A session of the Inter-regional Philosophical Dialogues between Asia and the Arab World was organized on 17 and 18 November 2006 in Rabat, Morocco, on the general topic “Encounters of Asia and the Arab World with modernity”. Three working groups deliberated on the following specific themes: “Globalization challenges facing philosophy and democracy”; “Philosophy facing the challenges of modern technology” and “The roles of philosophy in war and peace”. The sens of globalization, meaning in French both significance and direction, its effects on Asia and Arab region, and the role of philosophy in this context, were discussed at length by the participants. The various attitudes of our cultures towards modernization, the acquirement of technologies, sciences etc., were all interrogated. These attitudes may indeed take several forms: refusal, a more or less strong rejection, adaptation. “Can we accept globalization without liberating Man in the most specific meaning of this term, that is to say accepting the emergence of the individual in our societies?” – this was one of the questions introducing the debates.

The inter-regional philosophical dialogue on modernity was considered by several participants as an important issue for both these regions, who called for reflection on post-modernity with a human face. The mutations that the Arab-Maghreb world is experiencing, region that wants to embrace diverse logics (using terms such as reforms, human rights, etc.), were also underlined. The duo modernity/tradition and the possible unbalance between them in an era of globalization and the preeminence of technology, in the Arab-Islamic world as in Asia, was the subject of a good many remarks. The modalities of the relation between Islam and modernity were tackled: “Do Muslims need to become modern? Why modernization?”. Different perspectives were pictured, from the acception of modernity to its Islamization, the major idea being to find a bridge enabling a connection between Islam and modernity.

Other ideas were also exchanged during the philosophical dialogue, such as that of putting into practice a genuine dialogue whose centre would not necessarily be the West. “How can one create an interregional discourse that is not an obligation?”, namely that does not necessarily seek to be validated by the West, was one of the queries in this respect. Is it possible? What can Asia and the Arab world exchange on concerning modernity and other issues?
What are the mission and the role of philosophy today? According to several participants, it is foremost a role of clarifier. To fulfill this mission, philosophy has to serenely and at all costs take more to the streets. Many suggestions punctuated these days of exchange and debate: participants mostly stressed the necessity to do a double work both on tradition and modernity, asking again the question of what our differences are made of, reinventing lost communities, re-examining “the religious”, rediscovering the common basis of the three monotheisms, recreating the archive of memory, etc.

At this stage, the three thematic working groups announced the results of their discussions and suggestions:

On the theme of “Globalization challenges facing philosophy and democracy”, the necessity was put forward to dispose of landmarks in order to define the studied terms, and particularly globalization. The predominance of the economic dimension in the process of globalization was also underlined. What role can philosophy play in this context? Could philosophers undertake the humble task of description? One must first admit the disparity in the situation of philosophy in the two regions: Buddhism, Confucianism in Asia / medieval philosophy in the Arab world. In some countries (Japan, Thailand, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt) we witness a certain generalization in the translation of contemporary philosophy, by Foucault, Sartre, Heidegger, etc.

Some participants claimed that democracy, defined by a regime by the people, for the people, and by a culture of debate and deliberation, is yet to be put into action. Indeed, how can one move to a deliberative democracy, not necessarily representative and not simply steered? Many advanced the need to study and evaluate the weight of the religious phenomenon in democracy as well as the status of the Quran texts that are considered as laws by describing different situations.

The main focus was placed on education, notably the tragedies affecting the condition of women both in Asia and in the Arab-Islamic world. Tragedies qualified as avoidable, as they are not a fatality but have to be fully comprehended, particularly the case of missing women in China and India and, more generally, the struggle against analphabetism.

Another fundamental reflection was related to the question “How can one establish democracy firmly and permanently in our societies?” Different means proposed, such as reliance on criteria for participation, on openness (freedom of press and communication), on the battle against precariousness and the demand for a minimum of security. Several participants suggested analyzing the very notion of “citizenship”, too often monolithic, as well as examining the different approaches to it of contractualists, utilitarians, communitarians, libertarians, etc., for whom it remains a controversial issue. This field appeared to need to be further explored from a comparative perspective.
“Philosophy facing the challenges of modern technology”

Specific themes for future publications were suggested: studies of technical and scientific exchanges along the Silk Road highlighting the current situation and state of research; in-depth analysis of ethics of dialogue on energy (nuclear energy, pollution-related issues); environmental ethics and the related points of view of nations; etc.

The publication that will result from this working group should stimulate exchanges and discussions between the two regions, notably through a youth forum using Internet-based technologies;

- Setting up of a digital library: A project for a digital library of philosophy proposed to UNESCO, currently studying the technical and conceptual details for its possible implementation, was also presented on the occasion of this working group. This project could receive the sponsorship of the Organization. It would, inter alia, put at the disposal of the public and researchers modern and varied material. The main outlines for the project are the following: electronic edition of major philosophical texts; reproduction of texts from the original manuscripts; possible reproduction of translations; dictionary; historical and analytical comments accompanying the texts.

- Creation of an Open University for Philosophical Dialogue, with a dean from the Arab region and one from Asia. A management committee was proposed to develop this project and notably launch a feasibility study as soon as possible.

“The roles of philosophy in war and peace”

Which philosophy to invoke when studying and trying to understand war and peace? Why do we need philosophy in this situation? If the practical dimension of philosophy, including aesthetics, has been emphasized in Antiquity both in the Arab region and in Asia, this dimension tends to be marginalized in the modern era. Yet today, as several participants stressed, we must revivify this practical philosophy, this method of enquiry, questioning and dialogue for the sake of common interest. Philosophy has a major part to play in this area. What could it do? Philosophers are not politicians in power. They have the possibility to rise against injustice by addressing the powerful and reminding them of their responsibilities. It is therefore necessary to work for a better institutionalization of philosophy. Participants called for a public philosophy, a philosophy of civilizations and a rereading of other disciplines (philosophy of history, philosophy of law, etc.). One of the great challenges for philosophers, as some participants underlined, is to get along with those who are not philosophers (economists etc.), not to be advocates only for their discipline, to encourage philosophical dialogue without setting up philosophy as an object of worship.
Three distinct publications will issue from the working groups on the basis of the recommendations made by participants as well as additional contributions received from Arab and Asian philosophers.

The Rabat meeting of November 2006 is notably in the line with the preparation of the next World Congress of Philosophy that will take place in Seoul, Republic of Korea, in 2008.

These sessions of the Interregional Philosophical Dialogue are also in the context of the Dialogue of Civilizations between People and Cultures programme and represent the contribution of the Social and Human Sciences Sector to this initiative, by gathering, on one hand, Asian and Arab philosophers, and philosophers from Latin America and Africa, on the other hand, to discuss the convergent and divergent themes between these regional and cultural areas and share together the possibility to draw up common programmes and concrete exchanges (university curricula, research fellowships, establishment of university chairs on the Arab world in Asia and vice and versa, etc.)