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Mirror and Bridge—A View of the Academic Value of Mutual Learning among Civilizations: Interviews with World-Renowned Sinologists

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Abstract: The book *Mutual Learning among Civilizations: Interviews with World-Renowned Sinologists*, edited by Yang Huiling, compiles interviews with 31 distinguished sinologists from various countries. Through these interviews, we observe the rich and diverse images of Chinese civilization as reflected through different cultural perspectives. In the article, we analyze the dual academic characteristics of the book, which functions both as a mirror and a bridge, providing a multidimensional space for cultural exchange and intellectual communication between China and the West. At the same time, we reflect on the existing issues within current sinological studies, emphasizing that Chinese academia should adopt a calm and objective attitude to actively participate in international academic dialogues and promote mutual learning between Chinese and global civilizations.

Keywords: Intercultural Dialogue; Perspective of the Other; Mutual Learning among Civilizations; Sinologist

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标题: 镜与桥: 评《文明互鉴——世界著名汉学家访谈录》的学术价值

摘要: 由杨慧玲主编的《文明互鉴——世界著名汉学家访谈录》搜集整理了来自世界各国共 31 位著名汉学家的访谈, 从这些访谈中我们可以看到中华文明在不同文化视角下的所展现出来的丰富又各异的形象。在文章里, 我们分析了本书既如镜又如桥的学术特点, 为中西方文化交流与思想沟通提供了一个多维的空间, 同时也反思了当前汉学研究中所存在的问题, 强调中国学术应当冷静客观的态度主动参与到国际学术对话中, 积极推动中国与世界文明的互鉴。

关键词: 跨文化对话; 他者视域; 文明互鉴; 汉学家;

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Introduction

At this moment in the development of human civilization, a paradoxical scene unfolds before us: on one hand, the accelerating progress of technology provides unprecedented momentum for globalization, while on the other, cultural and civilizational barriers have not dissipated with the advancement of connectivity technologies. On the contrary, they often appear to be intensifying. Against this backdrop of our times, mutual learning among civilizations is no longer merely a lofty ideal discussed in theory; it has become a crucial and practical issue concerning the very survival and development of human civilization.

Genuine mutual learning among civilizations is far from a simple exchange of cultural products. It is, rather, an intellectual interaction that transcends material objects and is built upon a foundation of mutual understanding. The book *Mutual Learning among Civilizations: Interviews with World-Renowned Sinologists* (edited by Professor Yang Huiling, Elephant Press, 2021; hereafter referred to as *Mutual Learning among Civilizations*) exemplifies this very kind of thoughtful dialogue based on understanding and reciprocal exchange. This volume compiles the oral accounts of 31 world-renowned sinologists, presenting the research experiences, intellectual insights, and scholarly reflections of these academics who have long devoted themselves to the study of Chinese culture and civilization. It gradually sketches the century-long context of Sinological studies, constructing a diverse, multi-dimensional, and vibrant platform for dialogue – a meeting of Eastern and Western academic perspectives, a collision of traditional and modern cultural concepts, and an intertwining of individual academic journeys with the process of civilizational development.

This book functions both as a mirror and a bridge. As a mirror, it allows us, through the lens of the sinologists, to more consciously transcend the limitations of a single culture. While observing the unique cultural characteristics and boundaries of Chinese civilization, it also allows us to clearly glimpse the blind spots in our own self-interpretation, illuminating those easily overlooked cultural details and intellectual propositions. As a bridge, it connects the discursive systems, emotional structures, and academic traditions of Chinese and Western scholarship. It enables the fundamental concepts of Chinese academia to be better understood and allows Western research on China to be more effectively inherited within the Chinese academic system. To this end, the following discussion will interpret the academic significance of *Mutual*

Learning among Civilizations from the dual perspectives of the mirror and the bridge, and will also reflect on existing issues within the field of Sinological studies.

1. The Mirror

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer expressed the view that understanding is never a one-way cognitive activity, but rather a process where the interpreter's own horizon collides and merges with the horizon of the text or the other. In other words, everyone carries a cognitive horizon shaped by their own cultural background, academic training and life experiences. Understanding between different cultures and civilizations involves breaking through the limitations of one's own horizon, allowing different cognitive horizons to interpenetrate and jointly generate a new space of meaning. From the perspective of mutual learning among civilizations, sinologists play a crucial role in providing the perspective of the Other: they freely navigate between Chinese and Western civilizations, deeply understanding the systematic logic of Chinese civilization while being familiar with the theoretical tools and ways of thinking in the Western academic tradition. Their cognitive horizon itself is the outcome of dialogue between the two civilizations.

The value of *Mutual Learning among Civilizations* lies in its refusal to reduce the sinologists' cognitive horizons to a singular Western perspective. Instead, it brings together the diverse horizons of 31 sinologists stemming from distinct academic traditions and cultural backgrounds. Among them are European scholars delving into classical Chinese literature, North American researchers focusing on modern and contemporary Chinese society, and Japanese and Korean scholars dedicated to identifying both commonalities and distinctions. Some examine traditional Chinese philosophy through the lens of intellectual history, others investigate modern literature from an anthropological viewpoint, and still others strive to overcome the barriers of cultural translation through the study of conceptual history. When these diverse horizons are collectively projected onto Chinese civilization, we can perceive its richer layers and more complex tapestry. Much like light passing through a prism refracts into a spectrum of different wavelengths, our understanding of the civilization becomes more multi-dimensional and profound.

In the field of intellectual history, the research of German sinologist Michael Lackner on Chinese concepts such as divination and fate offers us a new perspective for understanding the complexity of thought. After studying Neo-Confucianism and conceptual history, Lackner returned to the starting point of his academic journey—the Chinese perspective on fate. He argues that the traditional predictive methods established in the West since the Enlightenment are no longer effective. The conventional Western approach to prediction involves setting a linear developmental direction and then continuously using data to make inferences, attempting to forecast what the future will be like. However, the world now faces numerous issues in areas such as politics, economics, and environmental protection, none of which can be predicted using these traditional methods. In Lackner's view, fortune-telling is also a form of knowledge containing its own internal logic. Practices like the I Ching or Eight Characters fortune-telling represent a refined and sophisticated wisdom with their own inherent logic.

This approach to research, grounded in conceptual history, makes us aware of the complexity inherent in Chinese ideological concepts. Throughout history, certain seemingly paradoxical concepts are, in fact,

composites formed by the layering of multiple meanings. As individuals embedded within this context, these concepts become so mundane that we often overlook their deeper veins of meaning. Lackner's work, however, compels us to retrospectively examine these concepts through an unfamiliar lens.

This defamiliarizing examination is, in essence, a process through which sinologists, leveraging their perspective as outsiders, assist us in both demystifying and re-enchanting our culture. Demystification involves stripping away the rigid interpretations that have become attached to cultural concepts, breaking down our taken-for-granted assumptions about cultural essence. Re-enchantment, then, builds upon this demystification to rediscover the deeper logic underlying these cultural concepts, allowing us to regard the unique value of our own culture with both greater reverence and rationality.

While presenting diverse perspectives, *Mutual Learning among Civilizations* also reflects the differences between various academic paradigms. Rooted in different academic contexts and holding distinct academic perspectives, sinologists often reach vastly different conclusions even when drawing on the same Chinese sources.

The research of American sinologist Wendy Swartz integrates the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives of comparative literature with close textual analysis that attends to both the linguistic being-in-the-world and poetic apprehension. She has not only pioneered innovative interpretations of canonical writers such as Tao Yuanming and Xie Lingyun but has also reevaluated traditionally low-regarded genres like metaphysical poetry in the history of Chinese literature. In doing so, she has expanded the boundaries of Six Dynasties literary studies in the English-speaking world.

Sinologists of the German school, such as Wolfgang Kubin and Michael Lackner mentioned earlier, bring a distinct philosophical speculation characteristic of German tradition to their work. They often employ philosophical theories as tools to delve deeply into the intellectual core of Chinese culture, seeking to uncover its essential nature and logical structure. Academician Boris Riftin of Russia applied Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, combined with semiotic theory, to the study of Chinese literature and its theory, offering refreshing insights. Professor Choi Yong-chul of the Korean school explores the cultural origins shared by China and Korea, investigating the dissemination, translation and current status of classical Chinese fiction in Korea, identifying subtle differences within similar cultural traditions. Japanese scholar Professor Kawahara Hidetoshi adheres to an interdisciplinary approach that bridges the humanities and sciences in his research, pursuing the study of history of science with the ultimate aim of advancing the understanding of intellectual or philosophical history.

Studies on Chinese language and culture both at home and abroad reflect not only differences in academic traditions across countries but also variations in individual research methods and philosophies. Yet amid these differences lies a common ground: all attach great importance to the collection and utilization of primary sources. As evidenced in the book, overseas sinologists all acknowledge that significant progress has been made in the cooperation on documentary resources between domestic and international sinological research. Scholars are not only beneficiaries of real-time collaboration but also promoters of cross-border academic cooperation.

In summary, the function of *Mutual Learning among Civilizations* as a mirror is fulfilled by utilizing the perspective of sinologists as the Other to shatter habitual cognitive traps and unveil previously overlooked cultural details before us. This external viewpoint compels us to break free from inertial thinking and re-examine our own civilization. This process is not about negation, but rather about leveraging the gaze of sinologists to provide new perspectives and methodologies for rediscovering Chinese civilization and culture—as the saying goes, stones from other hills may serve to polish the jade of this one.

2. The Bridge

The term bridge signifies communication and connection. In the book *Mutual Learning among Civilizations*, we first observe the personal connections between overseas sinologists and China. For instance, the bond between renowned sinologist Chloe Starr and China traces back to her parents, who both studied Chinese at SOAS (the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London). And Isabelle Rabut feels her relationship with China was destined, as her grandfather, who had served in Vietnam and was originally slated for a posting in China, passed away due to illness before he could make the journey.

Among them, the most representative figure is French academician Marianne Bastid-Bruguière. Her discovery of China came through her mother's Chinese student—Hu Honglie. Hu Honglie and his wife, Zhong Qirong, studied for their Doctor of Law degrees at the University of Paris from 1948 to 1952. In the year of their graduation, 1952, they invited the entire Bastid family to celebrate Chinese New Year, explaining Chinese characters and culture to them, which captivated the young Marianne. After finishing high school, while studying at the École Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles in Paris, Bastid-Bruguière simultaneously began learning Chinese at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales. As soon as diplomatic relations were established between China and France, she eagerly sought opportunities to come to China for further study. During her time in Beijing, she studied under Mr. Shao Xunzheng and received assistance from many teachers and students at Peking University at that time. Later, due to political movements, she was forced to return to France. As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended, she immediately resumed her exchanges with China. In her own words, "I had countless reasons to come to China at the earliest possible time."

For fifty years, Marianne Bastid-Bruguière has diligently and tirelessly dedicated herself to academic and cultural exchanges between China and France. Even after retirement, she still makes a point to set aside time each year to visit China for academic purposes. It is precisely this initial passion, warmth and persistence that have transformed cultural exchanges between China and the world into a dialogue with genuine human connection. Furthermore, the emotional bridges built by scholars from various countries with China have become the most subtle yet powerful force in breaking down cultural barriers.

The bridge built by *Mutual Learning among Civilizations* is not only an emotional one but also a knowledge bridge connecting the global Chinese studies community. From the perspective of information aggregation, this volume can be considered a contemporary directory and research guide to the most prominent figures in world sinology. The 31 scholars interviewed span multiple fields including literature, philosophy, history and sociology, collectively representing nearly the highest level of contemporary sinological research.

Among them are professors deeply engaged in classical literature such as Wolfgang Kubin, Martin Kern, and Choi Yong-chul; those focused on modern and contemporary society like Ezra Vogel and Oliver Moore; and specialists in intellectual history such as Michael Lackner.

In the interviews with each scholar, the content not only organizes their core achievements but also includes key research literature and academic viewpoints. This highly concentrated extraction of information provides an entry point for readers within the Chinese-speaking world, particularly young students, into the realm of international Sinology.

Even more significantly, through the editor's meticulous organization and the scholars' own narratives, the book delineates the underlying currents in the development of global Sinology. In their interviews, the scholars naturally reference their academic lineages. For instance, French sinologist Isabelle Rabut talks about studying under the authority Paul Demiéville, while American sinologist Ronald Egan recalls being taught by Professor Chen Shixiang. These narratives clearly outline the academic pedigrees of Sinology in different countries. The scholars also often spontaneously mention the origins of their own research institutions—such as the École Pratique des Hautes Études in France, the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University in the United States, and the Institute of Sinology at the University of Munich in Germany. This provides readers with a map of the institutional evolution of key centers of Sinology worldwide.

Many scholars in the book share stories about their mentors. This cross-continental lineage of master-disciple relationships forms the backbone of Sinology's academic transmission. In his interview, German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin recounts his connection with his Chinese mentor, Feng Zhi. During his research visit to China in the 1980s, Feng Zhi, then in his prime, served as Kubin's guide to the aesthetic characteristics and spirit of classical Chinese poetry. Feng Zhi not only provided academic inspiration but, more importantly, profoundly influenced Kubin through his personal integrity and character. Sinology is not an individual pursuit but a relay race across borders: sinologists convey the essence of native culture, allowing its wisdom to illuminate another cultural realm. This process of inheritance and transmission is often intertwined with the affectionate bonds passed down from mentors, infusing the academic path with warmth and profound humanity. Therefore, *Mutual Learning among Civilizations* also serves as a bridge of inheritance, documenting the cross-border transmission of academic sparks and providing spiritual sustenance for the intergenerational continuity of Sinological studies.

This bridge of inheritance also offers profound enlightenment for the younger generation. For young Chinese scholars engaged in sinological research domestically, this book presents the research methods and academic perspectives of overseas Sinology. It allows them to understand Chinese civilization through the lens of foreign scholars and provides a new vantage point for their own academic research. For young overseas scholars, the dedication of these established sinologists—who overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and persevere in their scholarly pursuits—serves as a spiritual benchmark. It demonstrates that despite the challenges inherent in Sinological research, its academic value and cultural significance are profound enough to warrant steadfast commitment.

Edited by Professor Yang Huiling, *Mutual Learning among Civilizations*, is not merely a bridge across a

single civilization, but a multi-dimensional, three-dimensional bridge connecting various types of civilizations. By transcending the differences manifested in diverse civilizational forms, it links the achievements of Chinese and foreign sinological research, bringing together sinological knowledge scattered across the globe and sketching a cognitive map of world sinology for Chinese readers. Meanwhile, through the scholars' own life experiences, it serves as an emotional bridge between China and foreign countries that transcends cultural barriers to achieve emotional resonance and academic affinity. It breaks down the long-standing inherent mindset of estrangement between Chinese and Western sinology, making academic exchanges vivid and lively, and ultimately nurturing an academic community of multi-civilizational mutual learning that transcends national borders.

3.Existing Issues

Mutual Learning among Civilizations not only showcases the abundant achievements of global Sinology but also objectively reveals certain problems within the field.

Hesse once lamented that many people, both in the East and the West, narrowly interpret globalization as economic globalization, striving to avoid cultural and spiritual dialogue between the two. He believed that true ideological exchange between the East and the West had barely taken place, or only remained superficial. Due to the enormous cultural and national differences between the East and the West, as well as between China and the world, misunderstandings often arise in mutual exchanges. Overall, ideological communication between China and the West remains unsatisfactory.

Sinologists around the world are contributing to the research and dissemination of Chinese culture and language. They interpret Chinese culture for people in their own countries while helping bridge the gap between Chinese and Western cultures. This is not only their work but also their mission. When talking about the problems in sinological research and dissemination, scholars unanimously point out that their translations and studies always focus on a handful of well-known novels, leading to a high degree of repetition. Furthermore, most Chinese books published overseas are contemporary Chinese works, while the vast number of ancient Chinese classics are rarely seen.

There are two primary reasons for this: firstly, from a commercial perspective, translating classics ensures a return on investment; secondly, overseas Chinese language learners, driven by practical needs and their own proficiency levels, often show greater interest in contemporary Chinese language and works.

In response to this situation, several scholars have unanimously expressed a similar wish: select a group of scholars with strong academic capabilities, assign each of them to translate a portion of ancient Chinese novels, and carry out the work in a planned manner. When the translation work is drawing to a close, the government and publishing houses will provide funding to publish these achievements as a cultural project, thereby expanding the scope of translations of ancient Chinese novels.

Beyond reflecting on existing issues, the most significant insight this book offers is that Chinese academia needs to actively participate in the construction of international scholarship. It should vigorously explore new research methodologies, translate domestic academic works while draw on external expertise, and utilize the

internationally common academic language to convey the unique value of Chinese civilization.

Conclusion

Reviewing the entire book, this cross-temporal dialogue with overseas sinologists allows us to sense their intense spirit of exploration and their heartfelt passion for the academic pursuits they champion. These overseas scholars, at the peak of their careers, possess a clear-eyed understanding of Sino-Western cultural exchange, demonstrating profound academic strength and rational tolerance. They neither idolize China's antiquity and grandeur nor excessively affirm Western culture and civilization. Instead, they seek common ground and mutual learning points between the two cultures with an attitude of equality. This is precisely the key to resolving cultural barriers and mitigating civilizational conflicts in today's uncertain world.

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