

## AESTHETIC CULTIVATION AND CREATIVE ASCESIS: TRANSCULTURAL REFLECTIONS ON THE LATE FOUCAULT

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**Abstract:** Foucault's understanding of the history and contemporary significance of ascetic practices or exercises of cultivation (ascesis) differs significantly from attempts which consider the renewal of asceticism in spiritual or even religious terms. This paper tries to show that he thought about related problems from the perspective of aesthetic cultivation. The first part will discuss his analysis of sexuality within the broader context of his theory-formation and elaborate on the theoretical structure of his concept of self-cultivation. In the second part I will situate the idea of creative ascesis in a broader historical context. The third part will provide a preliminary perspective on the transcultural significance of relating Foucault and contemporary Chinese philosophy.

**Key words:** self-cultivation; ascesis; Foucault; Chinese philosophy.

### Self-cultivation

Sexuality and its problematization is one of the topics on which Foucault's global fame is based. Although, Foucault would address this topic in several later interviews, it is quite astonishing that his famous interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow begins with Foucault remarking that he is not very interested in sex, that sex is boring (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 229). He states that he is much more interested in techniques of the self and their history. The following reflections on Foucault's conception of self-cultivation try to unravel some of the implications of this remark and show that it is not just a provocative statement, but one that is of systematic importance for understanding Foucault's philosophical development since the late 1970s. But, Foucault's remark is also significant beyond the realm of Foucault studies, because it can be read as an early sign of a turn from sexual liberation to the renewal of asceticism. At the same time, the way Foucault thinks about the history and the contemporary significance of ascetic practices or exercises of cultivation (ascesis) differs significantly from attempts to think about the renewal of asceticism in spiritual or even religious terms.

As far as I can see, Foucault does not consider the renewal of asceticism to be a return to specific historical forms of ascesis, nor a revival of the ascetic or monastic movements which accompanied the rise of Christianity, or even a return to the rules of St. Benedict of

Nursia and a particular monastic form of life for example. Instead he proposed something we may call “creative ascesis”—a translation of the German “kreative Askese”—one of the main concepts in an earlier study of self-cultivation in the later work of Foucault (see Heubel, 2002). Foucault thought about the renewal of ascetic practices not from the perspective of spiritual or religious cultivation, but from the perspective of aesthetic cultivation. The main characteristic of aesthetic cultivation, however, is not a kind of anti-metaphysical emphasis on the body and the senses or a one-dimensional critique of spiritual exercises, but is, in my view, a transformative process constituted by a dynamic relation between a somatic, an energetic and a spiritual dimension of the ascetic work of the self on the self.<sup>1</sup> I also understand these three dimensions to be the constitutive dynamic of transformative subjectivity, that is, subjectivity for which self-transformation through exercise is indispensable. This paper however does not focus on this aspect, but on something I would like to call the constitutive structure of transformative subjectivity, consisting of an ontological, an ascetic and a teleological moment. In the first part of this paper I will try to explain this constitutive structure by relating it to the “four modes of subjectivation” Foucault discusses in *The Use of Pleasure*. I have some doubts concerning Foucault’s conceptual framework, which distinguishes *four* modes of subjectivation. The four-dimensional structure can be traced back to an Aristotelian influence, but it is not necessarily the most convincing theoretical approach towards the transcultural philosophy of self-cultivation I am interested in. I prefer to distinguish not four but three modes—ontology, ascetics and teleology—as a guiding perspective for the analysis of historical modes of self-cultivation, in Europe and beyond. One major reason for this conceptual adjustment is the structural similarity to discussions of self-cultivation within contemporary Chinese philosophy, to which I will return later.

This paper, therefore, does not attempt to reconstruct Foucault’s writings on self-cultivation, but tries to reflect on the conceptual structure of his understanding of self-cultivation from the perspective of a transcultural philosophy of self-cultivation. In recent years, I have tried to develop this kind of philosophy by working on Foucault’s later writing in the context of contemporary Chinese philosophy, that is, by exploring the possibility of bringing Foucault’s later writing together with aspects of Chinese philosophy of cultivation in a mutually transformative dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

Before taking an example from *The Use of Pleasure* (the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*) to show how Foucault develops a structural model of self cultivation, which serves not only as the background for his discussion of antique Greco-Roman sexuality, but also has a remarkable transcultural significance, I will start by elucidating Foucault’s remark that sex is boring by situating his analysis of sexuality within the broader context of his theory-formation from 1976, the year the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published, and 1984, when volumes two and three were published. In the second part I will elaborate briefly on the ascetic moment by situating the idea of creative ascesis in a

<sup>1</sup> See Heubel (2002) for a detailed discussion of this interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed and systematic discussion of some of the ideas developed in this paper I can only refer to two books on the late Foucault and a critical theory of self-cultivation: Heubel (2002) and Heubel (unpublished).

broader historical context. The third and final part will outline a rough perspective of the transcultural significance of relating Foucault and contemporary Chinese philosophy.

(1) As is well known, Foucault's thought underwent a profound transformation between 1976 and 1984. In seeking to understand this transformation, it seems his lectures at the Collège de France are of even greater importance than the texts and interviews collected in volumes three and four of *Dits et écrits*. The lectures demonstrate that, for Foucault, sexuality was only one possible direction in which to research a much broader problem, which he calls "government". The lectures show a gradual shift from the notion of power or power-relations to the notion of government. It is a specific notion of government, from which gradually emerge the motive of an "art of government" and later "the government of the self and of others" (*le gouvernement de soi et des autres*). It is from this perspective that Foucault enters into a discussion of self-cultivation (*culture de soi*). For many years Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France turned around the problem of government. His understanding of government in the lectures on *Sécurité, territoire et population* (1977-1978) and *Naissance de la biopolitique* (1978-1979) is still very much connected to the idea of bio-politics developed in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The lectures of the subsequent five years—*Le gouvernement des vivants* (1979-1980), *Subjectivité et vérité* (1980-1981), *L'herméneutique du sujet* (1981-1982), *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres* (1982-1983), *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: le courage de la vérité* (1983-1984)—all deal with the relation between government and techniques of the self, but in a way that opens up historical perspectives that are much more diverse than those outlined in volumes two and three of *The History of Sexuality*. Only the lectures on *Subjectivité et vérité* deal with aspects of antique sexuality. In this five-year period Foucault made plans for publications under the general title "Le gouvernement de soi et des autres" which can be regarded as the central motive of his late work, shaped by the shift from the notion of power to that of government.

If the problem of the relation between truth and subjectivity runs through Foucault's entire work, it is the notion of government which allows him to transform it from research centered around questions of power into research centered around ethics. It is interesting to see how the dimension of self-government takes shape in his lectures on *Sécurité, territoire et population*, in which he compares antique (Greco-Roman) and Christian techniques of the self and discusses the subjectivating techniques of self-government by analyzing practices of confession and the examination of conscience within the Christian tradition. At this point the comparison between Christian practices and similar practices in Greco-Roman antiquity seems to be quite arbitrary, but it was exactly this comparison which was to become the connecting thread of his lectures well up until 1984.

The introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* suggests a transition from a history of sexuality to a history of self-cultivation. I use the term self-cultivation to sum up multiple motives in Foucault's later work (aesthetics of existence, art of existence, art of the self, care of the self, practices of the self, exercise of the self, government of the self, techniques or technologies of the self, etc.). One chapter in the *The Care of the Self*, the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, is dedicated to the notion of self-cultivation (*culture de soi*) in Stoic philosophy, but Foucault also used this notion in a much broader sense in various interviews and lectures. Since it indicates an open process of self-transformation, the word "cultivation" appears to

be more adequate than “culture”, which seems to lack this dynamic dimension and often refers to the given conditions of collective life.<sup>3</sup> The introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* thus situates the history of sexuality within a history of self-cultivation, within a “general history of the techniques of the self” as Foucault calls it (Foucault, 1990, p. 11).

Although Foucault introduces the idea of a “general history of the techniques of the self,” his study fails to realize the promise of generality, as European examples dominate the discussion. In spite of this limitation, Foucault’s *The Use of Pleasure* offers important clues for a transcultural reading—found, for example, in the peripheral references to the relation of self-cultivation and sexuality in traditional China (based on Robert van Gulik’s book *Sexual life in ancient China*). Considering the move away from the problematization of sexuality toward the problematization of self-cultivation, I will now focus on how Foucault uses a conceptual framework articulating ontology, deontology, ascetics and teleology—the four key notions he calls “modes of subjectivation”—to specify the notion of self-cultivation and to outline its European history.

(2) The chapters in the first part of *The Use of Pleasure* are devoted to the analysis of these four dimensions: “Aphrodisia” discusses the dimension of *ontology*; “Chrēsis” discusses the dimension of *deontology*; “Enkrateia” discusses the dimension of *ascetics* and “Freedom and truth” discusses *teleology*. Parts two to five of the book then reveal this analytical model and provide more substantive detail. I would now like to give a very rough outline of some aspects of this model of self-cultivation.

1. In this context ontology refers to the relation of the self to itself (*rapport de soi à soi*). It is interesting because very different modes of self-cultivation all initially seem to share in common a duplication of the self in two aspects which then form an ontological hierarchy: the self is differentiated into a low self and a high self, an empirical and an ideal one, a wrong and a true one, a bodily and a spiritual one, and an emotional and a reasonable one. Foucault’s discussion helps us to understand that the way in which this duplication is introduced decides the direction and dynamic of the cultivation process. This will obviously take a different direction when the body and sensuality are regarded as something which should be brought under the control of reason, or when they are regarded as something to be liberated from the coercive force of reason, perceived as an agent of repression. Foucault’s analysis shows that the hierarchization of human faculties was substantial to both the Greco-Roman and the Christian understanding of subject-formation. In antiquity, however, these faculties were conceived not as distinct entities but rather as forces that enter into dynamic play and constitute the subject as a “field of intensities” to which the sexual activity (*aphrodisia*) naturally belongs. In contrast, with the rise of Christianity the ontological hierarchy is re-enforced and the intensification of the agonistic struggle between mind/reason on the one hand and the body on the other now links spiritual elevation with the “annihilation of the flesh”. This very general distinction between the ontological

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the expression “cultivation de soi” (as opposed to “culture de soi”) makes no sense in French, unlike in English or German where one can speak alternatively of a “culture of the self” and of “self-cultivation” or of “Kultur des Selbst” and “Selbstkultivierung”.

dimension in the Greco-Roman and Christian cultivation of human self-relation or subjectivity has been very helpful for my understanding of a possible way to discuss self-cultivation and subjectivity, not only with regard to Chinese philosophy but also to a new paradigm of subjectivity. Within this new paradigm of subjectivity the hierarchy between mind and body would not just be turned around (thus substituting the priority of the body for the priority of the mind) nor abolished (thus suggesting the priority of a unity between mind and body), but would start by abolishing the hierarchy between mind and body to produce their *equalization*. The question emerges as to whether certain aspects of Chinese philosophy may help to develop a paradigm of subjectivity which could be called energetic or transformative subjectivity. I will come back to this question in the second part of this paper.

2. In the realm of deontology, the differences in the conceptualization of the ontological hierarchy discussed above correspond to the different ways in which it is practically enforced, that is, the different “modes of subjection” (Foucault, 1990, p. 27). This dimension is called deontology because it obviously has moral implications. Deontology refers particularly to social and political aspects of self-cultivation as related to the moral legitimation of certain forms of governmental practice. In regard to deontology the contrast between style and code, ethical subject and subject of law, “modulated universality” (Foucault, 1990, p. 60) and “universal law” marks the difference between antiquity and Christianity.
3. The dimension of ascetics leads into the sphere of daily practices and exercises. Here Foucault differentiates between philosophical asceticism and Christian asceticism, the first referring to a work of the self on the self which consists of *aesthetic exercises* in the formation and stylization of the self, while the second is said to be concerned with the deciphering of the self and the discovery of a true self. It is his understanding of asceticism as a system of exercises (ascesis) which enables Foucault to speak about the asceticism of the dandy or of homosexual asceticism.
4. Finally the dimension of teleology refers to the goal, the telos of self-cultivation, which Foucault designates by “freedom and truth”. According to Foucault in antiquity the telos of ascetic self-mastery (*maîtrise de soi*) has been moderation (*sophrosyne*), while in Christian asceticism “obedience” serves as both means and telos. Within the antique idea of moderation Foucault recognizes a “stylization of freedom” directed against the “servitude of the self”. But, of course, he is by no means satisfied with the return to antique self-cultivation. Instead he tries to develop a conception of aesthetic cultivation understood as a never-ending process of self-creation in which the telos itself becomes a process, namely the process of the permanent transgression of existing historical limits.

In Foucault’s writings and interviews, self-creation emerges as the center of a specifically modern model of self-cultivation, which differs both from the Greco-Roman model and the Christian model. Schematically speaking, Foucault differentiates three main phases within the European history of self-cultivation: the antique phase characterized by *self-mastery*, the Christian phase characterized by *self-discovery* and the modern phase characterized by *self-creation*. Therefore it seems justified to understand creative ascesis as the core of Foucault’s contemporary transformation of asceticism.

## Ascesis and modernity

The Marxian critique of political economy has focused on the economic (capital and work), political (nation and international relations) and social (family and class) factors of capitalism, but has largely neglected the analysis of the relation between the economy and subjectivity. By contrast, Max Weber paid much attention to changes to subjectivity in capitalist modernity. The systematic analysis of the relation between capitalist spirit and Christian asceticism thus became an important theoretical concern to him. Further developing Weber's notion of ascesis, Foucault loosened its fixation on the disciplinary work ethic of the industrial age and opened up the possibility of developing a non-Christian, de-spiritualized and creative understanding of ascesis. This move resulted in ascetic practices becoming related in a very ambiguous way to the neoliberal techniques of government Foucault already discussed at the end of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> As soon as Foucault's idea of a new ascetics and his interest in the European history of techniques of the self are linked back to his theoretical efforts on the archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power, one becomes aware of the extraordinary extent to which his analysis of regimes of knowledge, techniques of the self and ascetic ethics can sharpen understanding of the paradoxes of contemporary capitalism and modernity in general.<sup>5</sup> He makes it very clear that ascetic practices are closely interwoven with regimes of knowledge, which guide them, and with exercises of power, which refer not only to the work of the self on the self, but also to a complex net of relations with other persons and with the non-human nature that structures self-relation (*rapport à soi*).

As Max Weber has already discussed extensively, the capitalist spirit of the industrial age endorses ascetic techniques of the self which are favorable to a work ethic based on self-discipline. Weber speaks in this respect of the secularization of monastic into inner-worldly asceticism. With the "new" or creative spirit of capitalism developing since the 1970s and 1980s, the model of ascetic self-relation described by Weber has lost its paradigmatic position<sup>6</sup> without, however, causing the importance of ascetic practices as such to disappear. Instead they undergo a process of de-spiritualization, de-disciplinization and aesthetization, meeting, on the one hand, the growing demand to break away from the spirit of discipline, and integrating, on the other side, this new freedom into forms of dynamic self-transformation and self-management.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is highly significant that Foucault's turn to the study of Greco-Roman self-cultivation was preceded by an analysis of neoliberal

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<sup>4</sup> See Heubel (2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Honneth (2002); Honneth (2009, pp. 39-47).

<sup>6</sup> A development in which Daniel Bell still saw a serious crisis of capitalism. See Bell (1976).

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous studies on the relation between neoliberalism and changes on the level of subjectivity. Boltanski and Chiapello suppose there is an intimate connection between the revolt of 1968 and the new spirit of capitalism which became possible because of the assimilation of "artistic critique" (the demand for creative self-realization) and the neutralization of the "social critique" (the critique of capitalism). See Boltanski and Chiapello (1999); Dardot and Laval discuss the relation between the "neoliberal subject," new forms of "ascesis of performance" (*ascèses de la performance*) and an ascesis of self-enterprise, in which they see the opposite of Foucault's interest in "exercises of self-cultivation" (*exercices de la culture de soi*). See Dardot and Laval (2009, p. 4200).

techniques of government.<sup>8</sup> It becomes clear to what extent the connection of aesthetics of existence and ascetic ethics is motivated from the start by the search for possibilities of immanent critique directed against the subjective economy of neoliberal regularization and efficiency.

## **Towards a transcultural philosophy of cultivation**

The relevance of the concept of self-cultivation to understanding both classical China, and modern contemporary China should not be neglected.<sup>9</sup> Learning and exercise (*xué xí* 學習) belong to the historical *a priori* of Chinese modernity, which can be characterized as a process of hybrid modernization.<sup>10</sup> The fact that, since the early years of the Republic of China, Contemporary Neo-Confucianism has strongly relied on the Neo-Confucianism of the Song- and Ming-dynasties and its interpretation of classical Confucianism is therefore significant: the centuries-long effort of facing the challenge of Buddhism coming from India and the twisted process of learning from it and transforming it has already been a transcultural experience of self-transformation, which is now often compared to the Western challenge since the 19th century and the difficult process of learning from the West. Chinese Buddhism has not all of a sudden exercised a very important mediating function between modern European and classical Chinese philosophy, now mainly represented by the so-called three schools of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.

Contemporary Neo-Confucianism has been much ridiculed and criticized for its insistence on self-cultivation as the root (*xiū shēn wéi běn* 修身為本) formulated in the classical text *The Great Learning*; on the perspective of becoming a sage or holy person (*chéng shèng* 成聖); on the relation between inner holiness and exterior kingliness (*nèi shèng wài wáng* 內聖外王) or inner and exterior cultivation and on the related insistence on a three-dimensional structure of self-cultivation based on an ontology (*běntǐlùn* 本體論) of moral nature with cosmic implications; and on an ascetics (*gōngfūlùn* 工夫論) focusing on the realization of this moral nature and on a conception of levels of cultivation (*jìngjièlùn* 境界論) which believes in spiritual sublimation. The efforts to modernize and democratize the interpretation of *The Great Learning* is an attempt to theoretically reflect the fact of being forced to learn from the West, the modern coercion to self-transformation, and to reconstruct the Confucian ethos of learning and exercise under modern conditions.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, there are problematic assumptions at stake here, which seem to be incompatible with a certain, rather narrow, understanding of the so-called philosophical discourse of modernity. But, having in mind the conceptual correspondence with Foucault's four-dimensional structure discussed in the first part of this paper, this model of cultivation is already beginning to reveal an important aspect of its contemporary significance.

Peter Sloterdijk takes into account Foucault's reflections on a non-religious, non-spiritual asceticism, as well as the idea of a general history of the techniques of the self, and tries to

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<sup>8</sup> See Foucault (2004).

<sup>9</sup> For an introduction to the notion of self-cultivation in Confucian learning see for example Tu (1979).

<sup>10</sup> See Heubel (2016, chap. 1).

<sup>11</sup> See Heubel (2015, pp. 415-434).

develop them in the direction of a “universal theory of exercise and ascesis” (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 210). It is impossible to discuss Sloterdijk’s theory of exercise and ascesis in this paper. However, I would like to refer to one passage in the section on the “Exercises of modernity” that links the notion of exercise with the modern rise of China which he calls an “old super-power of exercise”: “Meanwhile, the Asian tigers of exercise have caught up, and while the modernity of the West turns up the nose arrogantly at imitation and mimesis, the new competitors have made the oldest principle of learning the basis of their success” (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 526). Although this statement remains completely within the framework of intercultural competition in which learning from other cultures is only utilized with regard to increasing the power of one’s own nation and culture, it nevertheless points to a problem which deserves to be discussed in greater detail.

“Learn and constantly exercise what you have learned”: so goes the first sentence of the *Analects* of Confucius. Wang Fuzhi’s 17th century commentary speaks of the lifelong learning of the “superior man” (Wang, 1990, p. 246). One might generally say that this ethos of learning and transformation has not only made it possible for China to participate in the early enlightenment phase of axial-age civilizations, but also for it to be put to the test and continue to be tested in the two historical learning phases during which China was drawn into the lengthy processes of profound self-transformation through its encounter with Indian (reception of the Buddhism) and Euro-American culture. The systematization of Confucian learning and exercise into a complex ascetics (*gōngfūlùn* 工夫論) goes back to the Song- and Ming-dynasty Neo-Confucianism’s critical struggle with and twisted assimilation of Buddhism. Confucian learning answered the challenge of Buddhism through a process of theoretical and practical transformation which gave rise to mutually competing schools. However, in the main directions of Neo-Confucian learning—the school of structure or principle, the school of the heart and the school of breath-energy—the fundamental importance of ascetics is beyond doubt and, following different interpretations of the *Great Learning*, has deeply influenced the social and political teachings of Neo-Confucianism.

The intense relation of 20th century Contemporary Neo-Confucianism to Song- and Ming Neo-Confucianism makes it probable that it will continue to play the role of an important source for philosophical reflections on Chinese modernization. Particularly with regard to problems of the relation between Chinese modernity and the spirit of capitalism, attention to different developments within Confucian ascetics may be very helpful in dealing with the subjective side of modernity in China in a way that not only searches, within Confucianism, for an equivalent to the disciplinary form of the Christian work ethic, but also for an ascetic ethics whose internal complexity corresponds to the paradox of transformative subjectivity insofar as it urges discipline and creativity at the same time. In this sense, creative ascesis is in itself a paradoxical expression which forms the practical core of an aesthetic cultivation, linked, ontologically, to a transformative and energetic understanding of subjectivity.

## Conclusion

European attempts to develop a modern conception of philosophy as a way of life and a theory of ascesis—for example Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and his *Genealogy of Morals*, Weber’s *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Adorno’s *Minima*



*Moralia*, Hadot's *Exercices spirituels*, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* II and III (and his later lectures at the Collège de France) or Sloterdijk's *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*—fail, in my view, to appropriately address structural changes in the area of subjectivity. A crucial reason for this might be the difficulty of overcoming the Christian model of asceticism and its secular aftermath. Foucault's "analysis of the man of desire" (*l'homme de désir*), which shapes the background of his research into the "long history of aesthetics of existence and technologies of the self" mentioned in the introduction to volume II of *The History of Sexuality*, gives clear evidence of his tendency to throw off the straitjacket of Christian asceticism by returning to Greco-Roman antiquity. In this respect, he does better than Nietzsche. Nevertheless, he remains within the Western historical framework of antiquity, Christianity and modernity, in which Christianity inevitably occupies a position of superior importance. Foucault has grasped the profound shift which the relation of asceticism and capitalism underwent in the course of the 20th century, a shift one might call *creative turn*, and which thereby went significantly beyond Max Weber's discussion of protestant ascesis preoccupied by discipline and self-restraint. But it seems quite obvious to me that the Eurocentric limits of his perspective did not allow him to truly open up the global perspectives of research, which can be seen as a precondition for the development of a transcultural philosophy of self-cultivation that would, for example, be able to take cultural resources of East Asia into account, where the schools of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism developed not only theories and practices of moral cultivation, but of aesthetic cultivation as well. I am convinced that a better understanding of practices of cultivation developed within these schools, who never knew something like monotheistic religiousness, would have been of great help in articulating the kind of post-Christian "creative ascesis" Foucault often describes when he speaks about an "aesthetics of existence"—but, of course, this has to proven in much greater detail. In this sense, however, I would like to emphasize that, at a time in which neoliberal capitalism(s) have emerged as global regime(s) of governance that are able to adapt to different political systems, Foucault persistently discussed the importance of new asceticism(s), which he understood as a product of those new regimes of governance and, at the same time, as sources for critique and resistance against those very regimes. Insofar as global capitalism(s) seem(s) to be based much more on an aesthetic regime than on a religious one, Foucault was, in my view, quite right to shift the attention from religious or spiritual to aesthetic cultivation and from spiritual to creative ascesis. Because Foucault's creative turn of asceticism responded to one of the most urgent global problems of "our" present age—creative capitalism—his research into the so-called "aesthetics of existence" has opened up perspectives well beyond the Western culture(s) he was familiar with and the Christian heritage he tried to overcome theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the structural, four-dimensional conception of self-cultivation, which he introduced in *The Use of Pleasure*, has a transcultural potential that deserves to be developed further—earlier in this paper I suggested transforming it into a three-dimensional model consisting of ontology, ascetics and teleology. This conception would be very familiar to philosophers who deal with self-cultivation in contemporary Chinese philosophy, but it remains an open question as to what extent this perspective may be fruitful for other regional theories and practices of cultivation. This, at least, seems to be a philosophical task that Foucault's

unfinished project of a general—global—history of the theories and practices of self-cultivation has left to later researchers.

Important studies on the relation between modernity and Confucianism, which refer to Weber's comparative sociology of religion but do not share his negative judgment on Confucianism, have stressed the importance of Confucian values for economic development in East Asia.<sup>12</sup> They have done important preparatory work for a better understanding of the modern relevance and possible transformation of Confucian self-cultivation, which, nevertheless, appears unsatisfactory to me because it still remains strongly attached to the normative model of the Christian work ethic. The attempt to counter Max Weber's sociology of religion and the link it established between asceticism, capitalist spirit and Christianity by connecting ascetics, Capitalist work ethic and Confucian religiousness or spirituality remains largely under the spell of the Christian challenge to Confucianism.

In this paper I have tried to sketch out a different research perspective which focuses neither on the relation between asceticism and religion (as developed by Max Weber), nor on that between philosophy as a way of life and spiritual exercise (in the sense of Pierre Hadot), but is instead inspired by Foucault in paying attention to the relation between ascetics (*Asketik*) and aesthetics (*Ästhetik*). Foucault provided me with the idea that the ontological dimension of aesthetic cultivation may be liberated from any kind of spiritual primacy, any notion of subjectivity in which an ontological priority of the soul or the mind of consciousness or reason is assumed. As a starting point for entering the huge realm of self-cultivation I now propose a notion of transformative subjectivity which is, ontologically speaking, nothing other than the dynamic interplay between its somatic, energetic and spiritual moment.<sup>13</sup>

From a transcultural perspective that is not limited to the European interactions between old and new (between antiquity and modernity), and East and West, this analysis is helpful because it makes it clear that the paradigm of transformative subjectivity (*qìhuà zhǔtǐ* 氣化主體) discussed in contemporary Chinese philosophy strongly corresponds to Foucault's idea of aesthetic cultivation as self-creation, but also differs significantly from it insofar as it rejects any understanding of the aesthetics of existence as the permanent transgression of limits as reductionist and one-dimensional: Foucault's understanding of creative ascesis is based on the illusion of permanent revolution—this is most clearly expressed in his fascinating lectures on Diogenes in which the Cynic and the “heroism” of his “philosophical life” are seen as the ancient forerunner of the modern revolutionary and the attitude of “revolutionary life” (Foucault, 2009, p. 196). Therefore, creative ascesis in the Foucauldian sense may be part of the transformative subjectivity discussed above, but, at the same time, the conception of transformative subjectivity leads to a much broader concept of aesthetic cultivation, which is, I would say, better prepared to resist the temptations of creative capitalism doomed to self-destruction.

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Tu Wei-ming (1989).

<sup>13</sup> See Yang Rubin (2016, chap. 3).

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