

Stray Thoughts of a Foreign Guest

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Setting up East Asian Journal of Conceptual History (*the Journal of the History of Ideas in East Asia*) is an important step in the formation of a multilingual and multicultural research community devoted to in the field of conceptual history. It reflects the understanding that concepts and their taxonomies are the mind's tools in making sense of the world around it and communicate its understanding; that their history is a key part of the history of any culture; and that their interaction with and enrichment from other languages and cultural environments is a feature which they share with other elements of culture. The study of conceptual history has far-reaching implications for fields as different as the history of religion, philosophy or doctrines of governance; the sharing of transcultural and translanguing interaction in the formation of cultural identities; taxonomies of knowledge and their transformations over time; and the interactions with other forms of cultural articulation such as institutions, practices, or art forms.

This Journal also reflects the crecive interest among scholars in East Asia in conceptual history and their growing interaction with scholars from other East Asian countries as well as the West in this research. With

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a general focus on conceptual developments in the different languages and cultural contexts of East Asia, the *JHIEA* will also provide a platform for research on the rich conceptual interactions of East Asian cultures with the world since the earliest times. It will allow East Asian researchers to read and write in their own scholarly languages, while additionally contributing to the body of studies and the analytical toolbox that is shared by scholars in this field worldwide.

Setting up such a journal also is a tremendous challenge in two aspects. We have all grown up in a nation state environment where the claim to the “authenticity” of the respective national language is seen as a key marker of identity. While the actual history of any language would suggest that its lifeline is the constant interflow of concepts, words, or metaphors with other languages, and that without it any language would desiccate and become impoverished, claims to authenticity on behalf of the “nation” have led to an overemphasis on “internal” developments. This has left its marks even on conceptual history. Among the classics of this field is the huge and exceedingly learned 8 volume set of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Historical Key Concepts)*, compiled since 1972 by a team led by Otto Brunner (1898-1982), Werner Conze (1910-1986), and Reinhart Koselleck in the best tradition of German hermeneutics. Although quite aware that these German key concepts are the result of a lively and long exchange across many languages, cultures, time periods and regions inside and outside of Europe, these scholars claimed - without further argument - the “untranslatability” of language. Indeed, in these volumes the rich body of quotations from many languages is never translated (assuming that any educated reader would be able to read complex arguments in Greek, Latin, Italian, etc.). In this manner conceptual history was set very much on a national language track. The result is that we

have quite a few studies done within this national language framework, but very little indeed on both the past and the present of translingual and transcultural interaction in the field of concepts, especially across Eurasia.

Another result is that we lack both the tools and the sources to adequately trace the flow of concepts, rhetorical figures, metaphors etc. across languages. The available databases assume a monolingual environment despite massive evidence to the contrary. We should remember that scholars in the German states of the eighteenth century would write in French after having written in Latin during the previous centuries; Chinese Buddhists would use a technical language largely derived from Sanskrit and other South and Central Asian languages; Japanese scholars well into the twentieth century would use classical Chinese as their scholarly language. The bilingual or multilingual mind is a key “contact zone” between languages, and people with this kind of training are most likely to congregate in real contact zones such as courts, monasteries and international trading centers such as ports. The translations done by these scholars use the existing language as much as they create a new language which in turn replaces older taxonomies and conceptual schemes. Therefore, the challenge we all have to meet is to learn to track the migration and exchange of concepts across cultures and languages and to cooperate in doing so, because not one single scholar has the competence to deal with the entire process.

The second part of the challenge is to live up to the insight that contributions to conceptual history are presented in many different languages. Due to the nation state heritage, scholars especially in the study of topics related to their own “national” language and heritage often neglect academic contributions in foreign languages. This assumption reinforces a tendency among librarians to prefer contributions in the

national languages, which in turn makes access to foreign-language research slow and cumbersome, as well as discourages attention to international research. Here, conceptual historians have much to learn from the sciences where a shared understanding has come to prevail that scientific research is a translingual and transcultural enterprise; it would be unimaginable to draft a paper on DNA codes in German that was not informed about the latest publications in English! I am hopeful and confident that this journal will play an important role in establishing itself as a platform where the respective contributions share in the understanding that scholarly research is transnational, transcultural and translingual in nature and that as a matter of principle and as a matter of fact, scholarly contributions to the subject under consideration will be part of the actively incorporated research context in whatever language they might be written.

At the same time, an asymmetry does prevail in the exchanges between different scholarly or technical languages at any given time in history as well as the present with the importing side enriching its own conceptual arsenal while for the time being giving little or less in return in this particular field. Conceptual history is a case in point. As a research approach it has its origins in scholarly endeavors in Germany, the United States (History of Ideas) and England (Cambridge School). But it has now become an agenda that is globally shared. The new journal will make its greatest contribution, I believe, if it consciously joins this global community and, in interaction with it, brings East Asia into the common field and contributes research, critical reflection, and new methodological forays to this joint enterprise.

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