**eternity/永恒(Yǒng Héng)**

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*Eternity, sempiternity*,[[1]](#footnote-1) and 永恒 (Yǒng Héng)—in the European and the Chinese histories of thought, these concepts respectively stand for important and related ideas. Because philosophers in both cultures seek eternity as an ideal, there is something fundamentally similar in both. But due to differences in their philosophical premises, there are also noticeable differences.

From their very inception, European ways of approaching eternity have been marked by oppositions: timelessness vs sempiternity, intellectual analysis vs existential experience, monism vs dualism, linearity non-linearity. And it seems as if Western discourses on eternity since have been inspired and fueled by the insoluble tension created by these oppositions.

The Chinese philosophical tradition, in contrast, does not lead into tensions of this kind. As we have seen above, the very word 永恒 and its etymology merge the realms of nature and of human beings. This seems to reflect the fundamental non-dualistic nature of Chinese thinking which also excludes the notion of transcendence as a relevant factor. Eternity is conceptualized as temporal and, hence, 永恒 is closer in meaning to *sempiternity* than to *(atemporal) eternity*. Furthermore, time is thought of as being fundamentally linked to this world, which all beings, including humans, are considered parts of. If humans are internal parts of this world rather than Archimedean subjects for which the world can be an external object, they underlie the very same processes as everything else. This implies their being temporal; and temporality, from a Chinese perspective, means circularity. While this concept is not unknown in European philosophy—think of, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence[[2]](#footnote-2)—the predominant notion is that of time flowing linearly from future through present into the past. If, however, there is no opposition between the world and humans, the latter can be seen as participating in the recurrent cycles that are best exemplified by the endless sequence of the seasons. While it may be doubtful whether this thought suffices to dissolve the internal aporias of European thinking about eternity from an outside standpoint, it may be considered one of the factors that recently have motivated Western intellectuals, including philosophers, artists, writers, and musicians, to turn to Buddhism, *The Book of Change*, and other Chinese and “Eastern” sources for inspiration.

The influence of European ideas of time and history in modern China, similar to many other Western ideas, is quite significant. It is not only very frequently seen among Chinese intellectuals, scientists, and Christian believers, but also has greatly shaped modern Chinese ideology. Hence the classic ideas of time as we discuss here, seem not quite familiar to most contemporary Chinese people. This has not, however, quite changed people’s understanding of eternity. Although Western understandings and terms about atemporal eternity are not strange to most people, they would not see it as their transcendental ideal. The Hegelian and Marxist ideas of history, combined with the non-dualistic understanding of Chinese thinking on time and eternity, are shaping their understanding of relevant issues.

All in all, the mutual understanding and influence between China and Europe have been and are still a very important phenomenon in human civilization. They will continually influence our life and ideas in the future.

1. Other than in English or French, in the German language there exists only a single word, *Ewigkeit*, to signify both concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus spoke Zarathustra. A book for all and none. Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)