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**Isay, Gad C.** *The Philosophy of the View of Life in Modern Chinese Thought*, Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013, 114 pp., ISBN 978-3-447-06883-3.

With the publication of *The Philosophy of the View of Life in Modern Chinese Thought*, a work mainly focusing on the 1923–1924 controversy over Science and Metaphysics (*kexue yu xuanxue lunzhan* 科學與玄學論戰), Gad C. Isay returns to one of his first academic interests, offering a reviewed version of his PhD dissertation. Originally supervised by Irene Eber and defended at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2000, this work aims at clarifying “the philosophical issues inherent in the arguments heard in the past [concerning the problem of view of life (in German *Lebensanschauung*, in Chinese *renshengguan* 人生觀)<sup>1</sup>] and at establishing a framework for making these relevant to contemporary discussions” (p. 8). As far as the first ambition is concerned, Isay certainly succeeds; regarding contemporary discussions only the future will tell us.

Isay’s book is truly innovative in a field long dominated by studies focusing only on the scientist actors of the debate, i.e. Ding Wenjiang 丁文江 (1887–1936), Wu Zihui 吳稚暉 (1865–1953), Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942), and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962)<sup>2</sup>. By Balancing this one-sided approach, Isay offers a very thorough presentation of the “metaphysics clique” (*xuanxue pai* 玄學派) including thinkers like Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1877–1969), Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973) or Lin Zaiping 林宰平 (1879–1960). As such, the work examined here can be considered as a part of a historiographical trend to “decenter the May Fourth Movement”<sup>3</sup>. In contrast to the old understanding of the May Fourth era as dominated by iconoclastic and scientist intellectuals, Isay shows that within the intellectual *milieu* of the time Chinese modernity was not solely considered in opposition to tradition. One can also say that Isay’s work is perhaps the first to enter into the philosophical articulations of the debate. His focus on the problem of autonomy underlines that Confucian philosophy was by

1 This term has often been mistranslated as “philosophy of life”. Isay’s solution is more appropriate.

2 See for instance, the dominant study on the 1923–1924 controversy: D.W.Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought 1900–1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.

3 On the decentering of the May Fourth Movement see Ip Hung-yok, Hon Tze-ki, and Lee Chiu-chun, “The Plurality of Chinese Modernity: A Review of Recent Scholarship on the May Fourth Movement”, *Modern China* 29.4, 2003: 490–509.

no means dead and buried. As a matter of fact, some intellectuals produced a philosophical discourse that was rooted in both Chinese native traditions and newly imported Western philosophy.

The first chapter of Isay's book addresses the "view of life" in Chinese thought. It browses the major ideas regarding this topic from Confucius to Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936). As Isay sees it, "the ultimate context of existence, the linkage, the individual's autonomy, and the integration ideal (...) form the foundations of the 'view of life' in Chinese thought" (p. 10). Isay presents extracts from writings of classical and Neoconfucian thinkers in a chronological order and discusses their key ideas. This chapter depicts the "Chinese background" of the 1923–1924 debate.

The second chapter focuses on the Kantian "view of life" and on how it was introduced in China at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Isay's approach to the problem is very illuminating, as he discusses in parallel the roles played by Ernst Faber (1839–1899) and Liang Qichao. Faber, a German missionary-philosopher, was perhaps one of the first Westerners to write about Kant in Chinese, while Liang was one of the first Chinese intellectuals interested in Kant, although he knew Kant only through Japanese translations. As Isay puts it, by "reading both men's texts we gain a singular insight into the initial phase of the meeting between Chinese and Western ideas" (p. 33).

Chapter 3 sets up the context of the controversy over Science and Metaphysics by pointing at the emergence of a resistance towards scientism in China by the early 1920s. Isay here again chooses a dual approach to the subject. On the one hand, he presents the foreign sources of this resistance (Bergson, Eucken, Dewey, Russell, and Driesch); on the other hand, he studies two Chinese works that exemplify a native resistance to scientism: *Reflection on a trip to Europe* by Liang Qichao and *The Cultures of East and West and their philosophies* by Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988). A valuable point here is the author's emphasis on the importance accorded to the question of philosophical dualism. Isay rightly insists on the spirit/matter dichotomy as an essential element informing the early premises of the debate.

Chapters 4 and 5 make up the core of the study. The former shows how the problem of scientism was addressed and verbalized by Chinese intellectuals, while the latter presents the solutions advocated by the "metaphysics *clique*". As Zhang Junmai had written, the key question of the 1923 debate was "Can science govern 'the view of life'?" (p. 77). Many of the authors studied by Isay thought that this question should be answered in the negative. Isay here analyses, with much relevance, how the so-called metaphysicians attacked the totalistic and scientist view that any affirmative answer to this question would imply. Philosophically speaking, the bone of contention lay in two major sub-questions: the problems of

mind-reality correspondence and of the autonomy of the different spheres of the human experience. At this point, Isay enters into a detailed reading of the texts, thus clarifying many points raised in the debate. His conclusion is very clear: “Lin, the two Zhangs, Liang and the other supporters of metaphysics agreed that there was a break between human life and the application of scientific explanations” (p. 92). Drawing from that idea, chapter 5 then systematically arranges the views and arguments of the supporters of metaphysics concerning the “view of life”. The central idea discussed here is in fact the very definition of this “view of life” promoted so often, but explained so seldom. Isay achieves a real *tour de force* in shedding light on the various frameworks hidden behind a multiplicity of discourses.

Carrying on the discussion, chapter 6 examines several ideas of Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1883–1968), Hou Wailu 侯外廬 (1903–1987) and Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990). Although this part is considerably shorter, Isay succeeds in showing that “the three men continued to think in terms of linkage, of autonomy and integration, or transpersonal interrelatedness” (p. 121).

In the concluding part of his study, Isay eventually discusses the question of the meaning of being human as addressed in philosophical discourses in modern China. He emphasizes that even if the traditional discourse on the human nature adapted itself to a new philosophical context of syncretism between East and West, the concern regarding the “view of life” “still preserved its appeal” and was “relevant to the Chinese intellectuals with humanistic persuasions” (p. 130).

As such, the work under review here is a significant and trustworthy contribution to the study of the philosophy of the “view of life” in twentieth century China. Isay’s readings and translations of the texts, as well as his philosophical explanations provide deep and valid insights. His book helps to gain a better and perhaps more balanced comprehension of the intellectual debates of the May Fourth era. Still, this would not be a book review if I only eulogized Isay’s work. Three methodological shortfalls shall indeed be put to the fore.

Firstly, one has to question the status of the secondary literature adduced by the author. It seems somewhat delicate if, in a study on a particular author, that very author’s writings are also quoted as secondary scientific literature. In chapter 1, Isay quotes Qian Mu’s *Chinese Learning in the recent three hundred years*<sup>4</sup> in order to present the philosophical thought of several Qing scholars, but in chapter 6, Qian Mu is then analyzed as a main proponent of the modern Chinese philosophy of the “view of life” (pp. 117–120). Thus, Qian Mu holds an ambivalent

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4 Qian Mu 錢穆, *Zhongguo jin sanbainian xueshu shi* 中國近三百年學術史, Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu, 1995.

position in Isay's research: It seems problematic to me if one places Qian Mu in the continuity of the history of a classical Chinese philosophy of the "view of life", when, at the same time, one reads the classical authors through Qian Mu's commentaries.

The second issue concerns the first chapter of the book. When presenting "the philosophy of the View of Life in Traditional Chinese thought", Isay seems to fall into cultural essentialism. Chinese philosophy appears very monolithic and Confucian-oriented, its development is presented as linear. It is of course difficult to expound, in such a short chapter, the richness and variety of intellectual traditions in pre-modern China, but an inch of postmodernity in questioning the notions of "Chinese Culture" or even "Western Culture" would certainly have been relevant. Isay replicates the dichotomy between Chinese and Western cultures without considering the epistemological basis of this assumption. In fact, he seems here entrenched in the cultural discourse of Neoconfucian thinkers, who regard Confucianism as the backbone of Chinese culture and Confucian philosophy as the only Chinese philosophy. If recent studies in the history of Chinese philosophy before its encounter with the West have succeeded in showing the diversity of the Chinese world of thought, one can regret that "traditional Chinese thought" still tends to be represented as an almost uniform block in studies about the modern era.

Thirdly, Isay's book, as most of the historiography of modern or contemporary Chinese philosophy is dominated by a hidden, if not unspoken teleological assumption, according to which Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) is the center and the culmination of Chinese modern philosophy. Even if Mou's name is only mentioned three times in the entire book, a simple look at the table of contents reveals this tacit assumption. Chapter one, discussed above, presents the idealist conception of the view of life in Chinese thought, the second chapter is concerned with the view of life in the West, or, more precisely, in Kantianism. The following chapters focus on the encounter of these two views under different perspectives. Through a discussion of the 1923 controversy, Isay is in fact telling us the story of how Kant met Confucius in Modern China, and how that incidentally led to Mou. By raising this point, I do not wish to undermine the importance of Kant in modern China, or even the important role of Mou Zongsan. My intention is just to defend the idea that another history of modern Chinese philosophy may also be possible.

My criticism of Gad Isay's book thus rather expresses my concerns about the historiography of modern Chinese thought, than a negative evaluation of his valuable work. Isay's readings and explanations of the texts are very insightful and show a real philosophical concern toward the question of the view of life, and his book is a must-read for anyone interested in the intellectual debates of the



1920s. I simply would have wished him to show the same degree of philosophical inquisitiveness with regard to the *loci communes* in the historiographical field. Just to give an example: Wouldn't it perhaps be time to "decenter Kant in the history of modern Chinese Philosophy" and to attempt a broader and more balanced approach to this matter?