comparative” in this sense always is “post-comparative”. Under a dynamic view of comparison, the point of commonality that sustains the comparison in the sense of giving a reason as to why one comparatum is put next to the other for comparison may change, be entirely substituted, or provisionally amount to no more than a sort of Cambridge property as that of “being of interest to the comparer”. In short, the variables involved are the comparer, the comparata and the pre-comparative tertium, the tertium comparationis, and the result of the comparison.

As is to be expected, different approaches in comparative philosophy emphasize different aspects, and these emphases usually reveal something about the purposes that the comparer attaches to the comparison. Clearly no comparison is undertaken in isolation, but each is motivated by some specific reason(s) and pursued to reach some specific goal(s) that may well point beyond the “comparison itself” to questions of personal taste, personal or collective identity, institutional pressures, religious, moral, political or other agendas, continuations of earlier debates or conversations, and so on. This contextual dimension of comparative philosophy is not much researched by scholars, and a sustained focus on the “politics of comparative philosophy”, or any of its more specialized variants, may be called for. Whether and to what extent these extra-comparative purposes inform the comparison in ways that are important (thus making them more intra than extra) may vary from case to case, as that dimension may or may not be part of a given comparative philosopher’s self-conscious methodological strategy and as different purposes may be attached by those who discuss, analyze or make other use of the comparisons at hand.

The mentioned aspects may trigger numerous questions with regard to particular studies in comparative philosophy. To give some examples: Does the comparer side with one, some, or all comparata, and if so how (say, in terms of his or her own belonging)? Does the choice of the pre-comparative tertium restrict the realm of possible tertia comparationis? Are there extra-comparative purposes that motivate the comparer to do the comparison? What role do the comparata play in the result of the comparison? It goes without saying that the aspects and these questions can equally be applied to particular comparisons understood as answers to the question “How to compare?” and to meta-methodological discussions involving an answer to the question “How to compare comparisons?”. For instance, is there a tertium to different approaches in comparative philosophy (that goes beyond positing the very general claims of each being an approach, being about comparison in the sense of possible analysis along the presented aspects, and being about philosophy)?

2. Recent Second-order Discussions and Cultures as Pre-comparative Tertium

In contemporary scholarship, there is a considerable variety as to both object and method in comparative philosophy; there is hence no consensus on what it is that comparative philosophy is comparing (cf. Panikkar). In the great majority of cases, the choice is for combinations of factors that account for the separation of one philosophy from another while cultures clearly play a preeminent role. This is readily demonstrated by the fact that every other text in comparative philosophy after a few lines (and usually without much argument) switches to the notion of “intercultural”, “cross-cultural”, or “transcultural” philosophy. In German, interkulturelle Philosophie is by far a more common notion than komparative or vergleichende Philosophie (for a debate, see Obert, Staub, and Wimmer). The missing piece of information in the notion of comparative philosophy, if the notion is somehow to reflect
the practices in the discipline, is some reference to the claim that there is a boundary between the philosophies of different cultures that is *ex ante* considered qualitatively importantly different from what separates philosophies of writers, schools or traditions within one and the same culture. This is amply reflected in habitual concessions to the practice of comparative philosophy as being about the “philosophizing across cultural traditions” (Li 19) as well as in many definitions of comparative philosophy. Joseph Kaipayil distinguishes a common and a technical sense, the former to be rejected and meaning that “every philosophy is a comparative philosophy and every philosopher a comparative philosopher”, the latter to be embraced and referring to “the systematic comparative study of culturally different philosophies of the world” (1). Ram Adhar Mall writes in his *Intercultural Philosophy*, “Comparative philosophy, worthy of its name, presupposes an intercultural orientation in philosophy” (17). David Wong begins his entry on comparative philosophy in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by saying that it “brings together philosophical traditions that have developed in relative isolation from one another and that are defined quite broadly along cultural and regional lines – Chinese versus Western, for example” (online).

In the last 3 years, a number of informative and in many ways thought-provoking works on (meta-)methodology in comparative philosophy have been published, but their authors all seem to rely to some degree on the presumption that comparative philosophy is best understood as “intercultural philosophy”. What is more, the different works all mirror mainstream (and often “Western”) philosophical predilections of their authors, which means that the eventually favored method or the framing of the meta-methodological discussion itself are indebted to one or another philosophical approach beyond comparative philosophy that is itself not open to debate. It is almost as if the different approaches could be profitably divided, for instance, into deconstructivist, phenomenologist, hermeneutical, pragmatist, analytic, etc. This implies that methodology in comparative philosophy would indeed coincide with methodology in philosophy – were it not for the emphasis on cultures and the potential methodological consequences of this emphasis, so that any approach in, say, phenomenology within the subdiscipline of comparative philosophy would come to differ markedly from any approach within noncomparative phenomenology.

A phenomenologist approach to “cross-cultural philosophical comparisons” (90) is advocated by Zhang Xianglong in his article “Comparison Paradox, Comparative Situation and Inter-Paradigmatic”. Zhang offers a refined discussion of the “phenomenal process of comparison” (93) and makes the *tertium comparationis* an explicit topic:

> When we compare two philosophical doctrines, e.g. C and D, what we are trying to do, in the most basic sense, is find their sameness and difference. […]. When we are talking about the sameness and difference of C and D, it is important to consider what common measure or standard of comparison we are appealing to. But can we truly appeal to a common measure in order to obtain a meaningful comparison? These problems are not often directly addressed, but how we solve them, whether explicitly or implicitly, will influence the quality of comparison. (93)

Zhang’s phenomenologist approach makes him argue against any appeal to a common measure and eventually opt for an approach largely not in need of concepts. His “non-conceptual” (100) approach involves a comparer who is “not constrained by [his or her] conceptual framework” (98) – such comparisons in Zhang’s terms would be “genuine”, “pregnant”, and “fruitful” comparisons (passim). The sort of inter-paradigmaticity that characterizes the “comparative situation” is one in which the comparer, “though abiding in one paradigm”, is in a “conscious state [of being] strongly aware of the heterogeneous and even threatening presence of other paradigms” (99). Inter-paradigmaticity turns out to be the
place of *Heimat, Heimlichkeit* and *Nativität* (native-land, nativeness, and nativity), marked by a fundamental potentiality of inter-(ness) or between-(ness) (100). The “comparative situation” is further described as “the potential and non-objectifiable stream of space-time experience flowing from the past to future”, “an indistinct, potential and all-related net that precedes all identifiable objects or subjects”, of which the “relational things that we experience are just the manifested or prominent parts of this anonymously functioning horizon” (96).

An entire monograph sharing some ground with Zhang is Steven Burik’s on *The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking*, a comparison of Heidegger (hence the title), Derrida and Daoism. Burik explains his views “on what comparative philosophy should and should not be” (2) as follows:

Comparative philosophy cannot stop at the finding and explanation of similarities and differences between thinking from different cultures, however valuable these findings are. As a discipline, it should locate itself between these differences, while aware of the impossibility of a purely neutral viewpoint, and in that sense I use the term intercultural. Being between different cultures suggests not the Western metaphysical ideal of objectivity, but it does suggest the openness toward what is other and the willingness to step outside one’s own comfortable sphere. (2)

Burik is careful not to claim that he is aiming at “one overarching theory or methodology of comparative philosophy” but still offers “a couple of ideas which comparative philosophy should adhere to” (4). Among these ideas are the acknowledgement and promotion of “the equivalence of different cultures” (3), the mentioned attempt to assume a position “in-between the different cultures” (4), the inseparability of “theory and practice of comparative philosophy” (4), and the furtherance of “our understanding of the problems we face today” (5). As with Heidegger, thinking is considered much more than just philosophy (38), but with Burik, thinking becomes comparative (and becomes tied to different cultures). Comparative thinking, in conclusion, is judged as being both “inside and outside of philosophy” (146).

Among recent second-order discussions of comparative philosophy, there are also some who defend only a moderately culturalist approach. Bo Mou has advocated for some years what he calls the “constructive engagement strategy of comparative philosophy”. In a programmatic introduction, he explains the strategy:

One strategic goal and basic methodological strategy of comparative philosophy as understood in a philosophically interesting and significant way can be summarized in this manner: to inquire into how, via reflective criticism (including self-criticism) and argumentation, distinct modes of thinking, methodological approaches, visions, insights, substantial points of view, or conceptual and explanatory resources from different philosophical traditions and/or different styles/orientations of doing philosophy (within one tradition or from different traditions) can learn from each other and jointly contribute to our understanding and treatment of a series of issues, themes or topics of philosophical significance, which can be jointly concerned through appropriate philosophical interpretation and/or from a broader philosophical vantage point. (3)

In contrast with this rather encompassing characterization, Mou is seemingly much stricter when it comes to specific “adequacy conditions for methodological guiding principles in comparative studies”, for which he suggests a set of six conditions somewhat complicatedly called the perspective-eligibility-recognizing condition, the agent-purpose-sensitivity condition, the equality-status-granting condition, the new-eligible-perspective-possibility-recognizing condition, the complementarity-seeking condition, and the sublation-seeking
condition (19–22). Yet, if one takes a closer look at any of these conditions, things become rather vague again, and it is unclear who would how determine whether “adequacy” is given. Mou’s meta-methodological framework is moderately culturalist because what he calls a “distinct (philosophical) tradition” amounts to a “distinct culture-associated philosophical tradition” only if “narrowly” understood (5 fn. 6); comparative philosophy, he writes further, “typically treats prominently cross-tradition/orientation comparative cases”, but his adequacy conditions are meant to apply no less to philosophy pursued “within the same tradition/orientation” (22).

A similar point is raised in more straightforward manner in Robert W. Smid’s monograph Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy. Focusing on the pragmatist and process traditions in the personae of William Ernest Hocking, Filmer S.C. Northrop, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, and Robert C. Neville, Smid opts himself for a decidedly pragmatic definition:

Comparative philosophy can be defined by its attempt to move across the boundaries of otherwise distinct philosophical traditions – especially insofar as these traditions are divided by significant historical and cultural distance – thus enabling a comparison of what lies on either side of the boundary. By this definition, a comparison of Descartes and Locke would constitute no less an instance of comparative philosophy than one of Mencius and Aquinas […], although the latter would likely be of greater interest to comparative philosophers because of the greater historical and cultural distance among the traditions represented. (2)

The definition is pragmatic since Descartes and Locke, strictly speaking, end up representing two distinct “philosophical traditions” if compared one with the other as well as representing one and the same philosophical tradition if compared, say, with Mencius. Smid offers a fine meta-discussion of comparative philosophy. He contrasts the “comparing of philosophies” with “the philosophy of comparison” (4), mentioning the frequent but mistaken assumption that “what comparison is” is sufficiently obvious that it requires little further attention” (4). Smid further points out that “the comparison of comparisons is self-referential and is so by necessity” and that “every comparative philosopher has a particular background”, which “influences the results of his or her comparative work” (11). He shows concern for different “strengths” of methods rather than for identification of “the strongest method” (12–13). Smid, however, does not problematize the ease with which also his examined pragmatist and process philosophers quickly turn from comparative philosophy to “cross-cultural comparison” (18,194). Note that cultures equally serve as pre-comparative tertium with those who wish to emphasize differences (Northrop, Hall, and Ames) as much as with those who presuppose some kind of continuity (Neville) or even seek to achieve philosophical synthesis (Hocking).

3. The Pre-Comparative Tertium Of Cultures As Philosophically Constraining

The chapter “Mou Zongsan on Intellectual Intuition” by Tang Refeng in Contemporary Chinese Philosophy is a good example of how scholarly discussion, concretely that of Mou’s famous notion of “moral metaphysics” (daode de xing’ershangxue), can be framed in a culturalist way as to be philosophically constraining. The notion of moral metaphysics is consciously set against Kant’s metaphysics of morals (Metaphysik der Sitten). Both Mou and Kant subscribe to some transcendentalism but differ in various regards. For instance, Kant’s transcendentalism is denying humans “intellectual intuition”, which is left to God only, whereas Mou bases his transcendentalism on precisely the human possibility of such
intuition. This translates into a similar difference as to their respective stances over against the summum bonum. In Tang’s discussion, the argument takes on the following form:

Step 1. Kant is said to separate morality from wisdom, whereas Mou coordinates and integrates them into one (339–340).\(\text{comparer: Tang Refeng, comparata: Kant, Mou, pre-comparative tertium: personal names, tertia comparationis: relating morality and wisdom, result of comparison: one separates, one integrates}\)

Step 2. It is claimed that the difference between Kant and Mou is “indeed the most important difference between Chinese moral philosophy and Western moral philosophy”; although some “similar ideas” are admitted (340).\(\text{comparata: Kant, Mou, pre-comparative tertium: moral philosophy, of which one is Chinese and one Western and to which Kant and Mou somehow relate}\)

Step 3. Yet, it is said “there is still a difference between the kind of moral wisdom we find in Chinese philosophy and in Western philosophy. And to see the real reason for the difference, we need to go deeper to the mentality that underlies Chinese culture and Western culture. This leads us to the difference between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy.” (340)\(\text{comparata: Kant, Mou (?), pre-comparative tertia: Chinese–Western distinction; moral wisdom; a reasoned difference; mentality here and there, cultures, culturally distinct philosophies}\)

In his writings and for reasons of his own, Mou was interested in establishing “a complete system of Chinese philosophy” while critically assessing “Western philosophy” (cf. Tang, 328). The mode of presentation of Chinese versus Western philosophy and culture is indeed omnipresent in Mou’s later writings, as when he maintains that “Chinese culture concerns life while Western culture emphasizes nature or external objects” (quoted in: Tang 341).

Even if that was part of his agenda, it is not quite clear why we should be following his example and adopt this specific framing; why it should be part of the agenda of contemporary comparative philosophy.

If scholarly discussion frames the issue in this fashion, what happens in the extreme is a sort of double reduction. Mou is reduced to being a vessel of some abstracted “Chinese culture”, to which he added a piece, but possibly a piece, which could emanate only from that culture. Arguable Western influences on his view of intuition, such as Kant himself and speculatively Bergson, are reduced to giving Mou a vocabulary to express in a novel way what unmistakably has been and remains within the bounds of dynamic development of Chinese culture (because surely, being Chinese, Mou could not possibly understand Bergson, leave alone Kant, properly... given the cultural differences...). This mode of presentation amounts to a sort of cultural closure. Any innovation, influence or suggestion from without of necessity is not really from without, but rather an expansion from what is considered to be within.

Another way of framing would take Mou’s argument against Kant as informed by various Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist writings, but also by Kant and (speculatively) by Bergson, who was equally contending with Kant’s transcendentalism on the point of intuition. This would mean to take Mou as influenced by all these writings and writers (who are then more than mere vocabulary givers in a world lost in translation) and as someone who understands them in a meaningful way. But that would be to acknowledge that Mou’s worldview differs in philosophically important ways from any supposed “Chinese worldview”. This would pave the way to understand Mou as someone leaning on to many others but thinking for himself and thereby formulating a critique of Kant, which might or might not be worthwhile to consider for its philosophical merit. Mou thought that the denial that humans may have intellectual intuition poses a major incoherence in Kant’s philosophy. He, for instance,
argued that Kant, to establish the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, must admit human intellectual intuition. If the argument has philosophical merit, then it should be possible to argue for that merit without having to even mention that Mou was “Confucian”, “Chinese”, drawing on “Chinese tradition” or writing from within Chinese culture.

Obviously, the emphasis on the adjective Chinese in the expressions Chinese tradition or Chinese culture with many writers serves to establish a counter-discourse, and that may be appropriate for various, including political, purposes. But, again, the differences between Mou and Kant on intellectual intuition or the *summa bonum* can easily be argued without any reference to the word Chinese. It is in my view simply unnecessary and even misleading to the point of being counterproductive in its reificationist implications to argue the thesis that the human possibility of intellectual intuition is somehow Chinese, whereas the impossibility is not. Bergson would have to be called Chinese.

4. Toward (Self-)Critical Comparative Philosophy

Those who rely on cultures as philosophically relevant pre-comparative *tertium* may have radically different reasons and purposes in mind, from the worst of chauvinist culturalism to the best of strategic essentialism. In conclusion, I should like briefly to point out two problematical aspects pertaining to the contemporary dominance of cultures in comparative philosophy.

The first aspect is simply reification. If reliance on cultures comes to be the only or the dominant way of doing comparative philosophy, then one runs the risk of turning a blind eye to the historical and ideological reasons that have made talk of cultures popular in the first place. It seems that particularly those cherishing so-called contextual approaches (and many “culturalists” do) should be the first to show an interest in the history of their own discipline and the historical contingencies of their own endeavor. If cultures are chosen for a pre-comparative *tertium* – and by no means would I dare hold that it should never be the *tertium* of one’s choice (in view of some purposes it might be a most fitting choice) – then the choice might and should be accompanied by reasons, which besides having the advantage of transparency and therefore contestability also straightforwardly works against reification. We only give reasons for choices which we admit could have turned out differently.

The second aspect is the effect of inclusionary exclusion. The more cultures are taken as unquestioned pre-comparative *tertium* instead of for example, gender, class, or style (which may cut across cultures in philosophically important ways), the more a certain ambiguity becomes pertinent. The same factors that allow scholars of these cultures to claim a niche for themselves within philosophy can be and are used by others to (dis)qualify that area of scholarship as being about something other than philosophy proper. Designations like “Indian philosophy” or “Chinese philosophy” (which may be, often are, but need not be understood as culturalist designations), hence may receive recognition in academic philosophy by setting up specific panels at professional conferences, but naming the panel in these terms amounts to an inclusionary exclusion. A contribution discussing Mou’s criticism of Kant on the level of arguments is very likely to end up on the Chinese philosophy panel and not on the one on which it would be most conventional to include a criticism of Kant’s take on intellectual intuition (had the criticism been offered, say, by a German or US American Kant scholar).

This is why those engaged in comparative philosophy would perhaps do good not to stress excessively the cultural embedding of the philosophical texts they study. To understand all texts as largely expressions of a cultural narrative is not only to give away a range of other understandings, but also to do a disservice to the philosophical relevance that most if not
all comparative philosophers aspire to. That is to say that the philosophically important result of the comparison should not merely reproduce the cultural difference or commonality that was presupposed at first when choosing the pre-comparative tertium. That texts are culturally embedded seems hard to deny and might for some purposes be of utmost importance, but it is not so clear what importance it has with regard to making a philosophically relevant point. Besides, from the insight that a text is culturally embedded, it does not follow that it is embedded in either Chinese, Indian, African, or European culture – that these at all should constitute philosophically important borders.

The five aspects of comparison presented and employed in this article provide a simple analytical tool to question and (self-)critically engage with comparative philosophy as well as to introduce more transparency in the light of the mentioned conceptual ambiguities of the very notion of comparative philosophy. At the same time, the analytical tool requires further analysis itself, which points to an endeavor that I would submit has the potential to open up a series of questions not covered in the existing literature on methodology in comparative philosophy, and also to prevent falling prey to comfortable but eventually counterproductive reifications.

**Short Biography**

Ralph Weber is a senior researcher and lecturer at the University Research Priority Program Asia and Europe at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. He received his doctorate from the University of St Gallen in 2007 on the basis of a thesis about Tu Weiming’s social and political thought. He specializes in political philosophy in the PRC and particularly in contemporary Confucianism as well as in theoretical and methodological aspects of comparative philosophy. He has published several articles in journals such as *Asian Philosophy, Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques, Frontiers of Philosophy in China, Philosophy East and West, polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren*, and *Zhexuemen* (Beida Journal of Philosophy). As of 2012, he is book review editor (Europe) for the journal *Philosophy East and West*.

**Works Cited**


