

The Absence of Husserl's Phenomenology in the Early 20th-Century Chinese Philosophy: A Philosophical Interpretation

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Abstract

The May Fourth Movement in 1919 initiated a new era of study and reception of Western philosophy in China. Under this ethos, however, a most influential philosophical movement in Europe at that time was nearly overlooked by nearly all Chinese philosophers — Husserl's phenomenology. Some historians suggest that the apathy of phenomenology in China was due to the highly abstract concepts and intricate theories in Husserl's phenomenology. Some propose that it was because Husserl's phenomenology does not meet the need of Chinese philosophy in that era.

In this paper, I propose that these explanations are untenable because some early introductions of phenomenology by Zhang Junmai 張君勱, Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀, and Yang Renbian 楊人樞 in the 1930s show that the concepts of phenomenology were indeed apprehensible to the Chinese philosophers.¹ Zhang Qingxiong 張慶熊's comparative study between Husserl and Xiong Shili 熊十力, a founder of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, also demonstrated the affinity between phenomenology and Chinese philosophy.² I would defend the hypothesis that a philosophical reason for the apathy of phenomenology was due to an underlying "cultural particularism" in the early 20th-century Chinese philosophy. This particularism goes against Husserl's universalism in the renewal of

¹ Junmai Zhang, "Report on German Philosopher Driesch Coming to the East and Synopsis of his Scholarship," *Gaizao* 4.6 (1921): 1-24. [張君勱: 《德國哲學家杜里舒氏東來之報告及其學說大略》, 載《改造》, 1921年第4卷第6期, 頁1-24。]; Dongsun Zhang, *Rationality and Liangzhi* (Shanghai: Far East Press, 1995). [張東蓀: 《理性與良知》, 上海, 遠東出版社, 1995年。]; Renbian Yang, "A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology," *Minduo* 10.1(1929): 1-11. [楊人樞: 《現象學概論》, 載《民鐸》, 第10卷1號, 1929年, 頁1-11。]; Xianglong Zhang, Xiaozhen Du, Yingquan Huang, *The Phenomenological Ethos in China* (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2011), p. 17. [張翔龍、杜小真、黃應全: 《現象學思潮在中國》, 北京: 首都師範大學出版社, 2011年, 頁17。]

² Qingxiong Zhang, *Xiong Shili's New Mind-Only Philosophy and Husserl's Phenomenology* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1995). [張慶熊: 《熊十力的新唯識論與胡塞爾的現象學》, 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1995年。]

civilization as presented in the *Kaizo* articles, which requires one to suspend and reflect on one's cultural tradition as a member of humankind. Against this background, China did not provide the condition for spread of phenomenology as it was in Europe. The absence of Husserl's phenomenology in early 20th-century Chinese philosophy hence exemplified the conflict between universalism and particularism in intercultural philosophy, which is still meaningful for our contemporary reflections.

Keywords: Husserl, phenomenology, May Fourth Movement, culture, universalism

The May Fourth Movement in 1919 initiated a new era of study and reception of Western philosophy in China. Chinese intellectuals within this movement “advocates the modernization or Westernization of China in all important aspects of her culture, from literature, philosophy, and ethics to social, political, and economic institutions and customs” in order to “save China”.³ Under this ethos, many dominating Western philosophies in contemporary Europe and America, including liberalism, pragmatism, rationalism, idealism, realism, existentialism, philosophy of life, Neo-Kantianism, and Marxism were introduced to China. However, an influential philosophical movement in Europe at that time — Husserl's phenomenology, was nearly overlooked by all Chinese philosophers.

This special phenomenon in the history of modern Chinese philosophy hitherto lacks a convincing explanation. Huang Jiande 黃見德 is perhaps the first scholar who has directly addressed this question. According to Huang, this phenomenon occurs because Husserl's works are intricate and his thought was always changing. At the same time, the reception of Husserl's thought also changed according to the philosophical interests of Chinese philosophers.⁴

This explanation is not convincing. First of all, Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century were not totally ignorant of Husserl's phenomenology. In the “Report on German Philosopher Driesch Come to the East and Synopsis of his Scholarship” written in 1921, Zhang Junmai 張君勱 has already recognized Husserl

³ Tse Tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 359.

⁴ Jiande Huang, *A History of the Eastern Reception of Western Philosophy* (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2011). [黃見德: 《西方哲學東漸史》, 北京: 首都師範大學出版社, 2011年。]

as one of the leading philosophers in Germany at that time.⁵ Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 has also introduced Husserl's philosophy in an article called "An Embryonic Form of Philosophy".⁶ Besides, Yang Renbian 楊人樞 has also published an introduction to phenomenology in 1929.⁷ These mentions of Husserl show that Chinese intellectuals were not unaware of Husserl's philosophy.⁸ More importantly, they had already obtained a basic understanding of Husserl's philosophy. This verifies that Husserl's philosophy was not incomprehensible to Chinese philosophers at that time. Second, later studies show that phenomenology indeed shared many philosophical interests with Chinese philosophers. For example, Zhang Qingxiong 張慶熊 comparative work on Husserl and Xiong Shili 熊十力 (a founder of the Contemporary Neo-Confucianism) shows that both Husserl and Xiong take consciousness as a central issue of their philosophical investigation.⁹ Besides that, Husserl's study of the foundation of science also echoes the advocacy of science in the May Fourth Movement. Hence, it is not adequate to say that Husserl's phenomenology is not relevant to the philosophical interests of the May Fourth Chinese philosophers.

In this paper, I would defend a hypothesis that the absence of Husserl's phenomenology in the early 20th century China might have a philosophical reason

⁵ Junmai Zhang, "Report on German Philosopher Driesch Coming to the East and Synopsis of his Scholarship," *Gaizao* 4.6 (1921): 1–24. [張君勱: 《德國哲學家杜里舒氏東來之報告及其學說大略》, 載《改造》, 1921年第4卷第6期, 頁1-24。] See also Junmai Zhang, *Essays on Chinese, Western, and Indian Philosophy* (Taipei: Student Book), p. 1124. [張君勱: 《中西印哲學文集》, 台北: 學生書局, 1981年, 頁1124。] In this report, Zhang proposes that there are three main streams in the contemporary German philosophy which are represented by Rickert, Natorp, and Husserl respectively.

⁶ Dongsun Zhang, *Rationality and Liangzhi* (Shanghai: Far East Press, 1995). [張東蓀: 《理性與良知》, 上海: 遠東出版社, 1995年。] According to Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, this article was probably written in the 1930s. See Xianglong Zhang, Xiaozhen Du, Yingquan Huang, *The Phenomenological Ethos in China* (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2011), p. 17. [張翔龍、杜小真、黃應全: 《現象學思潮在中國》, 北京: 首都師範大學出版社, 2011年, 頁17。]

⁷ Renbian Yang, "A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology," *Minduo* 10.1(1929): 1-11. [楊人樞: 《現象學概論》, 載《民鐸》, 第10卷1號, 1929年, 頁1-11。]

⁸ Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, a Neo-Confucian thinker, has also discussed phenomenology in details but he mainly addressed Heidegger instead of Husserl. Also, these discussions were published much later than the three texts investigated in the current essay. For more details of Mou's reception of phenomenology, please refer to Zongsan Mou, *Intellectual Intuitions and Chinese Philosophy* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1971). [牟宗三: 《智的直覺與中國哲學》, 台北: 商務印書館, 1971年。]

⁹ Qingxiong Zhang, *Xiong Shili's New Mind-Only Philosophy and Husserl's Phenomenology* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1995). [張慶熊: 《熊十力的新唯識論與胡塞爾的現象學》, 上海: 上海人民出版社, 1995年。]

beyond mere historical cause.¹⁰ The philosophical backdrop, I propose, is an underlying “cultural particularism” in the early receptions of phenomenology. More precisely, the early interpretations of Husserl in China regard phenomenology as a particular theory in epistemology instead of a philosophical movement that advocates for the radical self-responsibility of the renewal of philosophy. This cultural particularism is caused by the historical context in which the acquaintance of Western philosophy is subjected to the hope for saving China from the invasion of the Western world. Under the influence of this cultural particularism, Chinese intellectuals did not exercise the idea of “renewal [*Erneuerung*]” in phenomenology (proposed by Husserl in the *Kaizo* articles) as a universal project. The absence of phenomenology in the early 20th century China is, therefore, a special case in intercultural philosophy which exemplifies the conflict between universalism and particularism. This special case shows that although universalism is usually blamed as overlooking cultural diversity, particularism can also be a hindrance to intercultural communication for it limits one culture to its particular historical context and undermines the possibility of reaching intercultural interactions through cultural renewal. Therefore, the obstacle to intercultural philosophy is not associated naively to either universalism or particularism; rather, I propose that “cultural particularism” is as harmful as “dogmatic universalism”, and what Husserl would inspire us on intercultural philosophical reception is a “genetic universalism”.¹¹

This paper will be divided into three parts. First, I will introduce the hidden particularism in the early reception of Husserl and relate it to a larger context of the May Fourth Movement. Second, I will explain the underlying genetic universalism in Husserl's phenomenology especially as presented in the *Kaizo* articles published in Japan. Finally, I will interpret this case as an example of intercultural philosophy and highlight the problem of particularism as a hindrance of intercultural communication.

¹⁰ From the perspective of historical cause, the apathy could be caused by many empirical factors, such as the accidental ignorance of Husserl's texts, or the insufficient spreading of those introductory works. Nevertheless, this paper aims at hypothesizing a philosophical reason. A philosophical reason refers to those characteristics of Chinese philosophy at that time which are philosophically incoherent with the conditions of receiving Husserl's phenomenology. I do not propose to prove that these philosophical reasons constitute the sufficient “cause” of the apathy of phenomenology. Nevertheless, it is still meaningful to uncover these philosophical reasons because insofar as these philosophical reasons persist, they will continue to be a hindrance to a reception of Husserl's phenomenology. Therefore, the clarification of these philosophical reasons will be helpful to the contemporary reception of Husserl's phenomenology in China.

¹¹ These three concepts will be explained shortly.

1. The hidden “cultural particularism” in the early reception of Husserl

Zhang Junmai, Zhang Dongsun, and Yang Renbian have already introduced Husserl’s phenomenology into China before the 1930s. Although these interpretations correctly summarize most of the characteristics of Husserl’s phenomenology, these works do not recognize an underlying agenda of the phenomenological movement as the call for a radical self-responsibility of reflection and renewing one’s philosophical tradition. In the three texts written by Zhang Junmai, Zhang Dongun, and Yang Renbian, Husserl’s phenomenology was regarded as a mere particular theory of epistemology, and more or less belongs to the tradition of Kantianism or Neo-Kantianism in a broader sense.¹² Although Yang’s introduction discerns the distinction between Husserl and Kant, his paper did not draw enough attention, unfortunately. Therefore, these early receptions of Husserl’s phenomenology failed to introduce the core spirit of phenomenology into China.

The following is a summary of the three main texts.

At the beginning of the report, Zhang Junmai juxtaposes Husserl with Natorp and Rickert — two leading philosophers of the Neo-Kantianism in Germany. Zhang introduces Husserl’s phenomenology as follows:

Among the [German] philosophers, some hold that the core of cognition is sensation [*jue* 覺], that is what reached by the five sense organs. Ernst Mach belongs to this camp. On the other hand, some believe that the core of cognition is thinking [*si* 思], that means the concepts [*Der unanschauliche Begriff*] that are transcendental to sensation. The school of Marburg belongs to this camp. These two theories [about cognition] are controversial, and Husserl proposes to reconcile the two. [He proposes that] concepts cannot be independent of sensation, but there is a pure intuition [*cunjue* 純覺] beyond sensation. This is the starting point of Husserl’s theory.¹³

¹² One thing can be certain: A large part of Husserl’s phenomenology concerns the epistemological ground of natural sciences and logic. Husserl phenomenology is established as a study into the transcendental consciousness as the ultimate foundation of all knowledge. This transcendentalism resembles significantly the philosophical concerns of Kant. Even for most German philosophers contemporaneous to Husserl, such as Natorp, phenomenology was juxtaposed with Neo-Kantianism. However, Husserl’s epistemology and philosophy of consciousness is often criticized instead of followed, especially after the transcendental turn. In the later parts of this paper, I will explain the definition of phenomenological movement in a broader sense.

¹³ Zhang, *Essays on Chinese, Western, and Indian Philosophy*, p. 1125. All quotations of Chinese text are my translation.

This summary of Husserl's analysis of intuition is appropriate. According to Husserl, the givenness of essence is attained via two steps of reduction. First, after the phenomenological suspension of the existence of the external world, the objects that were conceived as existing objectively in the world under natural attitude are reduced to the corresponding intentional acts that intend toward the object. For example, a phenomenologically reduced chair is no longer a mere chair existing side-by-side with the table in a classroom; rather, the chair becomes an object of perception which shows forth in a particular side. If we move around the chair, we can see different sides of the chair appearing continuously in adumbration, but the perceptual content at each moment points towards the same chair.¹⁴ At this stage, we conceive the chair as an external object but it is yet not enough to grasp the essence of the chair. The second step of phenomenological reduction is the eidetic reduction which suspends the multiplicity of the experiential content and apperceive what is invariable across the variation of experiential content. After this level of reduction, Husserl proposes that we would have the eidetic intuition that grasp directly on the essence of the chair. In this regard, Zhang was right in catching Husserl's understanding of the relation between concepts and intuition:

The existent that is intuited is called “phenomenon”. Beyond the experiential content in intuition, there is the essence [*Wesen*] that becomes the concept. Therefore concepts are not directly presented to intuition but it cannot be independent of intuition. Beyond sensual intuition, there is an eidetic intuition [*Wesensschau*] which is the source of concepts.¹⁵

Although Zhang here uses a single Chinese word “*jue* 覺” to translate both “sensation” and “intuition”, he clearly understands that eidetic intuition is different from sensation in the context of Husserl's philosophy. However, despite this appropriate summary, Zhang focuses only on a particular finding in Husserl's philosophy but has omitted the foundation of Husserl's phenomenology. In fact, Husserl's phenomenology did not aim to “reconcile” empiricism and idealism, nor other established positions in philosophy; rather, the true “starting point” of phenomenology is not any theory of intuition and cognition but the suspension of all existing theories and philosophies. This attitude of suspension is usually summarized as the slogan of phenomenology — “back to things themselves”. It is

¹⁴ See the discussion of adumbration at Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (First Book)*. Trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), pp. 88-89.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

due to this uprooting of traditional doctrines that Husserl could attain new understandings that were not enclosed in past theories.

A similar hermeneutical prejudice can also be found in Zhang Dongsun's conception of phenomenology. In his essay "An Embryonic Form of Philosophy", Zhang Dongsun attempts to develop a new epistemological theory. He quotes Husserl's phenomenology as a reference:

Phenomenology (this is founded by the great German philosopher Edmund Husserl) is indeed a study of "object" — "object-in-consciousness". There is a method to discover the object within cognition. Therefore, [cognition] can be divided into three [moments]: the subjective, the objective, and the essential within cognition. Husserl believes that essence can be obtained by intuition, this is why it is called "*Wesenerschauung*".¹⁶

Zhang Dongsun's understanding echoes Zhang Junmai at two points. First, he assumes that Husserl's phenomenology is a theory of cognition which discusses how essence can be obtained. Second, he highlights that eidetic intuition is the most representative theoretical finding of Husserl. Although Zhang Dongsun does not compare Husserl with Neo-Kantianism, he juxtaposes it with a new form of realism in America at that time. He says,

The so-called "critical realism" that is newly established in America also adopts this three-fold division. My personal opinion is that this three-fold division is correct. We can have a subjective cognition of the external objective world, but we cannot equate the external objectivity with the cognitive content. This is because external objectivity is a unique kind of being, while cognitive content belongs entirely to another kind of being.¹⁷

Although Zhang Dongsun agrees with this three-fold distinction, he admits that the meaning of the essence is questionable:

After adopting this three-fold division, it demands more investigation into what this third term is. Husserl calls it "*Wesen*". Santayana calls it "essence". Indeed, it is Plato's "idea". I have pondered it for a long time but still, am thinking that this concept is indecipherable. They also call it "universal", "form", but I still think that this kind of investigation will get into an enigma.¹⁸

¹⁶ Zhang, *Rationality and Liangzhi*, p. 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

This quotation shows that Zhang Dongsun in fact equates Husserl's phenomenology with idealistic realism. Thus, the question that concerns him is what essence or ideas mean. This indicates that Zhang Dongsun has not truly acquired the meaning of phenomenological reduction, which, according to Husserl, requires suspension of the ontological status of essence. More precisely, essence is first of all not a subjective or objective being; rather, it is what we discover intuitively in eidetic intuition.

The above analysis shows that both Zhang Junmai and Zhang Dongsun interpret Husserl's phenomenology as an epistemology explaining the process of obtaining knowledge about essence. This is certainly an important aspect of Husserl's phenomenology. However, both of them, more or less, regard Husserl's phenomenology as a theory within the Kantian tradition. Although they have recognized some difference between Husserl and Kant, phenomenology is deemed as a mere theory of cognition that pertains to reconcile different branches in Kantianism, for example, Natorp and Rickert.

Different from Zhang Junmai and Zhang Dongsun, Yang Renbian is the only one (among the three) who realizes that Husserl's attempt was to build up a new first philosophy. Yang writes, "phenomenology is the foundation and center of philosophy. Psychology is certainly subjected to it. Even aesthetics, economics, legal theory, politics, ethics, religious study, mathematics, and pedagogy are subjected to phenomenology."¹⁹ This summary shows that Yang has acquainted Husserl's fundamental philosophical concern — to lay a foundation for all disciplines of science and knowledge.

Moreover, Yang correctly points out the deeper discrepancy between Husserl and Kant. He writes at the beginning of the essay that Husserl distinguishes two types of philosophy: philosophy-from-above [*Philosophie von Oben*] and philosophy-ascending-from-below [*Philosophie von Unten*].²⁰ This distinction comes from Husserl critique of Kant in a lecture: "it [Kant's philosophy] is a *constructive* thought procedure, followed afterward by intuition, and not a procedure that, ascending from below, advancing intuitively from authentication to authentication, makes intelligible the constitutive accomplishments of consciousness."²¹ This quotation shows that Yang is aware of Husserl's critique of Kant. Furthermore, Yang proposes that, while Kant belongs to the "philosophy-

¹⁹ Yang, "A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology," p. 2.

²⁰ Yang, "A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology," p. 1. According to the original text of Husserl, "*Philosophie von Unten*" should be "*Philosophie von Unten*". See Edmund Husserl, *Ernst Philosophie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), p. 197.

²¹ Edmund Husserl, *First Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019), p. 203.

from-above”, Husserl tries to reconcile the “philosophy-from-above” and the “philosophy-ascending-from-below”.²² Based on this observation, Yang correctly claims that Husserl’s phenomenology is not only a transcendental epistemology in the Kantian sense but it is also rooted in the direct experience in daily life.²³ He therefore divides phenomenology into two parts: transcendental psychology and transcendental epistemology. The former studies the transcendental conditions of consciousness and pure consciousness. The latter studies the foundation of knowledge.²⁴

In the rest of his essay, Yang further introduces other core concepts in phenomenology including phenomenological epoche, intuition, pure consciousness, noesis-noema, hyletic data, retention, protention, and essence. The explanation of these terms are generally accurate. Zhang Xianglong even claims that this is the best introduction of Husserl before the systematic acquaintance of phenomenology in the 1980s of China. However, given this authentic understanding of Husserl, Yang’s paper did not draw enough attention to Husserl phenomenology. A probable reason is that Yang was a historian instead of a philosopher by discipline. Hence his understanding of Husserl might not draw enough attention at that time. Nevertheless, I propose that even Yang has correctly pointed out the discrepancy between Husserl and Kant, he is still presenting Husserl’s phenomenology as reconciling (and hence a continuation of) Kant’s philosophy and the “philosophy-ascending-from-below”. He has not put forward Husserl’s ambition to establish a new beginning of philosophy, let alone advocating this spirit amid Chinese intellectuals.

Before entering into the analysis of Husserl’s idea of renewal, it is sufficient to see that the earlier receptions of Husserl in China incline to interpret Husserl’s phenomenology as a continuation of the Kantian tradition; what they observe from Husserl’s phenomenology is only that he contributed a different epistemological theory in explaining the acquaintance of essence and he put forward the role of intentional experience in epistemology. They have not advocated the core spirit of phenomenology as “returning to things themselves” without any presuppositions and prejudices handed down from the tradition.

Whether or not Husserl’s phenomenology can totally be freed from the influence of Kant and other traditional doctrines maybe a debatable question, but this concern is out of the scope of this paper. What is remarkable in the present context is, by associating Husserl with Kant, those earlier Chinese interpreters of Husserl missed the chance to elaborate the genuine sense of phenomenology as an

²² Yang, “A Brief Introduction to Phenomenology,” p. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6.

attitude of suspending the tradition and initializing a new starting point of philosophizing.

Such a shortcoming might not be accidentally caused by the ignorance of Husserl's discussion of cultural renewal. Although Husserl only discussed his concept of cultural renewal in the *Kaizo* articles which might be inaccessible to those Chinese scholars, the idea of epoche, "back to things themselves", and self-responsibility of philosophizing can easily be found associated with the idea of phenomenological reduction discussed in Husserl published works such as the *Ideas I*. Husserl's idea of cultural renewal can be known as a consequence of the epoche of one's own tradition. Moreover, Yang's application of the concept of "philosophy-from-above" indicates that Husserl's lecture of *First Philosophy* was an important source from which Yang acquired Husserl's phenomenology. (As far as I know this is the only place where Husserl describes Kant's philosophy with this term.) At the same lecture, Husserl explicitly defines first philosophy as

a reform of philosophy as a whole and, included therein, with a universal reform of all sciences whatsoever. And wherever one is concerned with radical and universal reform, no matter in which domain of culture, the motivation is a deeply stirring spiritual need. The general spiritual situation fills our soul with such deep dissatisfaction that to continue to live in its current forms and norms is no longer possible.²⁵

Therefore, Yang should at least know that phenomenology is not a mere theory of consciousness or epistemology. Hence, I propose that the absence of phenomenology in the early 20th-century China should have a deeper reason in the social-historical context. More precisely, the reception of Western philosophy in the early 20th-century China was mainly contextualized by a "cultural particularism" which limits the possibility of cultural renewal. This is also a reason why phenomenology was not developed in China as it was in Europe.

I define "cultural particularism" exclusively as the thought composed of these two main characteristics: First, it assumes that a particular philosophical thought belongs exclusively to the organic whole of the culture. In order to adopt some philosophical thoughts, one has to adopt the whole culture to which the thoughts belong; on the other hand, if some thought has to be abandoned, the whole culture should also be abandoned. Second, there are essential boundaries between different cultures. Chinese and Western culture are essentially unreconcilable.

²⁵ Husserl, *First Philosophy*, p. 7.

The first doctrine of particularism manifests in the so-called “totalistic antitraditionalism” in the May Fourth era. Lin Yu-Sheng 林毓生 observes that the “totalistic antitraditionalism” in the May Fourth Movement was originated from the cultural-intellectualistic approach in the thinking of modernization in the late 19th century.²⁶ The cultural-intellectualistic approach, according to Lin, “stressed the necessary priority of intellectual and cultural change over political, social, and economic changes ... It implied a fundamental belief that cultural change was the foundation for all other necessary changes.”²⁷ According to Lin, the first generation of Chinese thinkers who advocated for modernity, including Yan Fu 嚴復, Kang Youwei 康有為, Liang Qichao 梁啟超, were deeply influenced by the traditional Confucianism which emphasizes the priority of the mind (*xin* 心) in the governance of individual behavior as well as the external order of the world. Consequently, “the Chinese intelligentsia was primarily molded by a deep-seated Chinese cultural predisposition as embodied in a monistic and intellectualistic mode of postclassical Confucian thinking.”²⁸ Ironically, according to Lin, “the cultural-intellectualistic approach did, indeed, evolve into a holistic mode of thinking and thereby became a weapon for iconoclastic totalism: the Chinese tradition was attacked as an organismic whole whose nature was infected by the disease of the traditional Chinese mind.”²⁹ Based on this holistic view of culture, the primary concern of the May Fourth intellectuals was to acquire the philosophy and thinking that led to the “success” of the Western culture. In this context, what they understood about modern Western philosophy is not the enlightenment spirit of radical renewal and self-reflection but the particular doctrines and theories such as Kantianism, Darwinism, Marxism, utilitarianism, idealism, etc. which are present-at-hand to be imported to China.

In fact, this holistic view of culture is not only possessed by the anti-traditionalists. Intellectuals who advocated the traditional values also believed that a philosophy should belong exclusively to the particular culture and society. For example, Zhang Junmai expresses his idea of the “new philosophy” as follows, “what I mean by the creation of a new philosophy is the new philosophy of the Chinese nation in the modern time. It should bear the contribution of the Chinese

²⁶ Yu-Sheng Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 26.

²⁷ Yu-Sheng Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. 26.

²⁸ Yu-Sheng Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. 49.

²⁹ Yu-Sheng Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p. 29.

characteristic.”³⁰ Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (another Neo-Confucianist thinker) has compared the difference between Chinese, Indian, and Western culture in his famous work *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy*.³¹ In this work, Liang thinks that Chinese, Indian, and Western philosophy have different fundamental characteristics; the Western is proactive, the Chinese is moderate, and the Indian is reclusive. This kind of categorization of Chinese and Western philosophy is not a single case; it is a general phenomenon among the May Fourth intellectuals. This categorization of culture has embedded a cultural essentialism, which assumes that the essence of a culture is not alterable. Moreover, the cultural essence would manifest in all aspects of the culture. Therefore, for the conservative intellectuals who wished to preserve the characteristics of Chinese culture, any Western thought can be adopted only if it is “suitable” to China. For the anti-traditionalists, the adoption of Western democracy and science requires radical Westernization and the abandonment of the traditional Chinese culture.

These two trends of thought led to the second sense of cultural particularism: the belief that there are essential boundaries between different cultures. For example, Liang Shuming criticizes the intellectuals who wanted to implement the Western political and social system to China. He writes,

these Western ‘things’ do not come out of nothing; they have their origin. Their origin is the fundamental culture of the West. Only based on the fundamentals of Western culture can canons, steel shelters, sound, light, chemicals, and electricity be produced. These things are incommensurable with Eastern cultures.³²

This quotation demonstrates the underlying particularism in the debate of modernity in the May Fourth era. For the conservatives, Western philosophy should not be adopted uncritically because Western philosophy was grown up in a different soil. For the anti-traditionalists, Chinese culture has to be abandoned because it is not commensurable with the achievements of Western modernity. Under this tension, there is no room for a philosophy to be regarded as culturally neutral (if not universal).

³⁰ Junmai Zhang, *The Academic Foundation for the National Revival of China* (Beijing: Renmin University Press), p. 62. [張君勱：《民族復興之學術基礎》，北京：人民大學出版社，2006年，頁62。]

³¹ Shuming Liang, *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1999). [梁漱溟：《東西文化及其哲學》，商務印書館，1999年。]

³² Liang, *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophy*, p. 13.

Against this background, when phenomenology was introduced to China, it is natural that phenomenology was automatically categorized as an element of Western philosophy and was evaluated through comparisons with other philosophies in the Western tradition.

2. The universalism in Husserl's idea of renewal

Why is this cultural particularism or cultural essentialism a hindrance to the genuine reception of phenomenology? In this section, I would defend the thesis that phenomenology is not only a particular analysis of consciousness or a theory of cognition; as a method, phenomenology is also the exercise of “back to things themselves” — to suspend the prejudices handed down from one's own tradition and embrace the self-responsibility in philosophizing on one's own. *Without this self-responsibility of philosophizing, phenomenology could not be spreaded and accepted as it was in the 20th-century continental philosophy.* This self-responsibility, according to Husserl, is also a necessary condition for the renewal of culture.

In a broader context, one should even accept that this self-responsibility is a most determining factor for the renewal of Western philosophy since the enlightenment, a most remarkable case of renewal in the history of human civilization. Kant has defined the motto of enlightenment as: “Dare to Know! Have the courage to use your own understanding.”³³ This spirit can be chased back to Descartes's practice of the systematic doubt to deduce the ‘I think’ as the absolute certainty of knowledge.

Husserl obviously picks up this line of thought in his phenomenological project. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl explicitly takes up the “impulse” of Descartes work:

not to adopt their content but, in not doing so, to renew with greater intensity the radicalness of their spirit, the radicalness of self-responsibility, to make that radicalness true for the first time by enhancing it to, the last degree, to uncover thereby for the first time the genuine sense of the necessary regress to the ego.³⁴

³³ Samuel Fleischacker, *What is Enlightenment?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 13.

³⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*. Trans. Dorian Cairns. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), p. 6.

This radicalness of self-responsibility is summarized as the slogan of “back to things themselves”.³⁵ This also means the principle of “freedom from presupposition”.³⁶ Under this principle, all unreflected presuppositions, such as the belief that there is an objective external world governed by natural laws and causality, has to be suspended. This does not mean to nihilate the world and all objectivities but to reconstruct objectivity through analyses of how things are primordially given to consciousness from the first-person perspective. The conscious experience as it is lived from the first-person perspective is, therefore, the ground and starting point of phenomenological investigation.

This idea is also applied in Husserl's discussion of the renewal of culture in the articles published at *Kaizo* in Japan during 1922-1924. These articles contemplate the meaning of renewal in the context of the crisis of European culture. In the articles, Husserl highlighted two conditions for the renewal of culture. First, it is required that we live in the same life-world. He says, “something new has to be done; it must be done in us and by ourselves, through us as members of the living beings in this world, shaping it through us and through us Mankind.”³⁷ This means the contemplation of renewal should not be done by any particular culture or nation but by all human, as members of the humankind, who live in the same life-world. Second, this does not mean that the renewal belongs to the collective development of humankind or the natural development of history; rather, human here means the “free-willing subjects, [who] in their environment actively intervene, constantly shaping it [the world].”³⁸ Here one can see that Husserl's idea of the renewal of culture is universal in the first place.³⁹ Although Husserl's philosophy of culture is usually deemed as Eurocentric in many ways, he made it clear in the *Kaizo* articles that renewal has to be done by the subjects who are free from the boundary of culture and have the free will to decide the future. In this process, a culture is not regarded as an organic whole; rather, the renewal of a culture should start with the individuals who can think freely. Zachary Davis correctly summarizes the concise sense of Husserl's idea of renewal, “[c]ultural transformation takes place only through the actions of a single member of the

³⁵ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. Davide Carr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 168.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937)*. Ed. Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp (Dordrecht: Springer, 1988), p. 5. This is my translation from the German text.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ It does not mean that Husserl is a universalist all the way. I will explain how phenomenology understands a tradition shortly.

community, for in these acts the sense of the community is immediately operative.”⁴⁰

In view of this, the renewal of culture is not based on the model of culture which depicts culture as a totality of beliefs, practices, worldviews, theories, and philosophies as an organic whole with the determinative essence and characteristics. On the contrary, a culture has to be a genetic process which develops itself through the free individuals and their radical critique of the tradition. Antony Steinbock correctly observes that this “genetic” view of culture is contextualized by Husserl’s investigation in genetic phenomenology around the publication years of the *Kaizo* articles.⁴¹ Steinbock proposes that one of the central concepts in the *Kaizo* articles is “genesis”, but it is used in a special sense; “Husserl speaks of ‘genesis’ in the *Kaizo* articles, he uses the unrefined term to cover both individual temporalization and the process of socio-historical movement.”⁴² In other words, the renewal of culture is founded upon the double process of development of the individual and the socio-historical community. Culture is first of all understood as a process accompanying the genesis of individual life. Therefore, Steinbock adds,

culture is not merely a unity of pre-given norms, already established in advance, whether they be intellectual, artistic, political, or religious norms. Culture is most fundamentally for Husserl an ethical domain; it is a “normal” culture (normal in the full sense of the word), brought about through human accomplishments.⁴³

If the above claim is a promising summary of Husserl’s phenomenology of culture, phenomenology is applicable to the renewal of culture exactly because the self-responsibility in philosophizing can be the new moments for the normalization of culture. In this process, one has the freedom to suspend the traditional norm, goes back to things themselves, and set the new norm for the development of culture. This is why, according to Husserl, the renewal of culture is subjected to the idea of “the best possible”. It is the *telos* that guides the development and pursuit of culture.

Although Husserl’s idea of cultural renewal was development explicitly only in the 1920s, this idea is consistent with the spirit of phenomenological movement.

⁴⁰ Zachary Davis, “Husserl on the Ethical Renewal of Sympathy and the One World of Solidarity”. *The Southern journal of philosophy* 43, no. 4(2005): 561-581, 563.

⁴¹ Antony Steinbock, “The Project of Ethical Renewal and Critique: Edmund Husserl’s Early Phenomenology of Culture”. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXXII, (1994): 449-464.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 452.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

If we consider the publication of the *Yearbook for Philosophy and Phenomenological Investigation* since 1913 as the starting point of the phenomenological movement, one can see that this “movement” was not defined by any particular theories, doctrines, or beliefs. The statement of the *Yearbook* writes,

It is not a system that the editor share. What unites them is the common conviction that it is only by a return to the primary sources of direct intuition and to insights into essential structures derived from them that we shall be able to put to use the great traditions of philosophy with their concepts and problems; only thus shall we be in a position to clarify such concepts intuitively, to restate the problems on an intuitive basis, and thus, eventually, to solve them, at least in principle.⁴⁴

In other words, the shared conviction of the phenomenologists was not Husserl's transcendental philosophy of consciousness; rather, it is the conviction that only by applying one's own intuition, the concepts and problems in the tradition of philosophy can be restated, re-studied, and resolved. In this sense, phenomenology does not abandon any particular tradition; on the contrary, it believes that the tradition can only be renewed and re-understood by free application of intuition.

Although it is undeniable that even this loose definition of the phenomenological movement is also based on Husserl's research on intuition and consciousness, Husserl's “theory” of intuition and consciousness is not that which really passes down the movement. Quite the contrary, most philosophers who we nowadays recognize as a member of the movement are not satisfied with Husserl's philosophy. Most of them established their own philosophy by refuting Husserl. Take Heidegger — one of the most influential philosophers in the phenomenological movement, as an example. Heidegger's philosophy is not developed based on any particular theory of consciousness or epistemology in Husserl's philosophy; on the contrary, it is based upon a radical criticism of Husserl's idea of consciousness. In the *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger proposes that Husserl's phenomenology is not phenomenological enough because the priority of consciousness in Husserl's phenomenology is an unjustified presupposition. Heidegger says,

⁴⁴ Quoted and translated by Spiegelberg, in Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: a Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), p. 5.

This idea, that consciousness is to be the region of an absolute science, is not simply invented; it is the idea which has occupied modern philosophy ever since Descartes. The elaboration of pure consciousness as the thematic field of phenomenology is not derived phenomenologically by going back to the matters themselves but by going back to a traditional idea of philosophy.⁴⁵

Consequently, Heidegger proposes a new definition of phenomenology in *Being and Time* as: “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.”⁴⁶ This definition of phenomenology has eliminated the centrality of consciousness; the “showing itself” does not presuppose a (transcendental) consciousness which objectifies the shown and the given as a phenomenon. As we would learn from the rest of *Being and Time*, this “showing itself” or unconcealment, according to Heidegger, is the existence of Dasein.

A glimpse of the influence of the phenomenological movement is enough to observe that the effect of Husserl’s phenomenology in continental philosophy was not brought by its particular findings and theories in consciousness; rather, phenomenology became the source of thought for many philosophers in the process of “back to things themselves”. In this process, the most oftenly applied reason to refute Husserl was that Husserl is not radical enough in suspending doctrines handed down from the Western tradition of transcendental philosophy. For instances, Husserl was criticized to be following traditional ideas such as “transcendental ego”, “pure ego”, etc. Consequently, phenomenologists developed their own philosophies by returning to different “things themselves” which they think are more primordial, fundamental, or authentic. Heidegger, for example, proposes the priority of Being. Sartre criticizes the idea of the ego and studies the existence without any presupposition of it. Merleau-Ponty was not satisfied with the transcendental realm and he calls for attention to the body. Levinas criticizes the priority of the self-same subjectivity and advocates the welcoming of the Other. Derrida deconstructs the metaphysics of presence and unveils the priority of *différance* in the creation of meaning.

These examples could not be fully illustrated within the scope of this paper but they are sufficient to demonstrate that philosophers developed new ideas and philosophies based on attacking the unreflected presuppositions in Husserl’s phenomenology and tried to bring phenomenology to a new beginning and

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: A Prolegomena*. Trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 107.

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. Jacque Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 58.

foundation. Although these thinkers may, *de facto*, adopt some findings in Husserl's phenomenology, they position themselves as a free thinker who is capable to reflect on and improve Husserl's phenomenology. Therefore, these thinkers, despite their criticism of Husserl, have exemplified Husserl's idea of renewal, even without an explicit reference to Husserl's idea of cultural renewal published in the *Kaizo* articles. In other words, what phenomenology indeed invoked in the movement was the spirit of back to things themselves and taking up the self-responsibility of philosophizing.

In short, phenomenology became influential in Europe not because it represented a certain worldview, belief, or value, that is essential to the Western culture. Any of such traditional worldview, belief, or value is subjected to be bracketed and re-evaluated in phenomenology. Certainly, Husserl and other phenomenologists have constructed some theories and some philosophies based on their own investigations. However, these findings were not essential to phenomenology. Quite the contrary, the critiques of Husserl since Heidegger have shown that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology of consciousness was indeed not very convincing for most philosophers. They followed Husserl's path only in the sense that phenomenology can free oneself from the tradition in order to renew the culture, the thoughts, and the philosophical traditions in the most radical sense. This will of overcoming the hindrance of cultural tradition is what I would call an underlying "genetic universalism" in Husserl's idea of renewal.⁴⁷

3. The problem of particularism in intercultural philosophy

The above analysis shows that the absence of phenomenology in the early 20th century China might have a philosophical reason. A probable underlying philosophical reason is that the idea of renewal underlying the mainstream of May Fourth Movement was essentially incompatible with the spirit of phenomenology. More precisely, while the Chinese intellectuals bothered to choose between Chinese and Western culture as two organic totalities of worldview, beliefs, values, and social systems, phenomenology rejects the viewpoint that culture is something present-at-hand. Husserl holds that culture should be a genetic process in which all individual thinkers have the self-responsibility to philosophize on their own at a culturally neutral position. In other words, the absence of phenomenology in the early 20th-century Chinese philosophy is not a case of divergence between two particular cultures but an example of the conflict between particularism and universalism.

⁴⁷ The term is to be explained in the coming section.

Contemporary intercultural philosophy usually condemns universalism in modern Western philosophy as a form of Eurocentrism that undermines the diversity of thoughts and worldviews. Bryan van Norden, for example, criticizes the dominance of Western philosophy in contemporary academia and he advocates more attention to the so-called “less commonly taught philosophy (LCTP)”.⁴⁸ Certainly, it is a fault to regard Western philosophy as the only possible and legitimate way of thinking or to examine the non-Western philosophies based on the standard of Western philosophy. Eurocentrism in this sense is certainly not desirable. However, universalism does not necessary entail this kind of Eurocentrism insofar as it is carefully defined and practiced. The universalism of phenomenology, I propose, is not necessarily Eurocentric.

No doubt, there is evidence in Husserl’s work that indicates his Eurocentric thoughts. For example, in the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl says that scientific thinking belongs exclusively to Greek and European culture; “it is a mistake, a falsification of their sense, for those raised in the scientific ways of thinking created in Greece and developed in the modern period to speak of Indian and Chinese philosophy and science (astronomy, mathematics), i.e., to interpret India, Babylonia, China, in a European way.”⁴⁹ This critique of non-Western culture is not limited to science because Husserl claims in the *Kaizo* articles that this scientific and theoretic way of thinking is also essential to cultural renewal. Consequently, it would give an impression that Husserl advocated all cultures should learn and follow Europe in order to renew themselves.

I propose, however, that Eurocentrism is not an entrenched idea of phenomenology. Kwok-Ying Lau has suggested that “Husserl’s determination of the Idea of philosophy in terms of ‘pure *thêoria*’ not only denies the factual existence of Indian and Chinese philosophies but also excludes other modes of philosophy within Europe.”⁵⁰ Lau, however, proposes that Husserl’s phenomenology can still be meaningful in many other ways, such as the discovery of the pre-theoretical life-world, getting rid of unreflected presupposition, and avoiding any top-down theory. These insights can be independent of the Eurocentric claim and fruitful for intercultural understanding.⁵¹

In fact, Husserl himself was not unaware of the problem of Eurocentrism in his idea of renewal. As he has written in the *Kaizo* articles, “Finally, then, the question is whether every completed cultural humanity, if it has assumed the form

⁴⁸ Bryan van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 2.

⁴⁹ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*, pp. 284-285.

⁵⁰ Kwok-Ying Lau, *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding* (Springer, 2016), p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

of a 'trans-nation' [*Übernation*] over all individual nations, possibly of a trans-state over all individual states, turns out to be closed up, even externally, whether it is not ethically required, or ethical to grow a community over the whole world."⁵² Although Husserl seems to accept that the trans-nation is inevitable, Steinbock has offered a defense which I think is convincing:

If we take Husserl's insights into the genesis and generation of the optimal seriously, then the ethical best possible need not merely refer back to a primordial institution; ethical critique and renewal would not have to be oriented on "the one world." In addition to referring back, the institution of norms, and thus the development of a culture, can also go beyond the previous best possible, despite its teleology, precisely as the best possible; it can institute new normalities and new optima.⁵³

In other words, as long as we accept that each individual has the free will to reflect on the culture, the "best possible" can ever be re-examined and reformed. Hence, the universalism in Husserl's philosophy of culture should not be understood as essentialism — the universal as something predetermined by the essence of certain culture or way of thinking; rather, the universal is a possibility. More precisely, in the contemplation of renewal, one has to think as a member of humankind, think beyond the boundary of culture and aim at a possible universal form of culture. This aim is not dogmatic; rather, whether this best possible world can indeed be universalized depends on the communication and the reception of this idea by other thinkers, who has the same free will and self-responsibility in thinking.

According to Husserl, therefore, cultural renewal requires a culturally neutral position. Phenomenology's universalism is not dogmatically claiming certain ideas, beliefs, values, or cultural systems as universal, but it means only the cultural neutrality as a point of cultural reflection and renewal. In order to differentiate phenomenology's universalism from other kinds of universalism which advocate a shared and universal idea, I would like to call phenomenology's universalism a "genetic universalism" which is defined as the conviction that any individual member of any culture is capable to reflect and renew one's own by positioning oneself as a culturally neutral member of the humankind. Although one may not be completely freed from any influence of the cultural tradition, the possibility of renewal implies that at least some aspects of the culture is capable to be reflected

⁵² Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937)*, p. 58.

⁵³ Steinbock, "The Project of Ethical Renewal and Critique: Edmund Husserl's Early Phenomenology of Culture," p. 461.

and revised. “Genetic universalism” stands for the attitude to distance away from one’s own tradition when carrying out reflection. Under this attitude, thinkers can communicate with and understand other thinkers and other cultures on a relatively culture-neutral platform. In this process, a cultural tradition can be renewed to meet the challenge and inspiration of cultural differences. Thus, genetic universalism is not the enemy of any particular culture because any culture is capable to be renewed and preserved in the meeting with another. The renewed culture is still a particular culture generated from the “retention” and renewal of its own past.

Compared with “genetic universalism”, I would like to call the universalism that hinder intercultural understanding the “dogmatic universalism”. Dogmatic universalism claims that certain ideas, beliefs, values, or cultural systems are universal in the sense that they are applicable to any culture immediately without any reflection on the particularity of the culture. This kind of dogmatic universalism is an obstacle to intercultural understanding because cultural diversity is overlooked in the first place. The shortcomings of dogmatic universalism are fully exposed in numerous researches on intercultural communications in the last few decades.⁵⁴ However, unquestioned cultural particularism can also be harmful. The common point between dogmatic universalism and cultural particularism is they do not seek for cultural renewal through radical reflections of one’s own culture but to adopte some thoughts, values, systems present-at-hand, be them universal or particular to a culture. Cultural particularism is therefore equally harmful to intercultural dialogue, and even to the preservation of one’s own culture.⁵⁵

First of all, the above analysis has already shown that cultural particularism in China had limited the reception of phenomenology in China. Based on the assumption that culture is an organic whole, phenomenology was regarded as a part of the Kantian tradition. Consequently, the thinkers succeeded in analyzing Husserl’s epistemology and philosophy of consciousness but they did not arise the conviction to reflect and renew Chinese tradition with the phenomenological method, as if they can be a phenomenologist themselves. In other words, even some Chinese intellectuals had acquainted the discoveries of phenomenology, they did not practice it as a method.

Therefore, unlike the continental philosophers who discover new philosophical issues by returning “back to things themselves”, the Chinese intellectuals limit themselves by comparing Husserl’s work with realism,

⁵⁴ See Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel. *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*. (Albany: SUNY, 2017).

⁵⁵ Since universalism has been significantly criticized and universalism was not a dominating thought in the May Fourth Movement, I will focus only on cultural particularism.

Kantianism, or other thoughts instead of initiating a new philosophical project. Zhang Dongsun's embryo form of philosophy may be a good trial but this embryo form was still an immature form of epistemology which did not highlight the self-responsibility of philosophizing as Husserl did. Consequently, although Husserl's phenomenology meets certain philosophical interests of the Chinese intellectuals concerning the problem of mind, consciousness and epistemology, they would rather choose to follow Kant, as an ancestor of the epistemological tradition, instead of Husserl for acquiring the "totality" of the epistemological tradition in Western philosophy. This can show that, with the inference of cultural particularism, the main philosophical practice was to understand and analyze a philosophical tradition present-at-hand, instead of a radical suspension, reflection, and renewal of any tradition. In practice, cultural particularism is incoherent with phenomenological method which begins with epoche.

Cultural particularism was perhaps inevitable in the early Republican China because the hidden agenda of culture renewal in the May Fourth Movement was to save China from the invasion of the West. This hidden agenda *de dicto* was historical instead of universal. This hidden agenda was not in favor of philosophizing as a member of the humankind, or from the culturally neutral position.⁵⁶ On the contrary, they philosophize as a Chinese intellectual who wants to maintain the particularity of China. In this sense, Deng Xiaomang 鄧曉芒 is correct in his *Manifesto of the New Critique*: "About the May Fourth Movement, if I have to tell the fundamental shortcoming; it was not that it radically breached with the tradition. On the contrary, it was that it, on the deepest level, could not eliminate the trace of the tradition."⁵⁷ This tradition Deng meant was the Confucian tradition that intellectuals are first of all responsible for the stability and strength of the country. Even for those who urged for total Westernization, the hidden agenda was to make China "strong again". Against this background, although phenomenology contributed some insights to questions concerning those Chinese thinkers, it might not be a good candidate of fulfilling the pragmatical needs of the mainstream Chinese intellectuals.

⁵⁶ I should emphasize that not all intellectuals shared this agenda. For example, there were a few cosmopolitans and universalists in the May Fourth Movement. Nevertheless, these voices did not constitute a sufficient soil for the reception of phenomenology. Most cosmopolitans and universalists take a particular ideology, such as Marxism or liberalism as universal. Therefore, they fall into the category of "dogmatic universalism". As a result, most universalists would refute the traditional culture as a whole. In this sense, they are not much different from the cultural particularists who assume that a culture is a totality present at hand. They fail to see that culture is a genetic process capable of renewal.

⁵⁷ Xiaomang Deng, *Critiques and Enlightenment* (Wuhan: Chongwen Shuju, 2019), p. 177. [鄧曉芒：《批判與啟蒙》，崇文書局，2019年，頁177。]

Second, I would further suggest that cultural particularism is not only an obstacle to culture renewal but also to the preservation of the tradition. This ironic phenomenon can be viewed by comparing how tradition was treated in Western enlightenment and Chinese May Fourth Movement. Donald Rutherford proposes that

[w]hile some of its [enlightenment] best known figures describe their projects in revolutionary terms, recent scholarship has documented the extent to which even these philosophers remain tied to the ideas and arguments of their precursors. Philosophical theories are rarely, if ever, entirely new creations.⁵⁸

This phenomenon should not be evaluated negatively as the enlightenment thinkers failed to make a radical breakthrough from the tradition. Instead, Husserl's phenomenology of renewal explains why the preservation of tradition is possible in the genuine sense of renewal. More precisely, if cultural development is a genetic process, any cultural heritage, including the philosophies and thoughts, cannot be entities present-at-hand but they belong to the generative process of the culture. It is through the present reflection and renewal that the meaning of the tradition can be acquired, re-activated, and sustained. For example, when Husserl picks up Descartes's idea of the ego as a tradition, he does not take it as the heritage and doctrine but he aims to verify this again by a radical reflection. In this process, the tradition is preserved as something still meaningful and reasonable at the present. In this sense, the tradition is meaningful not because it is a part of the historical past of the culture but because it is meaningful for the present reflection by the contemporary thinkers.

On the other hand, when the May Fourth intellectuals regard culture as an organic whole without the awareness of the self-responsibility in philosophizing, the old culture could not be renewed by the re-interpretation in the contemporary time. If something new has to occur, the only possible way is to adopt something totally alien from the old culture. There was no place for the negotiation between cultures on an open platform. Therefore, Chow Tse-Tsung 周策縱 clearly summarizes the essential difference between the May Fourth Movement and the European Renaissance:

The Renaissance in Europe was in a sense the rebirth of interest in an ancient civilization, a seeking to substitute Greek and Roman ideas for those of

⁵⁸ Donald Rutherford, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 15.

medievalism. The study of these ancient civilizations was an aspect of the revolutionary side of the Renaissance as a whole. But the May Fourth Movement was far from being a restoration movement. On the contrary, it aimed at the transplantation of a modern civilization into an old nation, accompanied by bitter criticism of the old civilization.⁵⁹

This comparison indicates the ironic situation of cultural renewal: While the Western thinkers aim at breaking through the tradition and create something radically new, the tradition is preserved in the new creation; while the Chinese intellectuals endeavored to save the particularity of China, the Chinese tradition was sacrificed to the pursuit of Westernization and strengthening of China.

This difference in the understanding of cultural renewal was an underlying difference between China and the West in the early 20th-century that has often been overlooked. Although Chinese intellectuals at that time indeed acquired a lot from Western philosophy, science, sociology, psychology, engineering, and different disciplines of Western arts, the absence of phenomenology in this movement of reception of Western culture shows that what concerned Chinese intellectuals were the cultural achievement already made (as something present-at-hand that can be imported to China), instead of the spirit of renewal as the self-responsibility to philosophize and create something new for the future. Against this background, China did not possess the condition in favor of the development of phenomenology as it was in Europe. This condition was changed only after the 1980s when a less pragmatic academic environment flourished in China.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to render a philosophical explanation of why phenomenology, as a most influential philosophical movement in 20th continental philosophy, was almost absent in the era of reception of Western philosophy in the May Fourth Movement. I first concluded that the early introductions of phenomenology have interpreted it as a branch in the Kantian tradition or a special theory in epistemology or philosophy of consciousness, but failed to see the spirit of phenomenology as “back to things themselves” without presuppositions and prejudices handed down from the tradition. By analyzing the influence of

⁵⁹ Tse Tsung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, p. 340.

⁶⁰ For more information about the spread of phenomenology in China after the 1980s, please refer to Liangkang Ni and Xianghong Fang, “Phenomenology in China and Chinese Phenomenology,” *Chinese Social Science Evaluations* 4(2016): pp. 26-33. [倪梁康、方向紅：《現象學在中國與中國現象學》，載《中國社會科學評價》，2016年第4期，頁26-33。]

phenomenology in continental philosophy, I showed that phenomenology became influential in Europe because it invoked the self-responsibility of “back to things themselves” and philosophizing at a new beginning. This idea of renewal was not compatible with the hidden agenda of the May Fourth Movement as to acquire the achievements of Western culture in order to strengthen the national power of China. This hidden agenda implied a cultural particularism in the early 20th-century Chinese philosophy, which had hindered the genuine reception of phenomenology. Although the absence of phenomenology, *de facto*, may also be caused by other historical factors, a philosophical analysis at least shows that the mainstream philosophies under the May Fourth Movement did not provide an environment in favor of the spread of phenomenology as it was in Europe. Therefore, the absence of phenomenology in early 20th-century Chinese philosophy exemplified not the conflict between East and West but that between genetic universalism and cultural particularism. The implication of this case of intercultural philosophy is that cultural particularism can also be harmful to intercultural dialogue and even the preservation of one’s own cultural heritage. In effect, it could be as harmful as dogmatic universalism, which has long been criticized as a main obstacle to intercultural understanding. In order to foster genuine intercultural communication, one should not go into either the extreme of dogmatic universalism or cultural particularism. A more favorable attitude should be the “genetic universalism” which advocates the self-responsibility in philosophizing as a member of the humankind, without the limit of one’s own tradition, in the contemplation of cultural renewal.

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