

Domesticating a Philosophical Fiction

— Chinese Translations of Immanuel Kant's
“Things in Themselves”*

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■ **Abstract**

Ever since Chinese scholars began to engage modern European philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century, Immanuel Kant was perceived as a particular challenge. Many Chinese thinkers understood the limits of human knowledge delineated in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as a threat to the ethical maxims enshrined in classical Chinese texts. If accepted, Kant's epistemology seemed to negate the possibility of an intelligible moral world order and thus undermine a key tenet of traditional Chinese thought. As a result, quite a few Chinese scholars came to regard no mission as more urgent than to “overcome” Kant.

This essay traces the competing adaptations of a single concept that played a crucial role in Chinese attempts to come to terms with the Kantian challenge: the notion of “things in themselves” or *Dinge an sich*. The aim of my review is to assess what we may learn from the intentions with which different Chinese translations of this notion were proposed, and what they can tell us about the contexts in which individual choices were adopted, rejected, criticized or defended. In addition, I hope to clarify the uses and limitations of lexical data for histories of concepts in transcultural perspective.

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Ever since Chinese scholars began to engage modern European philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century, Immanuel Kant was perceived as a particular challenge.¹⁾ From Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), one of the earliest propagators of Western philosophy in the final decade of the Qing empire, to Mou Zongsan 牟宗三(1909-1995), the uncrowned king of contemporary New Confucianism(*dangdai xin rujia* 當代新儒家), Chinese thinkers understood the limits of human knowledge delineated in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*²⁾ as a potentially lethal threat to the ethical maxims enshrined in classical Chinese texts. If accepted, Kant's critical epistemology seemed to negate the possibility of a moral world order intelligible to man and thus undermine one of the key tenets of traditional Chinese thought. If Kant were right, Mou Zongsan lamented in a particularly somber moment, the very idea of a "Chinese philosophy" (*Zhongguo zhexue* 中國哲學) with continued relevance in the modern age would be "impossible" (Mou 1975, 3). To secure a place for traditional insights in the globalized philosophical discourse of modernity, quite a few Chinese scholars consequently came to regard no mission as more urgent than to "overcome" Kant and the potentially destructive consequences of his critical enterprise.

In the past two decades, a number of studies have begun to examine Kant's more often than not puzzling reception in the Chinese-speaking world (Lee 1996 and 2004; Kantor 1996 and 2006; Lehmann 2003; Schmidt 2008).

1) I am indebted to my friend and former colleague Professor Yu Li 虞莉, now at Williams College, for her close and critical reading of an earlier draft of this essay.

2) As is customary, citations from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, KrV) will be located henceforth by the pagination in the first German edition of 1781 (KrV A) or the second edition of 1787 (KrV B).

As yet, however, there is no comprehensive history of Chinese attempts to come to terms with the Kantian challenge. As a first step toward such a history, this essay traces Chinese adaptations of a single concept that played a crucial role in this philosophical drama: the notion of "things in themselves" (in the German original *Dinge an sich*) or "noumena," a Latin term that Kant used largely interchangeably. Although never intended as a theoretically productive notion and repeatedly denigrated by Kant himself as a "fiction" (*Unding*) and a mere "object of thought" (*Verstandeswesen*) with no "positive meaning" or "use" (KrV B274; B305-315), Chinese philosophers have insisted on treating "things in themselves" as a necessary and intelligible concept, and devoted numerous studies to the ways in which noumena may be known despite Kant's repeated, and perhaps even "dogmatic" (Guyer 1987, 333-344), claims to the contrary.

The necessity to unhinge this particular aspect of Kant's philosophy was rooted in the belief that Kant's denial of the intelligibility of things as they are independent of our perceptions of them, endangered the idea of spontaneous moral intuitions that played such a prominent part in traditional Chinese ethics (Kantor 1996, 118-125). Since it was impossible to ignore or flatly dismiss Kant's objections, not only due to the force of his arguments but perhaps even more so because of his prominence in the history of modern philosophy, many Chinese interpreters decided not to refute Kant outright but rather transform his theories in a way that made the limitations he postulated appear less absolute. (Schmidt 2008, 12-14)

Crucial aspects of these purposeful transformations were reflected in the competing translations suggested to render the terms "things in themselves" and "noumena." My aim in reviewing these adaptations consists not so much in discovering in the terminological choices grounds

for philosophically relevant misperceptions or distortions. Nor do I intend to offer judgements as to which translations may be more or less appropriate. Instead, my more modest goal is to try and assess what we may learn from the intentions with which different Chinese translations were proposed, and what they can tell us about the contexts in which individual choices were adopted, rejected, criticized or defended. At the same time, I hope to clarify some persistent methodological uncertainties by examining this intricate story with the more general purpose in mind of rethinking the uses and limitations of lexical data for histories of concepts in transcultural perspective.

From Königsberg to Shanghai

Immanuel Kant was among the first European philosophers to become known in modern China. The earliest, and usually overlooked, Chinese references to Kant can be found in the *Brief Introduction to Western Learning* (*Xixue lüeshuo* 西學略說), a text compiled in 1886 by the British missionary Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) for a series of textbooks on modern science. In the short overview of European philosophy (*lixue* 理學) that Edkins included in this *Introduction*, he introduced about a dozen European thinkers who had helped to lay the epistemological foundations of the contemporary sciences. One rather long section of this outline was devoted to the “theory of the three faculties [of understanding] and twelve forms of thought” (*san neng shier sifan shuo* 三能十二思範說) formulated by the “German Kant (Deren Gande 德人干得) during the reign of the Qianlong emperor.” According to Edkins, Kant showed how sensations (*juezhe* 覺者)

and the intellect (*shizhe* 識者) interacted in a determinate manner to produce perceptions, one providing the material, the other the forms of thought. As such, Kant revealed the mechanism guaranteeing a shared understanding of the relations between the human soul and the external world as well as the foundations of both in the Christian God. (Edkins 1886, 5:50-51)

In view of their brevity it is hardly surprising that neither Edkins's nor a handful of similarly fragmentary references to Kant surfacing at around the same time inspired any meaningful responses from Chinese scholars. Interest in Euro-American philosophy increased only in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95. (Kurtz 2008) Devastated by the apparent failure of all efforts at “self-strengthening” initiated since the 1860s, Chinese intellectuals embarked on a frantic search for what Zhang Hao has aptly described as new sources of “order and meaning.” (Chang 1987) In this hectic pursuit, many looked to Japan where philosophy enjoyed considerable prestige in the institutions of higher learning founded in the context of the Meiji restoration. The first Japanese department of philosophy was established in 1873 at Tōkyō's Imperial University. Initially, foreign instructors were invited to teach the new subject at Tōkyō and other schools emulating its example. Many of these lecturers as well as the first native professors, such as most notably Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1856-1944), had studied in Germany where they were trained in one or the other variety of neo-Kantianism. (Piovesana 1968, 33-42) In their writings and lectures, Kant was consequently portrayed as *the* quintessentially modern philosopher. His towering importance can perhaps best be illustrated by recalling the annual philosophical ceremonies held at the Imperial University beginning in 1885 and relocated to the shrine-like Philosophy Hall (Tetsugakkan 哲學館) in 1891. At these ritualized meetings,



Fig. 1: Scroll depicting the “Four Sages”(Sisheng 四聖) of philosophy
(Source: Burtscher 2006, 371)

sacrificial services were performed with much pomp in front of an image of the “sage from Königsberg” who was depicted alongside Sakyamuni, Confucius, and Socrates. (Fig. 1, see Burtscher 2006)

Kant’s image as the epitome of modernity was still very much in evidence at the turn of the twentieth century when the first Chinese scholars and overseas students began to study European philosophy in Japan. The translations of transcripts of lectures, textbooks and histories of philosophy that they started to publish almost immediately after their arrival reflected with few exceptions a neo-Kantian outlook and neo-Kantian concerns, especially with regard to the epistemological foundations of science. (For bibliographical details, see Sichuan daxue zhuxue ziliaoshi 1982; Müller 2006.) Some but by no means all of these texts introduced Kant’s distinction between the world of “phenomena” that affect our senses and thus become material for the operations of our intellect, and the unknowable world of the so called “noumena,” that is to say, the realm of “things in themselves” as they would appear if we could know them independently of our sense perceptions. Rather than discuss or critique the function and plausibility of this disparity, most early texts only strove to reproduce it. If anything, they added that this crucial discovery, which implied that the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge needed to be situated within the knowing subject and not the outside world, had brought about a “Copernican turn” in philosophy no less consequential than the refutation of the heliocentric view of the universe for the progress of the sciences.

The terminology in which the opposition between “phenomena” and “noumena” was presented in these texts offers some leads as to which aspects translators found particularly difficult to convey. Like the

overwhelming majority of the technical terms of European philosophy, neither “phenomena” nor “things in themselves” had obvious equivalents in the Chinese lexicon. Nonetheless, the translation of “phenomena” as *xianxiang* 現象 “shapes or images as they appear” was almost instantly standardized. Coined in Japan as a semantic loan from the word *genshō* 現象 that referred to the appearances of the Buddha or the Bodhisattvas in the world of men, the term struck Chinese interpreters apparently as an appropriate and self-explaining rendering, so much so that no translator felt the need to suggest a fundamentally different alternative until the 1980s.

In marked contrast, translations of “noumena” and “things in themselves” displayed great variety. Only very few Chinese authors adopted *shiti* 實體 (J. *jittai*) “real body/shape” or “substance,” the rendering of “noumena” recommended in the normative Japanese *Philosophical Dictionary* (*Tetsugaku jii* 哲學字彙) and used in most Japanese works on the subject. (Inoue 1881, 60; Inoue and Ariga 1884, 82) Even Wang Guowei, who borrowed *shiti* in one of his early translations, avoided the metaphysically loaded term in his own writings on Kant and resorted instead to paraphrasing the “things in themselves” as *wu zhi zishen* 物之自身 “things as they are by themselves” (Wang Guowei 1902, 5b and 8a). Authors who followed his example offered similarly colloquial paraphrases such as *zizai zhi wu* 自在之物 “independent things” or “things at ease” (Yan Fu 1902-1905, 1:94), or *wu shizai zhi tianranxing* 物實在之天然性 “the natural state of things in their actuality” (Ma Junwu 1991 [1903], 104). (For chronological lists of all translations of “things in themselves” and “noumena” discussed in this paper, see Tables 1 and 2 below.) Another strategy was to transcribe “noumena” phonetically and thus highlight the term’s alterity. Yan Fu 嚴復 (1853-1921), the most famous translator of the time, offered two such

phonemic replicas with *niumeinuo* 紐美諾 and *nuyoumina* 奴優彌那 (Yan 1902-1905, 1:94). But Yan was also the first to introduce an early, and as we shall see ultimately successful, alternative to *shiti* that was at least as metaphysically charged as the Japanese rendering. With *benti* 本體 “original body/shape” or “essence,” Yan proposed to translate the Kantian “noumena” into an eminent Buddhist term denoting the ultimate reality underlying all *dharmas* (法), that is, the formless and supersensible foundation of the world as we experience it. Song-Dynasty neo-Confucians had written a great deal about this term and appropriated it as a synonym of the *Dao*, the true way of the universe and goal of all human attainment. (Fang 2005, 93-94, 99-100) In this wider sense, *benti* was obviously not a merely negative notion. Rather it functioned similar to what Kant called a “regulative idea,” an ideal to which one continually aspires although we know that it is ultimately out of our reach. Since Yan Fu gave no reasons for his choice, we can only speculate whether he intended to infuse Kant’s “noumena” with the full range of these classical connotations. Yet, we may surmise that at least some readers were attracted to his suggestion because it offered some hope that the gap between the realms of the phenomenal and the noumenal could be bridged.

From Domestication to Rejection

The attempt to understand the distinction between phenomena and noumena in terms of Buddhist epistemology, which was the point of departure for Yan’s suggestion, also informed two of the earliest more

extensive discussions of Kantian philosophy. Liang Qichao 梁啟超(1873-1929), one of the most influential authors of the period, composed an essay on “The Teachings of Kant, the Greatest Philosopher of the Modern Era” (*Jinshi diyi dazhe Kangde zhi xueshuo* 近世第一大哲康德之學說) after witnessing the sacrificial rites performed at Tōkyō’s Philosophy Hall in 1899. (Huang 2004, 132) Like most of his articles introducing European philosophers in the early years of the century, Liang’s outline of Kant’s life and work was based on an unacknowledged Japanese source: in this case Nakae Chōmin’s 中江兆民(1847-1901) translation of Alfred Fouillée’s *Histoire de la philosophie* that had appeared under the title *Rigaku enkaku shi* 理學沿革史 in 1886. (Forke 1909) Liang adopted most of the terminology in which Nakae presented Kant’s concepts but inserted critical notes and additions wherever he disagreed with or wished to nuance Nakae’s or Fouillée’s accounts. (Miyamura 1990) In the case of the notion of “noumena,” which he discussed as the most important insight of Kant’s theory of “pure knowledge” (*chunzhi* 純智), this practice led him to accept Nakae’s choice of *bonsō* 本相(C. *benxiang*) “original form,” a Buddhist term referring to the “the fundamental aspects” of all phenomena, but to alter the terms in which Nakae had explained the function of this notion in Kant’s analysis of perception. (Nakae 1886, 628-629; see Thoraval 2007, 223-226) While Nakae borrowed the ancient Chinese term *wuguan* 五官(J. *gokan*) “five bodily offices,” that is, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and heart, which is commonly found in texts such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Xunzi* 荀子 to refer to the organs mediating sensations to the intellect, Liang used the Buddhist expression *liushi* 六識 “six sensibilities,” which according to the eighth-century *Sūrangama Sutra* (*Lengyan jing* 楞嚴經) included, in addition to the five senses, the “sixth sensibility” of “knowledge.” This slight shift

not only amplified the Buddhist context in which Liang situated Kant’s epistemology but allowed him also to portray Kant’s much lauded “Copernican turn” as a mere variation of a common Buddhist theme. (Liang Qichao 1936 [1903], 13:51-52)

The second prominent scholar who domesticated Kant’s distinction by integrating it with Buddhist concerns was Zhang Binglin 章炳麟(1869-1936). Having spent almost three years in prison during which he had embarked on extended studies of Yogācāra Buddhism and European philosophy, Zhang emerged as one of the intellectual leaders of the anti-Manchu movement in the final decade leading up to the fall of the Qing dynasty. In a series of essays for the revolutionary *People’s Journal* (*Minbao* 民報) Zhang synthesized a dazzling array of religious, philosophical, social and scientific concepts into a coherent political vision, with little regard for their origins in China, Japan, India, or the West. His article “On Establishing a Religion” (*Jianli zongjiao lun* 建立宗教論, 1906), in which he discussed Kant’s theory of perception, was part of this effort. Zhang argued that political revolutions had to be grounded in religion and that the politically most effective religions were created on the basis of firm philosophical foundations. Building these foundations required to prove the existence of an unchangeable “essence” (*benti* 本體) underlying the phenomenal world. Kant was among the “philosophers and religious teachers” who had offered the most convincing versions of such proofs. Like many Buddhist scholars, Kant argued that perceptions were derived from a combination of sense data and mental concepts, and insisted that this combination was shaped in predictable ways by the “empty” (*kong* 空) forms of time and space as well as the twelve categories of understanding. He also realized that our sensations, or the “five blemishes” (*wuchen* 五塵)

as they were called in Buddhism, could not be doubted and that their certain reality was possible only because they were rooted in “things in themselves.” For Zhang, too, “things in themselves” were thus much more than the negative “limiting notion” (*Grenzbegriff*) (KrV B305-306) that Kant had envisioned. To signal their centrality already on the lexical level, Zhang coined the neologism *wuru* 物如 “things in their thusness” to cover both “noumena” and “things in themselves” that drew on the suggestion of truth that the suffix *-ru* 如 “thusness” carried in prominent Buddhist terms, such as *zhenru* 真如 “ultimate truth” or “true thusness.” (Zhang Binglin 1996 [1906], 569-573) His creation integrated the Kantian concept seamlessly in a domestic semantic field with which many of Zhang’s readers were intimately familiar and whose dignity they could instantly recognize. Colloquial paraphrases, such as those mentioned above, would have needed much more detailed explanations to achieve a comparable effect.

For all the well-known differences in their political and religious orientations, Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin both portrayed Kant in a way that, consciously or not, deprived his epistemology of much of its critical edge. By translating Kant’s insights into docile Buddhist terms both ensured that their readers would recognize in the German philosopher yet another thinker who had speculated more or less vainly about the real or illusory nature of knowledge and perception.

The first Chinese scholar who set out to understand Kant on his own terms was Wang Guowei, whose translation efforts were already mentioned above. Wang became infatuated with European philosophy as early as 1897 in a moment of personal crisis but began more serious studies of the subject only in 1902 tutored by his Japanese teacher Fujita

Toyohachi 藤田豊八(1870-1929). In 1903 he started to work on Kant. As Wang recalled in an autobiographical essay written in 1907, it took him several years to master Kant’s *Critiques*: “I began to read Kant [in 1903] and found his analysis of the human mind in the *Critique of Pure Reason* almost impossible to comprehend. I therefore put it aside for a while and began to read Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea* whose content I found cogent and the style incisive; I read it twice in that same year. ... When I reached my 29th year [in 1905], I went back to Kant and found him not as difficult as before and began his theories on ethics and aesthetics besides his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This year, I read Kant for the fourth time and found him even less difficult.” (Wang 1996 [1907], 38-40; see Bonner 1986, 56-65) Despite his persistent efforts, Wang soon realized that Kant disappointed the hopes with which he had embarked on his studies. Rather than provide answers to his acute metaphysical yearnings, Kant threw the possibility of any knowledge beyond the realm of the phenomenal in doubt. Nowhere was the philosopher’s ruthless agnosticism more apparent than in his analysis of the relation between phenomena and noumena. By categorically denying the knowability of “things in themselves” (*wu zhi zishen* 物之自身), Kant blocked access to precisely those aspects that Wang had most fervently hoped to discover in his studies of European philosophy: “lofty metaphysics, sublime ethics, and pure aesthetics.” (Wang 1996 [1907], 40) Kant’s critical epistemology thus opened an intellectual abyss whose dire implications filled Wang with horror. For some time, he looked to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche for convincing arguments that Kant’s critical positions were untenable. (Kogelschatz 1986, 142-161) After several years, however, he concluded that neither Kant’s nor any other philosophy would enable him to reconcile his quest for “truth”

with his “love for the strange and absurd” and abruptly abandoned his studies of the subject, turning his attention instead to literature and history, the intellectual pursuits for which he is most admiringly remembered today. (Wang 1996 [1907], 40-41; see Bonner 1986, 87-96)

Professionalization and Standardization

The abruptness of Wang Guowei’s renunciation of European philosophy corresponded to the severity of the threat that he recognized in Kant’s critical enterprise. It is to Wang’s credit that he exposed himself in all clarity to the potentially destructive consequences of Kant’s insights. Rather than embalming the challenges posed by Kant’s epistemology in presumably congenial Chinese contexts, Wang insisted on discussing Kant in the latter’s own terms and, in contrast to Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin, detached from all political, cultural or religious concerns. Thanks to this attitude Wang can be seen as an important, albeit disillusioned, precursor of a more professional understanding of Kant that gained ground once philosophy was established as a regular academic discipline in Chinese institutions of higher learning.

After years of opposition from conservative circles reluctant to compromise the authority of the Chinese classics as the sole repositories of spiritual and ethical meaning and value, the first modern department of philosophy was founded at Peking University in 1919. (Xiao Chaoran 1986, 76-77) Its staff included several returning scholars who had studied in Japan, Europe or the United States and were fully fluent in the conceptual idiom of the new discipline. Supported by a rapidly expanding

mediasphere, the lecturers at Peking University and a host of other schools following its lead introduced a wide array of foreign thinkers, theories and concepts to a fast growing readership. Kant became one the most extensively discussed European philosophers in their writings. One problem with which all writers and readers had to struggle was that there was still no accepted vocabulary to represent Kantian notions. The office for terminological standardization at the Ministry of Education that had been established to provide lexical guidance failed to produce reliable recommendations. As a result, the Chinese philosophical lexicon remained very much in flux well into the 1920s. Individual efforts to clear up the confusion, spearheaded by the compilers of the first Chinese dictionaries with a focus on philosophy and the humanities, only exacerbated the problem by adding further terms to the many already in use. Examples of such decontextualized and thus inevitably infertile prescriptions for “noumena” or “things in themselves” included the pseudo-Buddhist renderings *zhenxing* 真性 “true nature” and *zhenru* 真如 “true thusness” (Wilhelm 1911, 102) as well as the more colloquial adaptations *wu qi zi* 物其自 “things per se” (MacGillivray 1913, 67); *wuzhi ziran* 物質自然 “matter as it is of itself” (Hemeling 1916, 1492); and *wu qi wu* 物其物 “things as things” (Médard 1927, 219).

The continued uncertainty was also reflected in two of the most widely read publications introducing Kant’s philosophy to Chinese audiences in the 1920s. Although produced with an impressive degree of professionalism, the special issues that the renowned journals *Wissen und Wissenschaft* (*Xueyi* 學藝) and *The People’s Bell* (*Minduo zazhi* 民鐸雜誌) devoted to reviews of Kant’s life and work did not escape the prevalent terminological confusion. The 21 articles written by 14 different authors in

Xueyi, while consistent in their use of *xianxiang* 現象 as a translation of “phenomena,” presented five different renderings of “things in themselves”—adding the three new terms *wu benshen* 物本身 “things themselves” (Fan Shoukang 1924, 21), *wu ziti* 物自體 “things in their own body/shape” (Zhang Xinpei 1924, 4; Zhang Shuiqi 1924, 10; Zhou Changshou 1924, 2) and *wu de benti* 物的本體 “the original body/shape of things” or “the essence of things” (Zhang Mingding 1924, 1) to the earlier suggestions *wu zishen* 物自身 and *wuru* 物如—and four translations of “noumena,” enlisting, besides *benti* 本體, the three new replicas: *shiwu* 實物 “real things,” or, as its author explained, “things that have real existence outside of our minds” (Fan Shoukang 1924, 9); *zhen shizai* 真實在 “true reality” or “what truly and really exists” (Fan Shoukang 1924, 21); and *zhen sbiti* 真實體 “true substance” or “true and real bodies/shapes” (Zhang Xinpei 1924, 1). The vocabulary of the “Kant issue” of *The People’s Bell*, published one year later and containing 14 pieces by eleven authors, was slightly more unified but still offered two new variations of “things in themselves”—*wu di benti* 物底本體 “the original body/shape of things” or “the essence of things” (Wu Zhijue 1925, 3) and *wu zixiang* 物自相 “things in their own form” (Yu Wenwei 1925, 2)—and one, *shizai* 實在 “reality” or “what really exists” (Zhang Mingding 1925, 19), for “noumena.” One reason for the further increase in terminological diversity may have been that the authors writing for the two journals based their accounts on sources in three different languages, English, Japanese and German, and each strove to reproduce the vocabulary he encountered as faithfully as possible.

Despite their lexical shortcomings both special issues contributed significantly to the popularization of Kant’s philosophy. Although ethics and aesthetics exerted the most visible influence, the key tenets of Kantian

epistemology, among them most prominently the disparity between phenomena and noumena, quickly became common knowledge among the philosophically inclined within and outside of academe. In the ensuing years, the professionalization of the discipline gained momentum with the publication of the first specialized journal of philosophy, the founding of a Philosophical Society, and the expansion of philosophical course offerings in universities throughout the country. (He Lin 2002, 97) The quantitative and qualitative increase in interest in Euro-American philosophy effected a swift reduction in lexical variation. This process was facilitated by the publication of the first authoritative *Dictionary of Philosophical Terms* (*Zhexue cidian* 哲學辭典) in 1926. Compiled under the direction of Fan Bingqing 樊炳清(1876-1931), a seasoned translator and long-time associate of Wang Guowei, the work was explicitly designed to help reduce terminological ambiguity. (Fan Bingqing 1926, i-ii) To this end, it listed English, French and German equivalents for each of its entries alongside the most appropriate Chinese renderings. In our cases, it recommended *wu zishen* for “things in themselves” and *benti* for “noumenon.” (Fan Bingqing 1926, 338, 342, 619, 708) The same terms were also used by Hu Renyuan 胡仁源(1883-1942) in the first full translation of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Chuncui lixing de pipan* 純粹理性的批判), based on the German original, that appeared in eight fascicles in the Commercial Press’s popular *Universal Library* (*Wanyou wenku* 萬有文庫) in 1931 and was reissued in a one-volume edition in 1935. (Kant, Hu Renyuan 1931/1935)

Within less than a decade, the combined effects of these initiatives narrowed the range of terms used in actual philosophical texts to very few alternatives. Most authors discussing Kant’s epistemology chose the metaphysically neutral and semantically interchangeable renderings *wu zishen*

or *wu ziti* for “things in themselves,” and reserved more resonant adaptations such as *shiti* or, more often, *benti* for “noumena.” The terminological confusion that had characterized the early stages of reception thus seemed to have been by and large resolved, even if perfect standardization remained as illusive as in most other domains of philosophical discourse, in China or elsewhere.

Sinicization by Translation

Yet, just as the vocabulary appeared to have stabilized, the implicit debate about the most appropriate rendering of Kant’s key terms was revived by He Lin 賀麟(1902-1992), a philosopher-*cum*-translator, who had studied with Liang Qichao at Qinghua University in Beijing before moving to the United States in 1926 and from there on to Germany in 1930. Following his return to China in 1931 he taught at both Qinghua and Peking University and established himself as one of the most respected voices of the emerging group of contemporary New Confucian thinkers. In addition he became known as a translator of Spinoza, Fichte, Hegel, Josiah Royce and other Western thinkers. Drawing on his rich experience, He Lin frequently addressed theoretical problems of translation. His most substantial article in this context was “Explanations of Kant’s Terminology and an Outline of his Theories” (“Kangde mingci de jieshi he xueshuo de gaiyao” 康德名詞的解釋和學說的概要), published in the popular Eastern *Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi* 東方雜誌) in 1936.

In line with his conviction that interpreters of modern European philosophy should aim to “Sinicize” (*Zhongguobua* 中國化) or “Confucianize”

(*rubua* 儒化) the theories they examined, He formulated in this essay “four principles” for the translation of philosophical notions. First, translation terms needed to have a firm etymological foundation, that is to say, translators had to determine the Greek or Latin roots of the European notions of departure and then search for closely related words in classical Chinese glossaries such as the second-century *Explanation of Writing through the Analysis of Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字) or the even earlier *Progress Toward Elegance* (*Erya* 爾雅). Secondly, translators needed to be intimately familiar with both the history of philosophy in the West and China’s intellectual history so that they were able to identify approximately equivalent notions in the two traditions. Thirdly, they should refrain from creating new terms unless it was absolutely inevitable. In such rare cases, they had to provide exact definitions and explain the reasons that had led them to their terminological choices. Finally, they should adopt a critical attitude toward the vocabulary coined in Japan. Japanese creations, He claimed, were generally crude and inelegant because most Japanese translators were ignorant of China’s intellectual history. As a result, their coinages were prone to evoke the mistaken impression that no points of connection existed between Chinese and European philosophy and a “fusion” (*ronghe* 融合) of Eastern and Western thought was impossible. (He Lin 1989 [1936], 255-256)

In accordance with his principles He Lin proposed an array of new terms to replace existing renderings of Kantian notions he found wanting. The results were often allusive but not always convincing. For instance, the presumably more appropriate Chinese titles of the three *Critiques* he suggested— “Balanced Discussions of the Principles of Pure [Knowledge]” (*chunli lunheng* 純理論衡), “Balanced Discussions of the Principles of [Virtuous]

Conduct” (*xingli lunheng* 行理論衡), and “The Reasoned Appreciation of Style and Taste” (*pin’ge jianshang* 品格鑒賞)—were criticized as implying wrongly that Kant’s critical method had been anticipated by the Chinese thinker Wang Chong 王充(27-97), who had authored his own collection of “Balanced Discussions” in the first century AD. Other terms He promoted were even more obviously intended to “Confucianize” the notions they were supposed to convey. The best known example was perhaps his choice of the venerated Confucian term “Supreme Ultimate” (*taiji* 太極) to translate the idealist notion of “the absolute.” In view of such poetic but far-fetched attempts, He Lin’s position with regard to Kant’s “things in themselves” was surprisingly accepting. Perhaps because he regarded the entire concept as unproblematic, He praised Zhang Binglin’s *wuru* 物如 “things in their thusness” as “the most elegant and appropriate” translation and even granted that there was “also nothing wrong” with the more colloquial renderings *wu zishen* or *wu ziti*. In our case, He was apparently content that a “Sinicizing,” but not in fact “Confucianizing” term had found relatively wide acceptance. (He Lin 1989 [1936], 274) His position was supported some years later by the influential philosopher Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀(1886-1973), who also appreciated the classical elegance of *wuru* but nonetheless added yet another paraphrase with *wu zhi benyang* 物之本樣 “things in their original manner.” (Zhang Dongsun 1939, 7)

The brevity with which both He and Zhang dealt with “things in themselves” and “noumena” suggests that their interventions were not intended to incite a controversy about the translation of this particular and by now familiar notion. As professional philosophers, neither of them depended on one or another term to gain or anchor his grasp of Kant’s concept, and both were aware that most of their readers, too, would have

long grown out of the stage where they “stared at characters to gain understanding” (*wang wen er sheng zhi* 望文而生知), one of the arguments put forth in an earlier debate about the dangers of semantic loans that implied resonances between new Euro-American terms and traditional Chinese words. (Kurtz 2003, 165-169) Still, both insisted that their terminological choices mattered, not so much to make nuanced philosophical arguments, but as statements of certain stylistic preferences or markers of the belief in the compatibility of Chinese and Western thought and thus the universality of the philosophical quest.

Is Closure Possible?

Despite the prestige that both He and Zhang continued to enjoy before and after the political and ideological realignments of 1949, the success of their advocacy remained limited. Most authors and translators in Mainland China and Taiwan ignored their plea for *wuru* and opted for simplicity by referring to “things in themselves” as *wu zishen*, *wu ziti* or, less often, *zizai zhi wu*, and relying on *benti* to render “noumena.” The new translations of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* that have become available over the past decades helped to stabilize this set of terms as standard renderings. Lan Gongwu’s 藍公武(1887-1957) adaptation of Norman Kemp Smith’s English edition (Kant, Smith 1929), which was completed in 1935 but published only in the year its author died, consistently used *wu zishen* and *benti*. (Kant, Lan Gongwu 1960 [1957], 215-219) In another posthumously published translation of Smith’s English edition, Wei Zhuomin 韋卓民(1888-1976) borrowed *benti* for “noumena” and rendered “things in themselves” either

as *zizai zhi wu* or *wu zhi zai qi benshen* 物之在其本身 “things as they are by themselves.” (Kant, Wei Zhuomin 2000, 284-287) Li Qiuling chose *benti* and *wu zishen* in his renditions of the first and second editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* compiled for the Chinese version of Kant’s *Complete Works*. (Kant, Li Qiuling 2003 and 2005) Deng Xiaomang 鄧曉芒, finally, who like Li Qiuling worked directly from the German original, opted for *benti* and *zizai zhi wu*. (Kant, Deng Xiaomang 2004, 225-227)

Although the four new translations of the *Critique* displayed considerable variety in style and diction, the consistency of their terminological repertoires seemed to indicate that the lexical issues that had figured so prominently in earlier adaptations had eventually been resolved. Yet, perhaps because translation is by nature an interminable task, no closure of the matter is in sight, not even in the sphere of terminology. Just as views on how best to translate “noumena” and “things in themselves” seemed to converge, some of Kant’s Chinese translators began to revisit the case of “phenomena.” In some sense, this unexpected development can be taken as testimony of how sophisticated Chinese translations of European philosophy have become. For at issue here was not how to relate Kant’s notion of the phenomenal world to actual or forced equivalents in Chinese thought. Rather translators strove to highlight the fairly minute, and not entirely consistent, differences in Kant’s usage of the German word *Erscheinung* “appearance” and its Latin cognate *Phaenomenon*. Wei Zhuomin suggested to mark the distinction by rendering *Erscheinung* as *chuxian* 出現 “becoming apparent” and using *biaoxiang* 表象 “appearance” or “representation” for “phenomenon.” (Kant, Wei Zhuomin 2000, 8-9) In a related move, Deng Xiaomang proposed *biaoxiang* for *Erscheinung* and *xianxiang* 現相 “forms as they appear,” a variation of the homophonous

standard term, for “phenomenon.” (Kant, Deng Xiaomang 2004, 227) Both suggestions were intended to draw attention to the fact that Kant seemed to enlist *Erscheinung* when he wished to highlight how the things we perceive appear “to us,” that is, when referring to the subjective aspect of our relation to the phenomenal world, but tended to prefer *Phaenomenon* when talking about its objective side.

But such specific disagreements, which a work as monumental in scope as Kant’s *Critique* undoubtedly invites in virtually unlimited number, are not the only reason why closure remains illusive. More important is the philosophical challenge that Kant’s work continues to present not only to Chinese thinkers. The labors of Mou Zongsan, the best known and most persistent Chinese interpreter of Kant to date, may serve as an illustration how this challenge can shape strategies of translation. More than any other Chinese thinker of the twentieth century, Mou struggled to breach the limits Kant’s epistemology seemed to impose on human knowledge. For several decades, he worked to prove *contra* Kant that it was indeed possible to gain access to the noumenal realm and, moreover, that it was Chinese philosophy that held the key. Mou not only wrote two monographs to state his case—*Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy (Zhi de zhibiue yu Zhongguo zhexue* 智的直覺與中國哲學, 1971) and *Phenomena and Things in Themselves (Xianxiang yu wu zishen* 現象與物自身, 1975)—but also authored new translations of Kant’s three *Critiques*, based on English adaptations, that reflected his understanding.

It is of course beyond the scope of this essay to try and outline Mou’s enterprise in its entirety, let alone to evaluate its success. (For sharply divergent assessments, see Lee Ming-huei 1999 and Schmidt 2008.) In our context, it is enough to sketch the ways in which Mou’s “creative transformation” of

Kant's ideas informed his translations. Even though he used the common renderings *xianxiang* and *wu zishen* in the title of his book on *Phenomena and Things in Themselves*, Mou regarded the emerging standard terminology as inadequate. His main objection related to the use of *benti* as a translation of "noumena." The meaning of *benti*, according to Mou, was close to that of a "metaphysical reality" (*xingershangxue de sbiti* 形而上學的實體) and implied the existence of an indivisible substratum underlying the sensible world. (Mou 1975, 44) Mou acknowledged that this "monistic" idea of a single, unified "essence" would have to be understood as a pure "object of thought" in Kant's system. But, and this was his main point of disagreement with Kant, as such it was not necessarily beyond the grasp of human intelligence. Various strands of Chinese thought, Mou argued, had pointed out ways to gain access to the metaphysical reality of the noumenal realm by means of "intellectual intuition," a capacity that Kant denied because he subscribed to an impoverished view of human nature. (Schmidt 2008, 22-25) One consequence of this misguided conception was that Kant attributed only negative meanings to the concept of "noumena." *Benti*, however, had acquired eminently positive connotations in the history of Chinese thought and was therefore not suited to serve as a rendering of Kant's limiting notion.

Unlike earlier critics of "Sinicizing" translations, Mou's objective in disputing the appropriateness of *benti* as an equivalent of "noumena" was not to guard against unwarranted domestications of Kant's theories in presumably less precise Chinese terms. On the contrary, Mou aimed to save the unique and as yet unexplored insights preserved in Chinese notions from a premature and potentially crippling adaptation to Kantian views. For his translation of the three *Critiques* he therefore coined a whole

range of neologisms that highlighted rather than blurred the differences between key terms of Kantian epistemology and traditional Chinese notions. Those relevant for our purposes included *zhisiwu* 智思物 "things as objects of thought," a calque of Kant's "intelligible entities" (*Verstandeswesen*) for "noumena"; *benziwu* 本自物 "things as they are originally in themselves," an abridged form of the unwieldy paraphrase *benshen zizai ziru zhiwu* 本身自在自如之物 "things as they are in themselves, independent [from us] and unrestrained [by the forms of perception]" for "things in themselves"; *ganchuwu* 感觸物 "things as objects of sensation" or "things as they affect our senses," a calque of Kant's "sensible entities" (*Sinnenwesen*) for *Erscheinung*; and, most idiosyncratically perhaps, *fadingxiang* 法定象 "appearances as governed by [the] forms [of perception]" for "phenomena." (Mou 1983, vol. 1, 488-489; see Mou 1975, 42-45) All these interpretive coinages seemed quite well suited to achieve their intended effect of distancing Kant's notions from related Chinese terms. At the same time, they helped to reinforce the impression Mou tried to create through his transformation of Kant's theorems. Although terms alone could not possibly close the gap between the realms of the phenomenal and noumenal that Mou wished to overcome, "things as objects of thought" undoubtedly appeared much closer to the reach of human intelligence than anything Kant could have had in mind when denying his "noumena" any positive meaning.

Instead of a Conclusion

What can we infer from this winding tale for our methodological question about the uses and limitations of lexical evidence for a history of

concepts in transcultural perspective? Our review seems to warrant several conclusions. First of all, the story of the changing Chinese translations of Kant's "things in themselves" confirms that terminological variation is a common phenomenon in the early stages of the appropriation of concepts across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Broader variety may indicate that a concept is perceived as novel or unusual in its context of arrival and that it conflicts in an uneasy manner with existing notions. Historians of concepts can exploit the competing terminological suggestions put forward in such moments of lexical fluidity to understand the contexts in which new notions are situated and the ways in which translations affect semantic relations in the languages of arrival and departure.

In later stages, lexical diversity is gradually reduced. Competition seems to subside once a novel or disturbing concept has gained acceptance among a significant part of the appropriating community and a certain degree of agreement about its valence has been reached. Even successful translation terms then revert to their usual status as arbitrary signifiers whose meanings are determined by their definition and usage in specialized debate. Once terms are normalized and domesticated in this way, lexical data offers historians of concepts very little.

Yet, as the unexpected twists toward the end of our story indicate, in the case of translated notions issues of terminology can be revived at almost any point. Interested parties may reactivate dormant connotations of the lexical items used to render a certain concept or propose new terms highlighting hitherto overlooked aspects whenever these moves promise to further their argumentative agendas. In such situations, terms regain their dual function as "factors" and "indicators" of conceptual change that R. Koselleck has identified as their most valuable quality from the point of

view of the historian. (Koselleck 2002) To understand the ways in which vocabularies are altered or manipulated, it is necessary to probe both functions without losing sight of the linguistic, social and institutional structures in which all semantic changes are embedded. At the same time, historians of concepts exploring transcultural movements of meanings need to pay attention to the significance that the involved actors themselves attribute to issues of translation and terminology in order to locate the sites where the most telling traces of semantic and cognitive change or dissonance may be found. Finally, if translation is indeed an interminable process, as our story suggests, they must be prepared to concede that their findings will of necessity remain more tentative than they may feel comfortable admit.

Table 1. Chinese Translations of "Things-in-themselves"

Year	Hanyu pinyin	Hanzi	Retranslation
1902	<i>wu zhi zishen</i>	物之自身	'things as they are themselves' (Wang Guowei)
1902	<i>zizai zhi wu</i>	自在之物	'independent things; things at ease' (Yan Fu)
1903	<i>wu shizai zhi tianranxing</i>	物實在之天然性	'the natural state of things in their actuality' (Ma Junwu)
1906	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Binglin)
1911	<i>zhenxing</i>	真性	'true nature' (R. Wilhelm)* ³⁾
1911	<i>zhenru</i>	真如	'true thusness' (R. Wilhelm)*
1911	<i>shiti</i>	實體	'real body/shape'; 'substance' (R. Wilhelm)*
1911	<i>benxiang</i>	本相	'original form'; 'fundamental aspect' (R. Wilhelm)*
1913	<i>wu qi zi</i>	物其自	'things per se' (D. MacGillivray)*

3) Entries marked with an asterisk (*) are compiled from dictionaries.

1916	<i>wu qi zi</i>	物其自	'things per se' (K. Hemeling)*
1916	<i>wuzhi ziran</i>	物質自然	'matter as it is of itself' (K. Hemeling)*
1924	<i>wu benshen</i>	物本身	'things themselves' (Fan Shoukang)
1924	<i>wu ziti</i>	物自體	'things in their own body/shape' (Zhang Xinpei)
1924	<i>wu de benti</i>	物的本體	'the original body/shape of things'; 'the essence of things' (Zhang Mingding)
1924	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Mingding)
1925	<i>wu di benti</i>	物底本體	'the original body/shape of things'; 'the essence of things' (Wu Zhijue)
1925	<i>wu zixiang</i>	物自相	'things in their own form' (Yu Wenwei)
1925	<i>wu benshen</i>	物本身	'things themselves' (Zhang Mingding)
1926	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (<i>Zhexue cidian</i>)*
1926	<i>wu zishen</i>	物自身	'things themselves' (<i>Zhexue cidian</i>)*
1927	<i>wu zhi sbiti</i>	物之實體	'the real shape/body of things' (J. Médard)*
1927	<i>wu zhi benti</i>	物之本體	'the original shape/body of things' (J. Médard)*
1927	<i>wu ziti</i>	物自體	'things themselves' (J. Médard)*
1927	<i>wu qi wu</i>	物其物	'things as things' (J. Médard)*
1936	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (He Lin)
1936	<i>wu zishen</i>	物自身	'things themselves' (He Lin)
1936	<i>wu ziti</i>	物自體	'things themselves' (He Lin)
1939	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Dongsun)
1939	<i>wu zhi benyang</i>	物之本樣	'things in their original manner' (Zhang Dongsun)
1957	<i>wu zishen</i>	物自身	'things themselves' (Lan Gongwu)
1975	<i>wu zishen</i>	物自身	'things themselves' (Mou Zongsan)
1975	<i>wu zhi zai qi ziji</i>	物之在其自己	'things on their own' (Mou Zongsan)
1975	<i>benzi wu</i>	本自物	'things as they are originally in themselves' (Mou Zongsan)
2000	<i>zizai zhi wu</i>	自在之物	'independent things; things at ease' (Wei Zhuomin)
2000	<i>wu zhi zai qi benshen</i>	物之在 其本身	'things as they are by themselves' (Wei Zhuomin)
2003	<i>wu zishen</i>	物自身	'things themselves' (Li Qiuling)
2004	<i>zizai zhi wu</i>	自在之物	'independent things; things at ease' (Deng Xiaomang)

Table 2. Chinese Translations of "Noumena"

Year	<i>Hanyu pinyin</i>	<i>Hanzi</i>	Retranslation
1902	<i>sbiti</i>	實體	'real body/shape'; 'substance' (Wang Guowei)
1902	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Yan Fu)
1902	<i>niumeinuo</i>	紐美諾	(phonetic loan) (Yan Fu)
1902	<i>nuyoumina</i>	奴優彌那	(phonetic loan) (Yan Fu)
1903	<i>benxiang</i>	本相	'original form'; 'fundamental aspect' (Liang Qichao)
1906	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Binglin)
1906	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Zhang Binglin)
1911	<i>zhenxing</i>	真性	'true nature' (R. Wilhelm)*
1911	<i>zhenru</i>	真如	'true thusness' (R. Wilhelm)*
1911	<i>sbiti</i>	實體	'real body/shape'; 'substance' (R. Wilhelm)*
1911	<i>benxiang</i>	本相	'original form'; 'fundamental aspect' (R. Wilhelm)*
1913	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (D. MacGillivray)*
1923	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (<i>Xin wenbua cisbu</i>)*
1924	<i>shiwu</i>	實物	'real things' (Fan Shoukang)
1924	<i>zhen shizai</i>	真實在	'true reality'; 'what truly and really exists' (Fan Shoukang)
1924	<i>zhen sbiti</i>	真實體	'true substance' or 'true and real body/shape' (Zhang Xinpei)
1924	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Mingding)
1925	<i>shizai</i>	實在	'reality'; 'what really exists' (Zhang Mingding)
1926	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (<i>Zhexue cidian</i>)*
1926	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (<i>Zhexue cidian</i>)*
1936	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (He Lin)
1939	<i>wuru</i>	物如	'things in their thusness' (Zhang Dongsun)
1957	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Lan Gongwu)
1983	<i>zhisi wu</i>	智思物	'things as objects of thought' (Mou Zongsan)
2000	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Wei Zhuomin)
2003	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Li Qiuling)
2004	<i>benti</i>	本體	'original body/shape'; 'essence' (Deng Xiaomang)

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요약문

철학적 허구의 자국화

— 임마누엘 칸트의 “물(物)자체”에 관한 중국학자들의 해석—

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■ 주제어: 임마누엘 칸트, 중국, 철학, 번역, 용어, 개념역사, 초문화적 역사적 의미론

20세기 초 중국학자들이 근대 유럽 철학에 관심을 갖기 시작한 이래로 임마누엘 칸트는 그들에게 까다로운 도전과제로 인식되어 왔다. 중국의 여러 사상가들은 칸트의 〈순수 이성 비판 Critique of Pure Reason〉에 기록된 인간 지식의 한계를 고전 중국 문서에 기술된 윤리적 격언에 대한 하나의 위협으로 여겼다. 만약 이 같은 내용을 받아들인다면, 칸트의 인식론은 이성적으로 파악할 수 있는 도덕적 세계 질서의 가능성을 부정하고 따라서 중국 전통 사상의 근간을 훼손하는 것처럼 보였다. 그래서 상당수의 중국학자들은 칸트를 뛰어넘는 것이 무엇보다 시급한 과제임을 깨닫게 되었다.

여기서는 칸트의 도전에 타협하려는 중국인의 노력에서 중대한 역할을 한 하나의 개념, 즉 “물(物)자체 *Dinge an sich*”를 둘러싼 서로 경쟁하는 번역들을 살펴보고자 한다. 이 논문의 목적은 “물자체”에 대한 상이한 중국 번역들이 제기된 의도로부터 우리가 배울 수 있는 것은 무엇인지, 그리고 그러한 의도들은 개개의 번역

이 채택·거절·비판·옹호되었던 맥락에 관해 우리에게 무엇을 말해 주는지를 살펴보는 데 있다. 덧붙여 필자는 초문화적 시각에서 개념의 역사에 관한 어휘정보의 유용성과 한계점을 분명히 하고자 한다.