Macau and Hong Kong would each enjoy a unique situation in the contemporary world, both politically and philosophically, if it were not for the other. While Hong Kong’s indigenous population has a longer recorded history than Macau’s, Macau is by far the older of the twin cities, as far as its Western influence is concerned. The Portuguese successfully settled Macau in 1557, making it the West’s first great “Gateway to China” (and vice versa), but failed in their attempts to establish a similar outpost in Hong Kong, less than 60 kilometers from Macau on the other side of the Pearl River Delta. Indeed, it was not until the British took control in 1841 that Hong Kong began the transformation into its current position as “Asia’s World City”. While the populations of both cities increased rapidly during the decades following World War II, when they served as havens for refugees from Mainland China during its decades of being closed to Western influence, Hong Kong’s greater economic success in recent years has been due largely to its geographical size. Hong Kong has more than 37 times the landmass of Macau (the latter’s size, though growing daily by the addition of reclaimed land, is still less than 30 km²); so even though Hong Kong’s population is 13 times that of its older sibling, Macau (not Hong Kong) is the world’s most densely populated region, boasting almost three times the overall population density of Hong Kong.

As China’s government became more open to interaction with the West, especially during the 1980s, the colonial governments in both Britain and Portugal agreed to return their colonies to Chinese control. The younger sibling led the way, with the official handovers taking place in 1997 and 1999, respectively. In both places a “Basic Law” was set up as a new constitution, redefining the former colonies as Special Administrative Regions of China but guaranteeing autonomy from the Mainland for a period of 50 years. This historical context must be understood in order to grasp the current situation (and the future prospects) of the general state of academia in Macau and Hong Kong, as well as the specific situation faced by philosophers working in the region. The autonomy guaranteed by the Basic Law in both places allows the previous, Western-style economic systems to continue under local governance, while providing protection and general oversight from the Central Government in Beijing.

How do you analyze the present state of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau?
At present, as throughout the twentieth century, Hong Kong has enjoyed by far the more prominent position on the world stage, both economically and academically. This is due largely to the different ways the British and the Portuguese treated their most remote colonies of the Far East. Without delving into the details of that history, let it suffice to say that, having a much larger population to deal with, the British worked harder than the Portuguese did to educate the local Chinese population. As a result, Hong Kong had eight government funded tertiary institutions by 1997 (including three universities listed in the top 40 of the QS World University Rankings for 2011; University of Hong Kong, founded in 1911, was rated an impressive 19th), whereas Macau had only one by 1999: Macau University, founded in 1981, is not listed in the 2011 QS rankings.

Assessing the current state of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau is not an easy task. Among the three universities with a Department of Philosophy, only one is included in the 2011 QS World University rankings for philosophy: the Chinese University of Hong Kong’s Philosophy Department is ranked 49th in the world, just behind the University of San Diego’s. This accurately reflects the fact that the University of Hong Kong’s Philosophy Department lost much of its former glory in the wake of the retirement of several world class philosophers over the past decade (including Laurence Goldstein, Tim Moore, and Chad Hansen); and Lingnan University’s Philosophy Department, though showing some promise, is too new to be ranked. Other local universities include philosophy teaching and research as part of other disciplines (the most notable being the Hong Kong Baptist University’s Department of Religion and Philosophy, though the University of Science and Technology’s Division of Humanities, City University’s Department of Public and Social Administration, and Macau University’s Department of History also have members with a significant philosophical emphasis in teaching and research). But alas, these are merely statistics.

The real answer to the question of the present state of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau is that it is still awaiting its birth after a long period of gestation. Almost without exception, philosophers working in this region have a borrowed identity. That is, there has to date been no such thing as an indigenous “philosophy of Macau/Hong Kong”. This fact surely has much to do with the influence of the colonial past on the mentality of the people of Macau and Hong Kong. In both places, but especially in Hong Kong, philosophy has been divided into four forms: Chinese philosophy, Anglo-American (i.e., so-called “analytic”) philosophy, Continental/European (what might be called “synthetic”) philosophy, and various attempts at “comparative” philosophy.

Chinese philosophy, as in the case of the other three approaches to philosophy,
cannot be regarded as just one thing. It certainly does not refer to the philosophy being conducted in one specific place or region; in Mainland China, for example, most philosophy conducted during the Twentieth Century was influenced more by Marxism than by any indigenous system of thought. As a result, the best research relating to classical Chinese systems of philosophy has been conducted by scholars in various other parts of the world, of both Chinese and non-Chinese ethnicity, without being focused in any one region. (The most notable possible exception would be the University of Hawaii, base for the two of the most influential journals publishing articles in comparative philosophy: Philosophy East & West, and Journal of Chinese Philosophy—one edited by a Westerner, the other by an ethnic Chinese philosopher, both of whom have close ties with academics in Hong Kong.) Moreover, much of the work being done in the past few decades by philosophers within China (1) has been explicitly Western philosophy, with Kant and Heidegger tending to attract the most interest; in many cases, the only thing Chinese about such research has been the ethnicity of the researchers.

If one were to insist on citing some exception(s) to the claim that this region has produced no indigenous philosophy, the main candidate would surely be the philosopher, Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), who spent much of his career (from 1960 to his retirement) teaching at New Asia College, now part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His work focused mainly on the history of Chinese philosophy and on comparative philosophy, as an attempt to establish a role for classical Chinese philosophy to play on the stage of world (i.e., Western) philosophy. Having published Chinese translations of several important works of Western philosophy, most notably Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Mou argued that certain crucial problems left unresolved by Kant are resolved by a proper interpretation of the Chinese classics. Summarizing the details of his arguments would take an article in itself, and is made more difficult by the rather surprising lack of translations of his work into English or other Western languages. Suffice it to say that if the present state of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau could claim any indigenous father-figure, up to now, it would be Mou Zongsan. The fact that many of his former students still occupy top academic positions, both in this region and elsewhere (especially Taiwan), makes the lack of translations even more perplexing.

Hong Kong and Macau both have the reputation of being so money-oriented that many observers would express serious doubts that philosophy will ever establish a firm foothold in the region. Just such doubts were expressed by some of my colleagues when, back in 1998, I announced my intention to start the Hong Kong Philosophy Cafe. Yet the organization is now in its 13th year (having held its first official meeting in September of 1999); with a mailing list of over 700 and having had three to six autonomous branches running concurrently during most of this period, this movement demonstrates that the region does have the potential to
In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

The future of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau, taken as a distinctive region (2), can be discussed in terms of either economic development or philosophical trends. From an economic point of view, the prospects of more and more high-quality philosophical work coming out of this region in the next five years are excellent. The reason is simple: both the Macau and Hong Kong governments are pouring money into the university systems at the very time when most Western universities are suffering from unprecedented financial cutbacks.

Most notable in this respect is Macau University: the government in China has arranged for Macau to “rent” a large plot of land, just over the border, for the construction of a spacious new campus. With the completion date currently set at mid-2013, the next five years look bright indeed for academia in Macau. One can expect Macau University not only to join the list of institutions included in the QS World rankings, but to transform itself from a virtually unknown entity into a centre for state-of-the-art education, soon challenging Hong Kong’s older tertiary institutions for a leadership role in the region.

Having just recently established philosophy as a Centre for research and teaching, Macau University sponsored its first international philosophy conference in December of 2011 and plans to initiate a postgraduate degree program in the near future. Before the end of this five-year period this new Centre is likely to become a full-fledged Department of Philosophy and Religions. It will be the region’s fifth tertiary institution with a Department offering degrees that include a significant component of philosophy and the second (along with the Hong Kong Baptist University) to combine philosophy and religious studies.

Universities in Hong Kong will also be expanding markedly during the coming five years, but for a rather different reason. Several years ago the government initiated a plan to convert the final year of secondary education into a new, first year of university. Beginning with the academic year 2012-2013, the long-standing three-year tertiary education system, inherited from the British, will be converted into a four-year system. As a result, this year’s intake of new students will be a so-called “double cohort”: the last batch entering the three-year system and the first batch entering the four-year system will both begin their university education at the same time. To cope with this transition period, the local government has earmarked significant additional funding for all eight institutions. While the bulk of these extra resources will be devoted to meeting the increased demands that will be placed on
resources will be devoted to meeting the increased demands that will be placed on teachers, research is not being ignored in the government’s effort to shape Hong Kong into a world leader in education.

If this second question is taken as referring to philosophical trends, however, the prognosis for the region’s development in the next five years is more difficult to assess. One of Mou Zongsan’s most important contributions was to the history of philosophy, and here one of his formative ideas was that a particular culture develops its own unique philosophy at a single, crucial stage in its history that Mou calls its “aperture”. (3) Thus he argued that the four major schools of classical Chinese philosophy (Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and Legalism) all stem from different responses to the failure of the Zhou Dynasty (c.1046-256 BCE) to keep its ritual culture alive and well. It could be argued that the cultural upheaval surrounding the 1997 and 1999 handovers have presented philosophers in Hong Kong and Macau with an opportunity for just such an aperture or opening-up of a new philosophical trend that would be genuinely indigenous to this region, so that the dominant approach to philosophy throughout the region would no longer merely be imported from elsewhere.

History is typically made and written in centuries, not in five-year snippets, and an aperture is best seen from a distance rather than from within the opening itself. With this in mind, the second way of interpreting the question regarding the future of philosophy in Hong Kong and Macau is best answered in connection with the third question.

**What are the structural long-term perspectives?**

Both Macau and Hong Kong, as stated above, are places where most current residents still have close relational links to (i.e., immediate family members who were) immigrants who “escaped” Mainland China when it was deemed to be a dangerous place for free-thinking Chinese people to live. This fact contributed significantly to the region’s economic success, since the citizens tended to be (on the whole) appreciative of and therefore cooperative with their foreign masters. The problem for the past 12-15 years has been that the locals have now become (at least in theory) their own masters (4)—but only for a period of 50 years. My prediction is that this whole transitional period will, in retrospect, prove to have been the aperture through which a whole new approach to philosophy comes into being.

I have elsewhere argued that the creation of anything new (e.g., an original idea, the coining of a new word, or the naming of an infant), especially the unique process of naming that new thing, is best regarded as having an “analytic a posteriori” epistemological status. (5) The point of this label, in a nutshell, is that a concept (e.g., the name) is being imposed (analytically) onto an object or situation not in a
logically necessary (a priori) manner, but through an empirical process of stipulating its nature in an immediate experience (a posteriori). Identifying the aperture leading to a new philosophical trend, and then naming that trend, is a good example of an analytic a posteriori process.

Before proposing a key to realizing the potential future development of philosophy in Macau and Hong Kong, let me identify a weakness that must be overcome, if full advantage is to be gained from the current 50-year aperture. Precisely because there is so much money available to scholars in this region, Westerners and Chinese academics alike tend to think that (or at least, to act as if) money can buy a good reputation. For example, participants in conferences organized in the region are nearly always fully sponsored: far from being asked to pay a conference fee, international visitors normally have most if not all of their expenses paid, even if they are not serving as a keynote speaker. Ironically, this tends to give visiting scholars the impression that they are doing local academics a favor, by filling in the local weakness with international expertise. To avoid giving this impression, academics in the region must be confident enough to organize conferences of sufficiently high quality to attract leading international scholars even though they must pay their own expenses (and possibly even a conference fee). That this is not only feasible but effective was demonstrated by the *Kant in Asia* international conference, held at the Hong Kong Baptist University in 2009: the 94 regular paper presenters each paid a conference fee, with only the three keynote speakers receiving full sponsorship. During the planning stages, some colleagues expressed doubts: “Why would scholars come all the way to *Hong Kong* for a conference, if they have to pay not only their own expenses, but also a substantial conference fee?” If philosophy in this region during the coming decades is to fulfill its potential to pass through the aperture provided by these 50 years of autonomy, then more and more local philosophers need to recognize that the answer to this question is not only the general rule-of-thumb, that people tend to appreciate what they have to pay for, but should also be: Because the philosophy being done in this region adopts a unique perspective that attracts worldwide attention!

The increased government funding being provided to universities in Macau and Hong Kong will not, on its own, guarantee that their world ranking will continue to improve in coming decades. It will certainly help, especially since both Macau University and Hong Kong’s University Grants Committee have recently begun to focus their efforts on attracting world class postgraduate students to come to the region for doctoral studies. The time is ripe for such a program to bear fruit, especially in light of China’s ever-increasing importance on the world economic stage. However, its ultimate success will depend not on the government’s financial support, but on academics in the region providing the kind of world leadership in their disciplines that will attract top class students—even if they have to pay their
As implied by the wording of this question, future success for philosophy in this region will depend on identifying the “perspectives” that will determine the course of local philosophers’ passage through the long term structural aperture that is now in the process of opening up during this 50-year period. The Macau/Hong Kong region is ideally-placed to provide what is sorely needed in every academic discipline to some extent, but most especially in philosophy, as the perspective-leader of them all: namely, to define a new perspective that goes beyond the traditional East-West divide. Considering the role of analytic a posteriority in all creative endeavours, I propose that a new name is needed in order to pave the way for such a new perspective. Two obvious options (in English) would be to call this new perspective “Weastern” philosophy (if we have in mind a syncretistic approach that combines features amenable to both Western and Eastern philosophy, but not necessarily common to both traditions) or to call it “Estern” philosophy (if we have in mind a minimalist approach that focuses on the common features in both traditions, treating them as one reality). Both neologisms, though rather fanciful, avoid the now standard approach of seeing the two traditions as disparate approaches that can only be “compared”, but never genuinely synthesized.

In this brief article, intended to foresee a possible future development rather than to bring it fully into being, I can only hint at what I regard as the most fruitful means of successfully creating a distinctive “philosophy of Hong Kong and Macau”. The key is to focus neither on metaphysics (as has been the tendency in the West) nor on ethics (as has been the tendency in the East), but on lived experience, on what is sometimes dubbed (for better or worse, depending on one’s bias) “the mystical”. Whereas both the Western-metaphysical and the Eastern-ethical approaches tend to divide (and are therefore unlikely to succeed as modes of forming a distinctive new synthetic perspective), human experience in general and the mystical in particular tend to unite.

If a name is needed for the new path that can serve as an aperture through which philosophy in Macau and Hong Kong can obtain a new distinctiveness and maturity, I would propose that it be developed under the heading: Philosophy of the Way. Adopting the perspective I have called “Estern”, we find that in both the West and the East the philosophical schools that have made both metaphysics and ethics subordinate to experience have tended to use the metaphor of philosophy as a path or road to be traversed. The new paradigm I foresee as the distinctive way forward for this region might look like philosophical Daoism, to those more familiar with the Chinese side of philosophy in Macau and Hong Kong, while it might look more like a certain type of (mystically-oriented) Christian philosophy, to those more familiar with Western traditions. The Chinese word “Dao” means “the way”; indeed, it is often used in that literal sense as part of the name for many actual roads
Indeed, it is often used in that literal sense as part of the name for many actual roads in Hong Kong and Macau. Similarly, the earliest Christians were called “followers of the Way” (Acts 24:14; cf. 9:2; 19:9,28, etc.). It is crucial to recognize that I am not referring here to the founding of a new religion, though like all philosophies it could develop a religious side. The religious application of the Philosophy of the Way would focus not on words but on silence, not on proselytizing but on peacemaking. Its members would be ethical, but without teaching any content of right and wrong action; they would have metaphysical commitments, but without teaching doctrines of required beliefs. This is the philosophy of life many actual residents of Hong Kong and Macau already affirm. What is needed is for a critical mass of professional philosophers to recognize this indigenous belief system and, by explicating the common denominator present in relevant Chinese and Western modes of thought, to develop it into a coherent philosophical system.

Notes:

(1) I here pass over the sticky question of what counts as “China”. Does it include Taiwan, for example? Even the precise status of Hong Kong and Macau, at least during the current 50-year transition period, is a matter of debate among locals.

(2) As argued above, they are one region, rather than two, because their histories are so similar and because their futures have been mapped out as one crucial aspect of China’s “one country, two systems” policy.

(3) Mou presents this argument in Lecture 1 of his influential Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy and Its Implications (Zhongguo zhexue jishi jiang, Taipei: Student Book Co., 1983), based on lectures he delivered in 1978. My source is Julie Lee Wei's English translation of the book, which was accepted for publication by a major university press. Once it appears, this translation should help to alleviate the widespread ignorance of Mou’s ideas among Western philosophers.

(4) One factor worth noting is that only ethnic Chinese can become full-fledged “citizens” of Hong Kong and Macau; the most a non-Chinese can hope for is to obtain permanent residency rights.


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