

**Pathways Towards a Global Philosophy of Religion: The Problem of Evil
from an Intercultural Perspective**

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i1.15>

Submission: November 27, 2021 Acceptance: January 25, 2022

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Abstract

In this article, we will make the case for an intercultural philosophy of religion with a special focus on interculturality between Chinese and African philosophies. We will provide an overview of the kind of intercultural philosophy that has already been undertaken between the East and the South and point out that a philosophy of religion has been left out. We will then make the case for a global philosophy of religion approach and why Chinese and African philosophies of religion should engage in philosophical interchanges. We will then highlight some directions for carrying out such a philosophy and explain why the problem of evil may be better addressed from an intercultural perspective.

Keywords: The Problem of Evil, Global Philosophy of Religion, Intercultural Philosophy, Chinese Philosophy, African Philosophy, Philosophical Methodology

Introduction

Africa is an increasingly important topic for China and the world, with African philosophy and Chinese philosophy having many common issues, which are worthy of in-depth study. Nonetheless, such study has been largely neglected. In this article, we will outline the importance of doing a Global comparison between African and Chinese philosophies, with a special focus on intercultural philosophy of religion. In the first two sections, we will give an overview of the debate. In the third section, we will make the case for a dialogue between Chinese and African traditions. We will also point out some ways to carry out such intercultural philosophical work.

African and Chinese Philosophies as a Topic of Intercultural Philosophy

Intercultural dialogue opens up new possibilities of development for contemporary philosophy. Doing intercultural philosophy helps us understand the diversity of the world in a better and fairer way. Intercultural philosophy has, therefore, some ideological elements underlying it, i.e., it envisions a globalized world. To carry out intercultural philosophy is not a morally neutral enterprise. Instead, it is to consciously acknowledge that there is something valuable to learn from intercultural exchanges and the importance of building on this (WIMMER 2004). It is not a unified setting that transcends all special cultural worlds, such as providing a unified standard to measure all different cultures, but a convergence of ideological possibilities. In such a philosophy, if anything is universal, it can only be the recognition of the fact of cultural diversity and the discussion of communicability between cultures and religions. We, therefore, endorse the Polylogue approach proposed by Franz Martin Wimmer, that is, taking the principle of pluralism, and through a full discussion and multi-participation of agents, searching for an ‘overlapping consensus’ (WIMMER 2004). The intercultural philosophy of religion is one of the keys to this intercultural consensus. This is because it contributes to a full understanding of the most basic ways that people relate to each other and to the world and, therefore, is of key importance in a Globalized world. Religion is not a random and simple category, but rather, it refers to many fundamental aspects of people’s lives.

From the perspective of intercultural philosophy, the scene of world philosophy is bound to change for an increasingly pluralist world. Western-centrism in the history of traditional philosophy, as well as the Chinese-Western dualistic structure of the Chinese world, should be challenged through the lens of contemporary intercultural philosophical methodology, and replaced by a pluralism that recognizes different cultures as valuable and deserving respect. The engagement with African philosophy is undoubtedly an important opportunity to repaint the map of world philosophy, and it is also an important step for the continuous expansion and improvement of Chinese cultural vision in the process of globalization. This is especially the case in terms of the philosophy of religion. African philosophy is very much grounded in religious thought and to this extent, other philosophical disciplines are very much inspired by the philosophy of religion (MBITI 1990). The truth is that for most Chinese scholars, African philosophy is a brand-new ‘other’. We suggest that a dialogue and understanding with African thoughts and philosophy will help us find an appropriate level of self-understanding and self-positioning in the era of globalization.

From our point of view, the study of African philosophy should not be carried out from an ethnocentric standpoint, like, for example, using Western philosophical categories and conceptual systems as the only standard to measure and interpret African and Chinese philosophies. New methodologies for the study of non-Western philosophies, such as Jonathan Chimakonam's Ezumezu viewpoint, ought to be adopted as ways to proceed (CHIMAKONAM 2019). On the other hand, in addition to studying African thoughts, religions, and culture from the perspectives of linguistics, anthropology, and ethnology, we should also understand, grasp and present African philosophy from the perspective of intercultural philosophy. We should systematically sort out the basic appearances and development context of African philosophy via three aspects, namely, African ethics and political philosophy, African traditional philosophy (e.g., African religious thought), and the links between contemporary African philosophy and world philosophy. All of these should be fully presented in the context of the pluralism of world philosophy. As mentioned before, owing to the crucial importance of religious thought in African philosophy, it is crucial to explore the African philosophy of religion in order to fully understand African philosophy (MBITI 1990).

The study of African philosophy in the Chinese World

The study of African philosophy in Chinese philosophy circles is still very rare. Most Chinese scholars in the field of philosophy who work on topics related to Africa focus mostly on the philosophy of North Africa. For example, a prominent book in Chinese philosophical circles is Martin Bernal's 'Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization', which was translated into Chinese by Hao Tianhu in 2020 (BERNAL, 2011). The research on philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa is nearly inexistent. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Chinese journals such as 'World Philosophy', 'Philosophical Trends' and 'Foreign Social Sciences' published a series of translations on African philosophy, such as the articles of Allasane N'Daw, Kwasi Wiredu, and Henry Odera Oruka, among others.¹

¹ Cf. N'DAW Allasane: 'Zivilisation und Philosophie in Schwarzafrika' [Wissenschaft und Weltanschauung], Vol.3, 1978. Chinese trans. by Yan Xiaoyuan, [World Philosophy], Vol. 5, 1979. Kwasi Wiredu: 'Can Philosophy be intercultural? An African viewpoint', [Diogenes] Vol. 184, 1998. Chinese trans. by Zhang Xiaojian, in: [Diougenni], 12/2000. Henry Odera Oruka: 'Sage Philosophy in Africa', [International Philosophical Quarterly], 1983(12). Chinese trans. by GUO Jingping, [Foreign social science], 1985(10).

Since 1985, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has translated and published the Chinese version of the journal 'Diogenes', sponsored by the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences, and a series of representative research papers on African philosophy has been published.² Most of the original papers by Chinese scholars on African philosophy are very introductory and superficial and mostly focused on African Marxism (such as the thought of Franz Fanon and Julius Nyerere). Indeed, since the 1970s, this has been the core focus of the philosophical dialogue. There has also been some research on topics such as colonialism and Pan-Africanism.³ Nonetheless, in the Chinese speaking world, there is currently no lengthy treatment in the shape of a monograph that is focused on African philosophy.

Recently, some more in-depth research attempts have been made to use African philosophy. In 2017, one of us (Jun Wang) translated *Afrikanische Philosophie im Kontext der Weltphilosophie* by the German philosopher Heinz Kimmeler from German to Chinese (2005). Jun Wang is also undertaking the translation of 10 representative African philosophical works and compiling a collection of essays on African philosophical research. These translation projects plan to cover the discussion of African political philosophy, African traditional philosophy and religions, contemporary African philosophy and world philosophy, and the methodology of intercultural philosophy. The hope is to provide more literature on basic research into African philosophy for the Chinese philosophical circle.

Towards a Sino-African Comparative Philosophy of Religion

As mentioned, comparisons between Chinese and African philosophy have been largely neglected. As far as Chinese philosophy is concerned, African philosophy is an important 'other', but it has not been fully revealed to the Chinese world so far. But as long as we pay attention to Africa, we will find that there are, in fact, many similarities between African philosophical and religious thoughts and the Chinese. Indeed, both have similar ways of thinking

² Such as DIOP, Babacar: 'African Civilizations between the winds of east and west, [Diogenes], No.184, 1998. WIREDU, Kwasi: ':Can Philosophy be intercultural? An African viewpoint', [Diogenes], Vol. 184, 1998. MABORUNJE Akin L.: 'La Construction Socio-Politique de L'Espace en Afrique', [Diogenes], Vol.184, 1998. BONI, Tanella: 'Contribution to an analysis of the daily life of African women', [Diogenes], Vol. 184. 1998. PRESPEY Gail: 'Bâtie une 'culture national' interethnique et intergénérationnelle au Kenya', [Diogenes], Vol. 235-236, 2011 etc.

³ Cf. ZHENG, Xiangfu: The Spread and Development of Marxism in Africa, [Zhejiang Social Science], 2014(12). LIN Zisai: 'The Development of Marxism in Africa', [Study & Exploration], 2019(06). ZHENG, Xiangfu: 'Marxism in the course of socialist movement in Africa', [Zhejiang Social Science] 2020(11). SHU Yunguo: 'Pan-Africanism and African Integration', in: [World History], 04/2014 etc.

about religion. Here we wish to focus on some similarities and provide some possible pathways towards philosophical comparisons of both Chinese and African philosophies of religion. Of course, we cannot include all the possible ways that Chinese and African philosophies of religion can be compared, but we will provide some important ideas that are worth considering. Here are some important comparative points:

(1) African religions and traditional ways of life are integrated, and there is not always an opposition between religion and science, and superstition and reason in the same sense that Western thought categorizes these. In this regard, China is more similar to Africa. In China there is no notion of a purely secular and scientific knowledge system. In fact, the traditional social life and religious factors are inseparable. Similarly, in Africa, it is not uncommon that both religion and witchcraft are used as complementary knowledge systems (CHIMAKONAM 2012). In fact, as scholars like Chimakonam and Innocent Asouzu have pointed out, the African epistemological viewpoint sees different aspects of reality not as opposites, but as complementary (CHIMAKONAM 2019; ASOUZU 2005). This is still very common in many rural areas in China, and we generally think that the rural areas with later modernization reflect traditional Chinese life. In addition, compared with the West, the relationship between religion and philosophy appears to be closer in Africa and China. This is clear in the way these cultures understand the problem of evil. Routinely, in the African philosophical context, evil can be explained by alluding to metaphysical entities, such as ancestors, demons, or deities. Moreover, the division between the natural and supernatural is not very clear in African thought: often there is no division between the two. Likewise, in Chinese philosophy, evil, destiny, misfortune, and so forth are explained by forces which are part of the world but are not clearly natural or supernatural (for such division does not exist) (PERKINS 2014). In short, explanations of the world are carried out by alluding to both scientific and religious ideas and, indeed, the division between these two is not clear. They are not opposites, but complementary realities.

(2) Both Chinese and African religions have obvious practicalities and are integrated into daily life. That is to say that religion has played a fundamental role in daily life and is intertwined with social reality. Chinese indigenous religions, such as Taoism, do not have a particularly complex philosophical theoretical system (unlike Buddhism that originates from India). Taoism is

more like a belief system on how to address daily life. Praying to ancestors or God has a very practical purpose: it is about changing one's daily life in a positive way. Metaphysical entities can intervene in the world and change its course (interestingly, however, this is usually not understood as a miracle like in Western Christianity). Hence, Taoists often pray for things such as rain in arid areas, releasing souls from purgatory, health, promotion, wealth, and so on. Many religions in Africa also serve a pragmatic role (MBITI 1990). For example, the Akan have a large number of gods in order to ensure a good harvest, protect people from disasters, or take special charge of a certain region, city, and village. The many gods of the Yoruba also play important roles in daily life, such as being responsible for the harvest and better weather conditions, curing diseases, helping humans to live together peacefully, as well as being stronger and more courageous in situations of war (GBADEGESIN 1996; CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES 2020). This kind of religious thinking integrated into life experience provides an ontological view of the world which is similar in both Africa and China. Indeed, the beliefs of the Onyame, worshipped by the Akan, and the Olodumare of the Yoruba, can be understood as similar in many ways to the idea of 'tian'/'heaven' in China. But in the European tradition, ontology has been philosophical rather than religious, at least since Ancient Greece.

(3) In the religious experience and rituals of Africa and China, the body experience and the body imagination triggered by it have long played a special role. In African religious experiences and rituals, participation with one's body is worthy of attention. In the religious world view of West Africa, the induction of God and person constitutes a harmonious tension (ZUESSE, 1979; PARRINDER 1961). The relationship between person and universe is understood through the intervention of the body in the world, and the meaning of life is constructed from this. In Chinese traditional religions such as Taoism, the practice of the body is regarded as a necessary way to obtain liberation, because the body has a close correspondence with the universe (CHEN 2005). This emphasis on the body in the religious experience of Africa and China does not appear in the traditional Greek-Hebrew religion of body and mind, which focuses on duality.

(4) The meaning of God is another topic that can be explored in Sino-African comparisons. The concepts of monotheism, polytheism, and so forth do not fully apply to Chinese and African religions. Routinely, there are several Gods in both religious traditions, but because each God or deity has many different functions, characteristics, and powers, it is questionable if it makes sense to classify African and Chinese religions as polytheist or monotheist. Hence, comparing concepts of God is one more way to explore Sino-African intercultural philosophy (HU (this issue); GU (this issue) CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES 2021).

(5) Concepts of Destiny can also be an interesting way to explore Sino-African philosophies of religion. The Ori concept in Yoruba philosophy seems to suggest individuals' predetermined faith and explains misfortunes according to individuals' Ori. Likewise, in Chinese philosophy, the concept of 'Ming' explains why bad things happen to good people and, at the same time, how people can play a role in their daily actions (GBADEGESIN 1996; SONG 2019). It is worth comparing these concepts and trying to build a Sino-African philosophy of destiny.

(6) The meaning of death can also be a point of comparison. In many traditional African religions, when humans die, they become one of the 'living-dead' and are able to continue their interactions with the human world (albeit in a different way from before) (MBITI 1990). Similarly, in Taoist philosophy, when people pass away, they are believed to become semi-Gods, or even evil Ghosts.

Questions that arise in the philosophy of religion such as world suffering, evil, the meaning of the God and His characteristics, amongst other key questions may be better answered if one takes an intercultural perspective. To understand this, let us look closely at the problem of evil: how can a morally perfect, omniscient and omnipotent God allow or cause evil in the world? At its most fundamental level, the understanding of the experience of evil and suffering is about people's daily experiences. Fundamentally, the problem of evil is a normative problem, and no reasonable theory can exclude such a great number of philosophical perspectives if it is to be taken seriously. It is only through valuing all the experiences of different cultures that it is possible to understand this suffering. This is, at its core, a methodological question. Any theory to be considered as sound needs to offer a better explanation to a problem than just offer the alternatives. The way to do this is to test the theory vis-à-vis a larger number of intuitions and theories of the world. The question becomes much more fundamental when speaking about suffering and evil in the world, where people's experiences are fundamental to understanding it. The problem of evil, if it neglects different worldviews and neglects an intercultural approach, is likely to be centered on the understanding of suffering by an elite, and, more precisely, a Christian Western elite. But if one is to theorize suffering in the right way, it cannot be selective about what kinds of suffering are important.

This, of course, ought to be combined with exploring other important concepts and the list we provided above sheds some light on how to answer the question of the problem of evil. In Western Christian philosophy, the concept of free will is key to understanding the problem of evil. Philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga have explained evil in the world fundamentally as a necessary condition by which individuals can make moral choices. Nonetheless, combining the Yoruba concept of Ori with the Chinese concept of Ming seems to be another possible pathway that takes us beyond this idea of free will (SONG 2019; GBADEGESIN 1996). Both concepts offer a more deterministic (yet slightly prescriptive) views of destiny and, therefore, can give a new shape to the question of evil in the world.

It is also important to note the limits of Western Christian philosophy on addressing the problem of evil. The free will defense is grounded on a Christian idea which is, at the very least, controversial: the idea that only some people will be saved from suffering in Hell (See the passage in the Bible, Matt 22). Hence, the value of free will is justified for the good of *a minority*. Such an approach is ethically untenable.

What happens after someone dies is also a relevant topic for the problem of evil. Many Christian ‘solutions’ to the problem of evil are grounded in the idea of an after-life and how the existence of an after-life relativizes the suffering on Earth, making it less significant or, indeed, insignificant (ADAMS 2000). Nonetheless, this idea could potentially make sense if the after-life was eternal and some kind of paradise. In the African and Chinese conceptions, this is not the case. The after-life is often understood to be a reflection and a continuation of one’s own life on Earth and, indeed, a place where suffering can exist (PERKINS 2014; MBITI 1990).

Conclusion

These similarities between African and Chinese religions illustrate the necessity of a comparative study of African culture and Chinese religions and cultures. Today, we should look at African and Chinese philosophies from an inter-cultural perspective and put them into a Global framework for understanding. For the Chinese philosopher, the contemporary world ought not only to be merely the East and the West, but also Africa, Latin America, the Near East, South Asia, and so on. Using an intercultural perspective, the diversity of religion, culture, and philosophy will eventually form a brand-new self-understanding of each of our cultures (WANG 2017). The problem of evil, in particular, requires such an approach. This is because, as a problem that is fundamentally normative and about people’s experiences, it cannot do without a Global approach that encompasses intercultural views on the meaning of suffering.

Funding Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and the Global Philosophy of Religion Project at the University of Birmingham. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of these organizations.



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