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THEMATIC FOCUS:

50 YEARS OF ISCP

CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE: FROM ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

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Editorial Introduction by the 2025 ISCP President

The Master Said: Make Love, Not War

Jana S. ROŠKER

Just over a week ago, we passed the anniversary of a year in which we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy (ISCP). This means that exactly half a century has passed since the late Professor Cheng Chung-ying founded this society, which stands as the oldest and largest academic association in the world dedicated to building bridges between Chinese and global philosophies. The 50th anniversary is, of course, a significant milestone in the history of this association—especially so because we live in a world burdened by a range of global crises. It is precisely for this reason that such bridges, connecting diverse traditions and systems of thought, are more important than ever before.

We marked this important milestone in past June at the 24th biennial conference of the society, held under the title "Addressing Global Crises and Reimagining Solutions through Chinese Philosophy". Although today's most pressing crises are deeply interconnected and can therefore only be addressed on a global level, it is worth noting that the core issues underlying these predicaments—ranging from ecological catastrophe, large-scale migration, and the threat of viral pandemics to the unjust distribution of global wealth, resources, and goods—have, over the past year, increasingly culminated in the growing threat of armed conflicts and wars of aggression. For this reason, we have chosen to dedicate this issue of *Asian Studies*, which commemorates the 50th anniversary of the ISCP and includes selected contributions from the 24th, i.e., the jubilee, conference of the society, to the culture of peace and pacifism within the Chinese philosophical tradition. We regard this theme as especially significant precisely because of the aforementioned culmination of global crises into violent conflict.

At present, we are confronted with two such crisis hotspots that are deemed sufficiently "interesting" by mainstream journalism to warrant daily coverage. These are, of course, the war in Ukraine and the genocide being carried out by the Israeli state against the Palestinian people. Clearly, these two armed conflicts are by no means the only wars in which innocent lives are being lost. Yet perhaps the dark clouds of a war-driven apocalypse—one that could give rise to a new world war—have never loomed so near and so threateningly in this century as they do now. Equally dangerous, however, is the fact that militarism—along with its military terminology and ideology of fear and hatred, which underpin this type of discourse—is becoming an increasingly central part of the culture in most states and civilizations.

If we are to resist this culture, which actually does not deserve to be given such a name, and oppose the pervasive and increasingly powerful ideology that underlies it, we must learn to think differently and establish alternative forms of discourse and strategy.

The mission of the ISCP is grounded in a vision of egalitarian and mutually respectful polylogues among diverse traditions, especially between China and the so-called West. It strives to ensure that the voice of Chinese philosophy is heard not only within the narrow circles of specialized scholars dedicated to its study and global interpretation, but also more broadly. It seeks to foster a dialogue that makes space for ideas and methods that transcend the dominant paradigms established by Western-style modernization and disseminated globally through colonial ideologies. This is a culture in which we must learn to truly listen to one another, beyond the voices of the dominant intellectual currents that prevail in contemporary societies.

The same vision also undelays the work and editorial policy of the journal *Asian Studies*. Its editorial board is convinced that violence can never be resolved by even greater violence—that is, through escalating militarization—but only through radical pacifism, even if its realization comes at the cost of reducing GDP and the wealth of those among the world's richest. In this spirit, we were reminded that a culture of peace may be the most meaningful gift to mark the 50th anniversary of the ISCP, and, at the same time, the best legacy we can offer this international society for its future path of development.

Many philosophers in the Chinese tradition have thought in similar ways. This is by no means a coincidence, given that Chinese philosophy itself, as a discourse, was born in the turbulent era of the Warring States. It emerged as a hopeful step towards a new universal ethics—one that would once and for all prevent the shedding of blood and enslavement, while at the same time ensuring safety and a modest well-being for all. Such traditions have long been at the forefront of many special issues of our journal. In this context, it is worth mentioning three in particular: the issue on humanism and post-humanism in Asian traditions (see https://journals.uni-lj.si/as/issue/view/1078), the issue dedicated to traditional Asian ecological discourses (see https://journals.uni-lj.si/as/issue/view/916), and the special issue on COVID-19 as part of the broader spectrum of global crises—crises that pose dangers but also offer opportunities for renewed reflection and hope for resolution (see https://journals.uni-lj.si/as/issue/view/754).

Among these thematic clusters, several contributions explicitly addressed the question of peace and pacifism. Notably, Dawid Rogacz's article on the idea of Supreme Peace (*Taiping*) in premodern Chinese philosophies of history (Rogacz 2022, 401–13), Alok Bhalla's reflection on Tagore's dark vision of humanity (Bhalla 2013, 101), and Graham Parkes's open letter to Xi Jinping (Parkes 2023,

242–43). Chen Bo's article, which traces 70 years of Western logic in China, also originated from the idea of peaceful coexistence and dialogue between politics and academia, highlighting the pacifism of the "Hundred Flowers" metaphor, in which a specifically Chinese mode of thinking was born (see Chen 2022, 77–78). Seongmin Hong, in his contribution on pandemics, explored pacifist aspects of Zhu Xi's philosophy through the lens of ecological justice (Hong 2022, 317), while Hans-Georg Moeller (2023, 71) and Gloria Luque-Moya (2023, 130) each examined critical Daoist approaches that challenge the traditional anthropocentric supremacy over nature—approaches that not only lead to ecological crises, but also to disruptive imbalances in politics and society. In the context of the foundations of pacifism found within the Chinese philosophical tradition, Xiang Shuchen's article, "Why the Chinese Tradition Had No Concept of 'Barbarian'" (Xiang 2023, 149–50), is also particularly worth mentioning.

Given the state of global politics and philosophy in 2025, the 24th ISCP conference was likewise dedicated to related questions, and this issue features a selection of contributions from that jubilee conference. Special attention has been given to the articles based on the three keynote lectures with which the academic gathering was opened. We have also included all three articles by young researchers who were awarded the Charles Fu Foundation Prize. The remaining contributions are grouped thematically into two main sections: one focusing on traditional models of pacifism within the Chinese tradition, and the other on the idea of dialogue—not one grounded in adversarial opposition, but in the principle of mutual complementarity and adaptive exchange.

The keynote section of the 24th ISCP conference brings together three major contributions that explore Chinese philosophical resources for rethinking justice, interdependence, and peaceful coexistence in the face of global crises. What connects them is their shared rejection of adversarial logic and self-assertion, and their common search for philosophical pathways beyond conflict.

In his article "Confucian Role Ethics and a Holistic Conception of Justice Introduction", Roger T. Ames draws on Confucian "zoetology" (*shengshenglun* 生生論), a philosophy centred on generative relational life, to propose an ethical framework grounded not in individual rights or substance ontology, but in dynamic relationships and co-creativity. This model of justice, inherently dialogical and non-confrontational, undermines dualistic thinking and offers a relational ontology as the basis for a peaceful societal order.

Robin Wang's contribution, "Zhuangzi's *Jie Xin* 解心 (Untangling the Heart-mind) and the Wisdom of Biomimicry", connects Daoist philosophy with ecological and technological innovation. Through the metaphor of "untangling the heart-mind", Wang presents Zhuangzi's thought as a method for dissolving inner and outer conflict, emphasizing alignment with the natural order. In this context,

she introduces the concept of biomimicry, which is based on the principle of learning from nature rather than dominating it. This principle resonates with Daoist pacifism, for it proposes a model of technological and human development that is harmonious, not combative.

In his essay "In Search of Allies: Global Philosophy as Criticism", Heiner Roetz argues that the dominant global logic of self-assertion is incompatible with genuine solidarity. He critiques both nationalism and superficial forms of "global philosophy" for failing to transcend cultural self-enclosure. Roetz recalls philosophy's critical origins as a response to crisis, emphasizing its task as a culture-transcending critique. His call to form philosophical alliances against systemic violence positions global philosophy as an ally of peace, instead of identity-based assertions.

Although they proceed from different angles, all three keynote contributions outline a philosophical paradigm opposed to domination and conflict—one that centres interdependence, critique, and harmony as the conditions for a sustainable and peaceful future.

The second section consists of three essays that were awarded the Charles Fu Foundation Prize at the 24th ISCP Conference. All of these deal with critical engagement with Confucian relational ethics, which each author creatively reinterprets in response to contemporary global challenges. Their shared commitment to nonviolence and relational autonomy forms the thematic backbone of this section, linking classical Chinese thought with urgent ethical dilemmas in the age of digital alienation, technological domination, and distorted collectivism.

In his paper titled "The Confucian Conception of Self: Collectivist or Relational?", Thomas Moore redefines the Confucian self not as collectivist in the Western sense of subordinated individuality, but as a dynamic, processual identity shaped through ethical relations. By retrieving the practice-oriented virtue of *Ren* (仁) from the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, Moore argues for a model of personhood grounded in mutual responsiveness rather than domination or isolation. This vision, integrating individuality and interdependence, exemplifies a pacifist anthropology: it resists both the violence of radical individualism and the coercive force of collective erasure.

Yuchen Liang's essay "Resisting Technology Addiction with Mencius" explores how Confucian philosophy, and specifically Mencius' emphasis on nurturing care and non-coercive moral cultivation, can provide an ethical framework for resisting the systemic violence of the attention economy. Drawing on the principle "don't forget; don't force", Liang proposes mutual aid communities as nonviolent sites of resistance against manipulative technologies. By foregrounding the relational care structures found in Confucianism, this approach offers a pacifist alternative to punitive or exploitative responses to digital addiction, countering both techno-authoritarianism and neoliberal abandonment.

Chen Hwee Loi's Chinese contribution, "Are AI Robots Human? Exploring Confucianism's "the Distinction between a Human Being and Object" from the Ancient Confucian Way of Naming 'Objects'", examines the ethical implications of AI through the lens of ancient Confucian debates on *renwu zhi bian* (the distinction between humans and things). Rather than relying solely on human-centred moral agency, Chen traces a dual framework in early Confucianism that includes both ethical judgment *and* ethical description of nonhuman entities. This broader view resists the modern instrumentalization of "things", opening a space for non-anthropocentric, non-dominative relations with emerging intelligences. The author's nuanced reconstruction of Confucian classificatory thinking suggests a way of engaging with AI that avoids violent control and instead emphasizes ethical coexistence.

Together, these essays articulate diverse, yet intersecting visions of pacifism rooted in Confucian relationism. Whether confronting distorted views of the self, predatory technological systems, or the new ontological challenges posed by AI, they all affirm a common ethical thread: that peace is cultivated not through assertion or control, but through nurturing relationships, mutual recognition, and nonviolent co-creation.

The next section gathers four contributions that critically engage with traditional Chinese philosophical models to rethink power, politics, and the possibility of pacifism. While they are also quite diverse in their approaches, these papers converge in their rejection of violence as a necessary or desirable mode of political action. Instead, they illuminate non-belligerent paradigms embedded in classical Chinese thought, offering alternative pathways to peaceful coexistence in an increasingly conflict-driven world.

Xiang Shuchen's paper "Must Great Power Politics Necessarily be Tragic?" challenges the realist presuppositions of thinkers like John Mearsheimer by retrieving the classical Chinese distinction between *li* (力), coercive power, and *de* (德), moral or noncoercive influence. She argues that the tragedy of modern geopolitics lies in its adherence to a narrow, militarized conception of power. Drawing from the Chinese tradition's elevation of *de* over *li*, Xiang proposes an alternative understanding of power that is inherently pacifist—not weak, but sustainable, relational, and ethically grounded. This redefinition undermines the assumed inevitability of violent great power conflict.

Gregor Paul, in "The 'Confucian' Ideal Person(ality) and Pacifism", centres the ethical figure of the *junzi* (君子) as an exemplar of individual moral autonomy and nonviolence. The *junzi* refuses to resolve conflict through force and embodies virtues such as *ren* (仁) and *yi* (義), promoting persuasion over domination. Paul asks what impact such individual pacifism can have in the context of war and state violence, ultimately arguing for a virtue-based pacifism that can be normatively

binding even in political contexts. His proposed model offers a stark contrast to current justifications of militarized defence and suggests the relevance of Confucian ethics for contemporary global pacifist discourse.

Yuchen Guo's essay "Pacifism in Mengzian Political Philosophy" revisits Mencius through the lens of "positive-pragmatic pacifism". Rather than situating Mengzi within traditional just war theory, Guo highlights the philosopher's emphasis on benevolent governance and fundamental opposition to violence. Applying Olaf Müller's framework, the paper argues that Mengzi's practical political proposals reflect a constructive pacifism rooted in realpolitik but guided by moral ideals. This synthesis of realism and normative pacifism positions Mengzian thought as an important resource for ethical governance beyond militarism.

In his "Confucian Social Philosophy Between Self and Family", Kevin Turner explores the tension between the Confucian ideal of harmony and the historical participation of Confucian figures in armed resistance. Rather than dismissing Confucianism as either pacifist or non-pacifist, Turner emphasizes its practical orientation toward social transformation. Taking the concept of the "consciousness of worry" (憂患意識) as central to the Confucian notion of responsibility, he suggests that Confucian ethics is not passive but deeply invested in the well-being of society. While not dogmatically pacifist, this philosophy allows for nonviolent social engagement and morally grounded reform as preferred strategies.

Taken together, these essays argue that Chinese traditions offer more than abstract ethical ideals—they contain robust philosophical resources for rethinking the very foundations of political power, war, and peace. By foregrounding moral authority over coercive dominance, relational responsibility over isolation, and virtue over force, they make a compelling case for alternative models of political order anchored in pacifist principles.

The final section, *Models of Adaptation and Complementarity*, gathers five studies that reinterpret classical Chinese thought through the lenses of flexibility, harmony, and ecological interdependence. Each contribution explores how balance—rather than confrontation—functions as a principle of pacification, making adaptability and complementarity central to the philosophical architecture of nonviolence.

In his study "Complex Adaptive Systems and Chinese Philosophy: A Fruitful Resonance", Margus Ott tries to bridge contemporary complexity theory and traditional Chinese thought. He demonstrates that notions such as *yin-yang*, relational embeddedness, and processual change anticipate key concepts of complex adaptive systems (CAS). Both frameworks privilege interconnection over control and responsiveness over rigidity. Ott's comparative synthesis reveals a form of systemic pacifism: conflict is replaced by self-organization, and stability arises through dynamic equilibrium, not domination.

Rory O'Neill's essay "Complementing Aggressive Activity with Laozian Stillness" offers a Daoist model of pacification through complementarity. Contrary to interpretations that portray Laozi's stillness as pure withdrawal, O'Neill argues that *jing* (靜) interacts with activity as its balancing counterpart. This dialectic of stillness and movement mitigates aggression and restores stability without suppression. The political implications are profound: peace, for Laozi, is not enforced but flows from the fluid interplay of opposites—an ethical flexibility mirroring the soft power of water that overcomes rigidity without violence.

Tao Junbo's "Shuwu's Tragedy: Rethinking Mencius' Arguments on the 'Right of Rebellion'" revisits the Confucian discourse on legitimacy and moral resistance. Through an analysis of *Shuwu's Tragedy* in the *Zuozhuan* and *Gongyangzhuan*, Tao supports Justin Tiwald's view that Mencius' notion of rebellion is a moral critique of tyranny, not an endorsement of violent uprising. The study highlights the Confucian tension between confronting injustice and restoring order, proposing a model of pacifist resistance grounded in ethical admonition rather than revolutionary force.

Massimiliano Lacertosa's paper "Human and Natural: The Function of the Myriad Things (*Wanwu* 萬物) in the Zhuangzi" interprets Daoist cosmology as an ecological ethics of coexistence. By dissolving hierarchies between humans and the myriad things, the *Zhuangzi* offers a radical critique of anthropocentric domination. Through *wuwei* (無為), or non-coercive action, Lacertosa articulates a mode of pacifism that protects life by refusing to harm or impose. Mutual adaptation, instead of conflict, becomes the ethical ground of peace within an ever-transforming continuum of being.

In his contribution, titled "Encountering the *Zhuangzi*: Adaptability and Emptiness in the Story of Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi", Thaddée Chantry-Gellens extends this reflection by focusing on adaptability as a spiritual and ethical practice. Through the imagery of emptiness and transformation, the *Zhuangzi* teaches attunement to change and humility before multiplicity. This adaptability, rooted in nonattachment, functions as an antidote to violence and rigidity, cultivating inner and social harmony through the acceptance of flux.

The essays in this section show that nonviolence in the Chinese philosophical tradition is not mere passivity, but an active art of transformation. Peace arises through adaptive responsiveness, balance, and ethical complementarity, i.e. through principles that dissolve oppositional conflicts. They emphasize the harmonization of diversity, and sustain coexistence across the human and natural worlds.

Across all its sections, this commemorative issue celebrates 50 years of the ISCP's commitment to fostering intercultural understanding through philosophical dialogue. From the ontological depth of Confucian relationism to the Daoist ecological insights into adaptation and balance, the collected works articulate a

shared refusal of domination, conflict, and coercion. They demonstrate that peace between nations, species, and minds, cannot be achieved through conflicts of contradictions but rather through creative transformation, ethical responsiveness, and relational harmonization.

Probably no Chinese master ever literally said "make love, not war", yet many have conveyed ideas that embody the same philosophical depth and moral appeal. They remind us that genuine love for humanity in the Confucian sense of humaneness (*ren* 仁), the Daoist sense of non-impositional harmonization, and the Buddhist sense of compassion, belongs to the deepest form of resistance to violence. To make love in this sense means to nurture and enjoy life in loving relationships and cultivated connections, and to restore balance in a world increasingly defined by profit-driven division. It is this humanistic and transformative spirit that has guided the ISCP for five decades, and it remains the guiding light for the future of global philosophy and the culture of peace.

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Keynotes: Forging Allies, Pursuing Justice, and Shaping Peaceful Coexistence

Confucian Role Ethics and a Holistic Conception of Justice Introduction

*Roger T. AMES**

Abstract

In the last half of the nineteenth century, a Chinese-character language was created in East Asia to synchronize East Asian cultures with the "new knowledge" being produced by Western modernity. Like Buddhism and other forms of Western learning that took root in China, this new vocabulary has been sinicized to express an indigenous worldview captured in the distinction between classical Greek ontological thinking as the science of being, and zoetological thinking as the art of living. While the language of Western modernity was being domesticated in East Asia, at the same time, beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Western philosophical narrative took a zoetological turn captured in Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead", and in different philosophical movements, has repudiated its own traditional commitment to onto-theological thinking. In this essay I use a holistic conception of justice as a specific case to illustrate an incremental convergence between the contemporary Chinese and Western philosophical worldviews.

Keywords: justice-as-principle, *zhengyi* 正義, ontological thinking, zoetological thinking, holistic conception of justice, power, Confucian role ethics, individualism, human becomings

Konfucijanska etika vlog in celostno pojmovanje pravičnosti

Izvleček

V drugi polovici 19. stoletja je bila v Vzhodni Aziji ustvarjena nova terminologija takšnega nabora kitajskih pismenk, ki naj bi vzhodnoazijske kulture uskladil z »novim znanjem«, ki ga je ustvarila zahodna modernost. Tako kot budizem in druge oblike zahodnega učenja, ki so dobili svoje mesto na Kitajskem, je bilo tudi to novo besedišče pokitajčeno, da bi izrazilo avtohtone poglede na svet, ujete v razlikovanju med klasično grško ontološko miselnostjo in zoetološkim mišljenjem kot umetnostjo življenja. Medtem ko se je jezik zahodne modernosti udomačeval v Vzhodni Aziji, je zahodna filozofska naracija hkrati, začenši v drugi polovici 19. stoletja, doživela zoetološki preobrat, izražen v Nietzschejevi izjavi, da je »Bog mrtev«, in je v različnih filozofskih gibanjih zavračala svojo lastno tradicionalno zavezanost ontoteološkemu mišljenju. V tem prispevku na osnovi celostnega

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pojmovanja pravičnosti kot specifičnega primera ponazorim postopno zbliževanje med sodobnim kitajskim in zahodnim filozofskim pogledom na svet.

Ključne besede: pravičnost kot načelo, *zhengyi* 正義, ontološka miselnost, zoetološka miselnost, celostno pojmovanje pravičnosti, moč, konfucijanska etika vlog, individualizem, ljudje v postajanju

Beginning in Japan and then China, in the second half of the nineteenth century East-Asian cultures constructed a new Chinese conceptual vocabulary drawn largely from the classics in their best efforts to synchronize their own cultural importance and their aspirations for the future with the terminology of Western modernity. The institutions and curricula of Western education were imported wholesale into the East-Asian academies, providing Asian scholars with access to the apparatus needed for the production of new knowledge, but at some cost to their own cultural and political identities. The consequences of this effort are still very much with us, as this language of Western modernity continues to be the medium through which East-Asian traditions are conceptualized and theorized abroad, and, via the translated form of this vocabulary, within their own scholarly literature as well.

But the story does not stop here. One way forward to an understanding of China's own emerging hybridic modernity is to reflect on the way in which this newly constructed Chinese vocabulary of Western modernity, as with the doctrines of Buddhism and Marxism before it, is being sinicized and "domesticated" within the context of Chinese culture itself. Concepts that originally spoke and stabilized a modernity grounded in substance ontology and its dualistic worldview, are now being retrofitted to express the ecological assumptions privileged in what we might call Confucian "zoetology" (*shengshenglun* 生生論) or "the art of living" as China's own first philosophy.

This distinction between Greek ontology and zoetology as two different first philosophies must not be construed as a simple, "either-or" comparison of Western and Chinese thinking. The classical Greek causal ontology that begins with Parmenides has certainly had a formative and persistent impact on the evolution of mainstream Western philosophy and culture, but at the same time, there are many examples of one-world, zoetological thinking in the counter currents within the Western narrative itself.[1] Even more significant than this Western counterculture,

1 There is the pragmatic if not expedient logic of political survival formulated by Niccolò Machiavelli, the "new science" and its emphasis on rhetoric, history, and a philosophy of the imagination posited by the anti-Cartesian humanist Giambattista Vico, the identification of God with nature (*Deus sive Natura*, "God is Nature") that was the signature of Baruch Spinoza's pantheism, the

however, is the fact that in the later part of the nineteenth century, a seismic shift occurs within the Western philosophical narrative itself that seizes upon substance ontology with all of its implications as its specific target of denunciation. Taking Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" as a signpost in this Western turn toward zoetological thinking, I would argue that many if not most of the various movements that have defined Western philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been trying to extricate themselves from this old and now deemed fallacious way of thinking.

Putting the Chinese domestication of the vocabulary of Western modernity together with the zoetological turn in the Western philosophical narrative, perhaps the most interesting phenomenon in the current and continuing cultural encounter between China and the liberal West is that at the same time East Asia was constructing its version of the language of Western modernity, a Kuhnian paradigm shift was occurring within the contemporary Western narrative that rang the death knell on substance ontology and all of its trappings. Indeed, in our own time, we bear witness to a new direction in Western philosophy where the process philosophies being developed to replace what Heidegger has called a kind of theo-ontological foundationalism is to an important degree becoming resonant with the processual vocabulary of Confucian philosophy.

In this essay, I want to reflect on the term *zhengyi* 正義 that came to be used as a translation of the Western notion of "justice" as a case study in this cultural convergence. We will discover that in the avalanche of the commentary on justice following the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, his abstract, principled, and contractarian "theory" of justice has been challenged by a parade of scholars who offer a more capacious interpretation of justice and in so doing, are drawing the contemporary discourse on justice toward the more holistic understanding of it as it is found in Confucian role ethics.

Justice or Power? Is Justice "In Principle" Actually Justice?

Former Singaporean minister of foreign affairs, George Yeo 楊榮文, in a recent article, "Refreshing Western Liberalism", observes that early on, both the United States and European Union, as the foremost advocates of liberalism, took respect for diversity as liberalism's most fundamental organizing principle. Yeo insists that what follows from respect for this seminal value as a necessary condition for any robust conception of social justice is that "in any domain of human affairs,

transition from poetics to the engraving of images by the antinomian William Blake, the transcendentalism of Romantic figures such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the deference paid to Ralph Waldo Emerson as the hero of William James and John Dewey, who both took him to be a precursor of their own philosophical pragmatism, to name but a few.

the only justification for centralization—for taking power from a lower level—is necessity" (Yeo 2003, 3). But in reporting on the subsequent degeneration of this liberal ideal, Yeo avers that liberalism has now assumed a universalist pretence in which "instead of the liberal system being a meta-structure that respects the diversity and autonomy of constituent elements, it now seeks to create uniformity with the help of centralized power" (ibid.). The degenerative failure of liberalism has arisen from its own exceptionalism and parochialism, and in this discriminatory form, has come to apply a universalistic "democracy-autocracy" binary where the value systems of other peoples if not wholly ignored, are being judged and disdained before they are even understood.

The larger problem in this tension between social justice and centralized power of which illiberal liberalism is just one example, is that when any doctrine or value or belief system, however benign, becomes singular and exclusive as "one thing", it at the same time becomes hegemonic and oppressive. In the discourse around justice today, there are many scholars who are critical of the highly abstract way in which the remote, autonomous individual that grounds Kantian and utilitarian ethics, and rights theory as well, has been taken as the subject of justice, and has been theorized, valorized, and justified independent of our empirical, social actualities. In what follows, I want to level a parallel complaint against the impersonal and highly abstract way in which a remote, principled notion of justice which has no actual force independent of our social activities has been formulated and institutionalized as a framework for the pursuit of procedural rather than social, distributive, or more recently, restorative justice. My argument will be that our understanding of both persons as subjects of justice and what the idea of justice itself means should be derived from and justified by the empirical experience within which such concepts originate.

I am not alone in questioning the adequacy of a principled approach to justice. Amartya Sen is critical of many of the contemporary theorists of justice—his own teacher, Rawls, first among them—who, in their presupposing that justice is to be found in the application of principle, take what Sen describes as a "transcendental" approach to the theorizing of justice. Sen describes such scholars as being "arrangement-focused" rather than "realization-focused". That is, these theorists are indeed theorists. They are concerned to define institutional justice as a perfect, independent standard that can then be mechanically applied for fair adjudication that for Sen is without sufficient regard to the actualizing of justice in the lives of real people (Sen 2009).

That justice has conventionally been understood as some antecedent moral principle that adjudicates just conduct is borne out by the blindfold, scales, and sword that have come to symbolize divine justice with the statue of the Goddess of Justice. The Greek Themis as the second wife of Zeus dispenses a rationalized justice as she sits at his foot high above the untidy complexities of human life. Justice is

thus often treated as some higher-order norm from which lower and more specific rules of behaviour are derived. Blind justice is usually understood as that moral rightness or righteousness that is achieved by evaluating a situation and acting objectively and impartially by appeal to this principle in treating all people the same. Indeed, it is the assumption that justice must function as an independent principle that has galvanized an intimate association between justice and the impartial rule of law that, in treating all human beings equally regardless of their particular histories or lived differences, serves as guarantor for the "upholding of justice". But does this principled conception of justice, either primordial or derived, as it is applied to individuals impartially regardless of their differences, really "do justice" to the complexity of the phenomenon?

There is this second understanding of justice that we might invoke as an alternative to this idea of upholding and enforcing a principle of righteousness and rectitude. "To do justice" to something means to appreciate it fully and to respond to it in a such a way that its full worth is registered and respected. Indeed, this second, more holistic notion of justice references a complex and creative process of doing our utmost to achieve what is optimally appropriate in the specific, usually inequitable relations that locate us as always unique individuals living our roles in our families and communities. I want to appeal to Confucian role ethics and its conception of equity among relationally constituted "human becomings" as a challenge to the value invested in liberal ideology in the notions of individual autonomy and equality, to explore this second more robust "sense of justice" as an alternative to the perhaps clearer and cleaner but certainly less capacious notion of justice-as-principle.[2]

2 There has been some important work done on the Confucian conception of justice in the recent sinological literature that, although the authors express their formulations in different ways, I take as being corroborative of my holistic "partial and impartial" interpretation of a sense of justice. Jiang Tao 蒋涛, for example, in his monograph *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China* (2021) uses what he takes to be the tension between "humaneness" (*ren* 仁) as partiality and "justice" as impartiality to be the complex continuum on which the classical political philosophies of Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism are to be differentiated and calibrated, with Confucius himself being seen as leaning heavily in the direction of partialism. Erin Cline in her *Confucius, Rawls, and a Sense of Justice* (2012), without positing Jiang's perceived exclusionary tension between such virtues and justice, also offers an interpretation of a Confucian sense of justice expressed through Confucian "partialist" virtues such as *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義. In another important publication, *Justice and International Order* (2022), Richard Ned Lebow and Feng Zhang centre their discussion on the two meanings of the term *yi* 義 that they take as referencing a personal disposition or virtue, and being closely linked to ritual propriety (*li* 禮), also as a higher order social norm or standard. For Lebow and Zhang, this same complementarity is found in *ren* 仁 as a personal virtue and as universalizable affection or care. And again, in Joshua Mason's *Justice and Harmony: Cross-cultural Ideals in Conflict and Cooperation* (2022), he reconciles exclusive binaries such as justice and harmony, and the right and the good, by correlating the notions of "root harmony" (*benhe* 本和) and "harmonic justice" (*heyi* 和義) in the symbiotic achievement of "just harmony" (*zhengyi* 正義).

Confucian Role Ethics: A Challenge to the Ideology of Individualism

In the introduction of Chinese philosophy and culture into the Western academy, we have in significant degree tended to theorize and conceptualize this antique tradition by appeal to familiar categories drawn from the Western narrative. As noted above, this situation has been exacerbated over the past century and a half in East Asia by the invention and wholesale application of a Chinese version of the language of Western modernity to serve as the conceptual structure for general education and its curriculum. The positing of a Confucian role ethics with its distinctively different vocabulary is an attempt to articulate a *sui generis* moral philosophy that allows this tradition to have its own voice, and to speak on its own terms. This holistic Confucian ethic is grounded in the primacy of relationality, and serves as a robust challenge to a foundational liberal individualism that has come to define persons as discrete, autonomous, rational, free, and often self-interested agents. Confucian role ethics begins from a relationally constituted conception of persons and understands such persons as unique, habituated foci within a manifold of relations. It takes family roles and relations as the entry point for developing moral competence, invokes moral imagination and the growth in relations that it can inspire as the engine and substance of human morality, and entails a human- and family-centred, a-theistic religiousness that stands in sharp contrast to the God-centred Abrahamic religions.

Confucian role ethics avoids the ontological misstep of what A.N. Whitehead calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness" where we equate the abstracted and independent "thing" with what is real, while at the same time ignoring the genuine connectivity and transitivity of such "things" that animate them in the transactional events of our ordinary experience. This fallacy of misplaced concreteness regards abstracted entities presumed to have a "simple location" as being what is concrete, while at the same time, ignoring the vital and processual synergies that attend all things in our experience of them.[3] Indeed, it is these fallacies of misplaced concreteness and simple location that underwrite the principled-notion of justice and the abstracted individual that its application is presumed to adjudicate.

The classical Confucian texts give us a Chinese instance of what Dewey has called the postulate of immediate empiricism as it is captured in the mantra "the inseparability of doing and knowing" (*zhixingheyi* 知行合一). These canonical Confucian works also appeal to a relatively straightforward account of our actual life experiences as the ultimate source of all theorizing and conceptualizing. For Confucian philosophy, the primacy of relationality in the human ecology means that experience is a vital, continuous, collaborative, and unbounded affair with

3 A.N. Whitehead in *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1979, 137) observes: "This presupposition of individual independence is what I have elsewhere called, the 'fallacy of simple location'".

all erstwhile "things" in fact being organically interdependent and synergistic "events". Experience is holistic in the sense that there are no gaps or final boundaries, and the transitions, conjunctions, and shared horizons within experience are as real as anything else.

In the growth of a friendship, for example, the friendship itself is what is most concrete, and the individual friends are themselves an abstraction from the matrix of coalescing relations. That is, the friends are best understood in their connectivity rather than in isolation, and they become distinctive as individuals not in spite of the growth in this connectivity, but because of it. In this Confucian view, we are not individuals in the discrete sense of a Platonic or Aristotelian *psyche*, but are instead interrelated persons living a multiplicity of roles that in aggregate constitute who we are, and that enable us to pursue and habituate a unique and distinctive virtuosity in our conduct. Stated simply, each of us is the sum of the roles we live in consonance with our kin and our fellows.

In thinking of the nature of human "beings", we are culturally disposed to default to a retrospective causal or teleological explanation rather than to allow for a more holistic, prospective, contextual, and processive account of what it means to *become* human, both individually and as a species.[4] Viewed critically from a Confucian perspective, thinking of human nature retrospectively as a given potential rather than prospectively and holistically as the evolving product of "becoming" human is a miscalculation. In thinking this way, we come to presuppose that human nature is either a given potential to be actualized or some pre-existing ideal to be attained. Indeed, such ontological thinking is precisely what John Dewey is referencing in his deep concern about what he calls *the* philosophical fallacy. Dewey alerts us to our inveterate habit of decontextualizing and essentializing one element within the continuity of experience, and then in our best efforts to overcome this *post hoc* diremption, of construing this same element as foundational and causal. Taking the example of "human nature", in the process of our ongoing narratives in which we gradually shape our personal identities, we abstract something called human "being" out of the complexity of this continuing experience, and then make this abstraction antecedent to and causal of the subsequent process. For Dewey, contrary to such substance thinking,

> [...] the reality is the growth-process itself [...] The real existence is the history in its entirety, the history just as what it is. The operations of splitting it up into two parts and then having to unite them again by

4 This ready-made conception of a human "being" can be understood morally as well as physically. For example, in Elizabeth Anscombe's seminal essay that has underwritten much more recent work in Aristotelian naturalism, "Modern Moral Philosophy", she suggests that: "[...] just as *man* has so many teeth [...] so perhaps the species *man*, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life [...] 'has' such-and-such virtues." (Anscombe 1981, 38)

> appeal to causative power are equally arbitrary and gratuitous. (Dewey 1985, 210)

Some scholars believe that notions such as free agency and moral responsibility require us to isolate individuals from their relationships by positing a definition of what it *is* to be a human being.[5] We would argue the irony is that in thus insisting upon a definition of some ready-made human *being* or some guiding teleological hand, such reduplicative conceptions of persons not only diminish the possibilities of productive difference and uniqueness among human beings, but also, in asserting that our sameness is essential while our differences are only incidental, in fact truncates any robust existential notion of individual agency or responsibility. Under such conditions, who we *are* is largely a given.

Justice as a Relational Virtuosity

Turning from who we are to what we do, Confucian role ethics is radical in resisting any separation between personal identity and the world of experience. Role ethics goes beyond the penetration of "mind" and "language" as they penetrate into experience to locate the identity of persons within the actual content of experience itself.[6] If for Confucian role ethics the notion of a ready-made human nature is problematic, so too is the principle of justice conceived as an antecedent principle. To the extent that we think of justice as a *principle*, there is a strong sense of antecedence, and of generality if not universality in its application. Indeed, the word "principle" carries just such connotations: a basic source, an essence or determining characteristic, an original faculty or endowment, an originating or actuating or determining force, a higher-order norm from which lower and more specific rules of behaviour are derived, a fixed or predetermined mode of action, an axiom of conduct.

But in fact, we can argue from a Confucian perspective that on reflection, if justice does indeed have a referent, it is primarily as a habituated sensibility learned largely at home and derived from persons acting justly within our family and community relations. Rather than being fixed and retrospective, such an

5 This seems to be a major concern for May Sim (2007, 13 and *passim*) in her reading of Confucius: "The Confucian self [...] is so relationalistic that it is difficult to see how it could function as a source of agency or locus of responsibility as Confucian ethics demands."

6 Hilary Putnam (1990, 28) insists that: "[...] elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' *penetrate so deeply into what we call 'reality' that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the start.* Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere." (Italics in original)

awareness and responsiveness point most concretely to the unfolding of complex configurations of always-unique relations as they are informed by analogy with past experience. Erstwhile "principles" are in fact a habituated and responsive virtuosity, a quality of efficacious and productive behaviour attained when our human transactions are informed in any particular situation by our best efforts to give full affordance to the legitimate interests of all concerned.

When we turn to Confucian role ethics and its assumptions about living justly, it certainly offers guidelines for conduct, but more than appealing to *abstract* principles or values or virtues, it looks primarily to the contours of our concrete familial and social roles for guidance, lived roles that are arguably more instructive in what to do next than such bald abstractions. We have real, intuitive, existential insight into what constitutes the appropriate role of a brother or a daughter or a friend from our lived experience in a family and community. We might think of the cognate vocabulary of "an achieved ritual propriety in our roles and relations" (*li* 禮) and our "habituated embodied living" (*ti* 體) as that social grammar that gives us standing and enables our role-located activities in a family and community to become increasingly meaningful. Role ethics offers guidance on how to behave most productively, and provides an explanation for proper conduct that seeks to accommodate the inevitable complexity of human activities. In relying upon what is most clearly empirical for guidance rather than appealing to abstract principles such as justice, courage, temperance, and so on, we find that there is a vital, felt sense of propriety in our concrete roles and relations that suggests to us quite specifically what we ought to do in this particular situation in order to act justly.

Confucian Role Ethics and a Capacious Conception of Justice

Confucian role ethics is Confucian, but not exotic. A relational conception of person that resonates with the one that grounds Confucian philosophy is also found among the classical American pragmatists, such as William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. For Dewey, for example, simply put, autonomy is a fiction; it is association that is a fact. In his own words, he asserts that

> [...] there is no mystery about the fact of association, of interconnected action which affects the activity of singular elements. There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association [...]. Thus man is not merely *de facto* associated; but he *becomes* a social animal in the make-up of his ideas, sentiments and deliberate behavior. *What* he believes, hopes for and aims at is the outcome of association and intercourse. (Dewey 2000, 288)

Dewey particularizes the fact of associated living and valorizes it by developing a vision of the incremental congealing of a focal habitude as the ever-evolving identity of the relationally constituted human being. That is, he develops a distinctive if not idiosyncratic language of "habits" to describe the various modalities of association that enable human beings to add value to their activities and to transform mere relations into a communicating community. Dewey says that

> [...] we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. (Dewey 1977, vol. 14, 31)[7]

I would argue that empirically Confucian role ethics can be seen as taking Dewey's contention that association is a fact a step further by stipulating the specific forms that association take within lives as they are lived in a family—that is, the various roles we live as sons and spouses, grandmothers and cousins. If association is a fact in the human experience, the institution and roles we live in a family are no less so. Not only are these familial roles descriptive of our associations, but they are also prescriptive in the sense that roles in a family that then extend into community are themselves normative, guiding us in the direction of appropriate conduct. Whereas mere association is a given, flourishing families and communities are what we are able to make of this condition, and as perhaps our highest human achievement.

I would argue that in several important ways Confucian role ethics, like Dewey's democracy, offers a context for a holistic understanding of justice within a capacious and inclusive vision of the moral life. First, Confucian role ethics would insist on the primacy of relationships that would preclude any notion of a solitary and isolated individual. Personal discreteness is a conceptual abstraction and strict autonomy a misleading fiction: association in everything we do is a fact. And the roles we live that necessarily begin with family are simply the way in which this fact of association is further stipulated and specified.

I hasten to make the point that giving up the notion of a superordinate "self" far from surrendering one's personal uniqueness, in fact enhances it. That is, the "natural kinds" talk that usually stands behind claims about a shared and universal human nature and the concomitant essential self that follows from it, mitigates the degree of difference we find in a Confucian notion of focal persons

7 See Steven Fesmire (2003, 10) wherein he sheds some light on the deliberately imprecise notion of habits by describing them as "pre-established social circuits".

where each non-fungible person is constituted by a dynamic manifold of always specific relations.

Secondly, Confucian role ethics resists the uncritical ontological assumptions underlying a conception of agency that requires a separation between the agent of conduct and the conduct itself, and between the agent and the narrative in which their story is unfolding. The notion of consummate person/conduct (*ren* 仁) that in itself is one way of saying Confucian role ethics entails no such agency/action dichotomy, and is a gerundive descriptive of everything from particular behaviours to an entire life lived well. *Ren* requires a narrative rather than an analytic understanding of persons. And in the project of becoming *ren*, the assumption is that, rather than cleaving off character from conduct or advocating acting in concert with some abstract moral principles, our actions must be correlated with both our role models and with those other persons who make up our families and communities. As it states in the *Analects*,

> Consummate persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Being able to correlate one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming consummate as a person. (*Analects* 6.30)
>
> 夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方也已。

Of course, when *ren* is referred to in a more abstract sense, it is an open-ended generalization made off of particular historical accomplishments of consummate conduct rather than referencing some innate and essential nature characteristic of all members of the set called human "beings". As gerundive persons—that is, as erstwhile verbal nouns—we are what we do, and whatever we do, we do it together in our relations with others, or not at all.

Thirdly, Confucian role ethicists appreciate the dramatic role that the body has as integral to achieving personal identity and consummate conduct. The body is the root through which the quality of human conduct is being nourished and grown. It is at least heuristically inviting that the simplified graph for body (*ti* 體) is 体—that is, quite literally, the graphic denotation of the root of a person. The body and its body "consciousness"—always a collaboration between organism and environment, and between person and world, is at once carnal and vital, seen and lived, receptive and responsive. Not only does experience in the world shape the body, but through our bodily sensorium we structure, conceptualize, and theorize our world of experience (see Ames 2020, especially 102–14). Indeed, it is because the body is the conduit through which the ancestors and their culture live on in us that keeping one's body intact has been the first among the several precepts of family reverence (*xiao* 孝) (Rosemont and Ames 2008, 105). Although the *Shuowen* lexicon states the "altar" (*li* 豊) element in the graph that makes it

cognate with the "ritualized propriety" (*li* 禮) with its roots in the performance of sanctified ancestral sacrifices has phonetic reference, the fact that the body is presumed to be inherited from the ancestors and must be safeguarded at all costs does elevate this precept into a sacred trust.

Fourthly, Confucian role ethics emphasizes the vital role that the process of moral imagination and dramatic rehearsal (*shu* 恕) plays in consummate thinking and living. In Confucian role ethics, it is our educated imagination that, in drawing upon feelings, reason, intelligence, somaticity and all of our human resources, can defer responsive action until we can conjure forth the full range of possibilities that allows for optimal growth in our relationships. And it is this deliberate growth in relationships that is the very substance of Confucian morality.

Finally, Confucian role ethics does not compete with virtue ethics or any other ethical *theory* but is rather a vision of the moral life that resists the theoretical/practical dichotomy. When we read the Confucian canon, the expectation in this tradition is that the student, in subscribing to such a regimen of study and practice, is being provided with a transformative moral education (*jiaohua* 教化). While there is certainly the prospect that, by becoming more familiar with a cluster of terms that enable a critical reflection on our conduct, we can become more cogent in our moral reasoning, the more important consideration is the stern belief that we can become better people through exposure to the ethical exhortations and the model behaviours of cultural heroes.

The Chinese Domestication of the Language of Western Modernity

It is a commonplace to observe that within the Western academy Confucian philosophy has been misread to an important degree by the conversion of the tradition through the Christian vocabulary used by the missionaries to translate it. At the same time, within the Chinese academy itself, the wholesale construction of a Chinese-language version of Western modernity has led to a theorizing and conceptualizing of Confucian philosophy through a vocabulary that is not its own. In the ethical discourse, for example, early on Confucian ethics was relegated to deontic status by many scholars, the most recent examples being Heiner Roetz and Lee Ming-huei. But more recently, with the resurrection of virtue ethics in the Western narrative by scholars such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre, Confucian ethics is more widely read now as a version of virtue ethics.[8]

But as I have observed above, the story of theorizing China through Western concepts is intriguing in its complexity. By appealing to the examples of the Chinese

8 For a comprehensive overview of this history, see Wong (2024).

appropriation of Buddhism and more recently of Marxism, we can anticipate that while the influence of these waves of Western learning on Confucian thinking has certainly been significant if not transformative, at the same time there has been an internal process whereby the vocabulary of what for China are initially alien traditions has been domesticated to become a distinctively Chinese version of the original: a Chinese Buddhism, a Chinese Marxism, and now a Chinese adaptation of Western modernity.

In this process of linguistic domestication and cultural adaptation, terms such as *chaoyue* 超越 and *pubian* 普遍 that were originally used specifically as a Chinese translation of the classical Western conception of strict transcendence and its universalism that we find with Plato's Forms (*eidos*) and the aseity of the Abrahamic God, have been insinuated into a one-world Confucian cosmology and deflated to mean "surpassing" and "pervasive, common, general", respectively. Other examples that immediately come to mind are *bentilun* 本體論 as a translation of "ontology" that far from referencing the classical Greek notion of "being" as immutable "substance" or "essence", has come to denote generic traits of experience. Another most revealing term is *wenhua* 文化 as a translation of "culture" that, without being freighted with the original teleological assumptions built into the metaphor of "culture" as it is found in terms such as agriculture or horticulture, refers in the Chinese context to a contrapuntal and open-ended process of aestheticizing the human environment.

But in terms of the long-term implications it will have for the discipline of philosophy itself, perhaps the most consequential event in this intercultural saga of linguistic adaptation, is the profound turn towards zoetology within the contemporary Western philosophical narrative. With the repudiation of ontological thinking, the various versions of process philosophy that are the signature of phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, existentialism, and so on, and that have been developed to replace what is now a discredited foundationalism, is in some important degree becoming resonant with the vocabulary of traditional Confucian philosophy. In the place of Platonic formal definition, Aristotelian causal thinking, and Cartesian rationalism that in their quest for objective certainty all privilege the precision of clear and distinct ideas, vocabularies of process, change, particularity, metaphor, somaticity, emotions, creative advance, and indeed productive vagueness have come increasingly into vogue. Simply put, an important direction in contemporary Western philosophy is the attempt to think of the process and to cultivate the practical wisdom needed for philosophy to be relevant to an always changing world order. And the good news for comparative philosophy is that these recent developments in mainstream Anglo-European philosophy are themselves giving rise to an interpretive vocabulary that promises a more productive dialogue with a Chinese philosophical tradition that never denied the reality of change or process or wisdom in the first place.

A Test Case: Tracking a Convergence Between *Zhengyi* 正義 and "Justice"

As one example of how these two philosophical narratives are moving towards a convergence, I want to track the current Western discourse on "justice" and its Chinese translation as *zhengyi* 正義. *Zhengyi* is a Chinese binomial term first appearing several times in the *Xunzi*, and has subsequently in our own time been appropriated to translate the Western conception of "justice". The term *zhengyi*, unlike *pubian* and *chaoyue*, was not specifically invented to translate a distinctively Western philosophical term. As an expression that dates back to at least the Han dynasty, it has had a life of its own and is thus coloured by its own persistent philosophical assumptions. By first locating and understanding *zhengyi* within the holistic cosmology of its own Confucian interpretive context, we can speculate on how a distinctively Confucian conception of "justice" has been understood within the tradition itself. On this basis, we can then compare it with how the current post-Rawlsian conception of justice has evolved within the Western philosophical discourse.

We might begin from the two separate terms that have been combined to constitute the expression *zhengyi* 正義, that is, *zheng* 正 and *yi* 義. *Zheng* as what is right and what ought to be done in a particular context, means "proper conduct". Translating it as "proper" rather than "correct" or "right" respects the reflexive nature of judgments within this ecological cosmology in which agent and context are co-terminus and mutually shaping. What is important in our understanding of this term is that *zheng* as a description of what is the most appropriate course of action in a particular situation has the connotation of "proper" rather than what would be a realist claim that it is objectively right conduct independent of the subject. The *Shuowen* lexicon defines *zheng* as *shi* 是: "this", "what is to be affirmed", "what is deserving of approbation". It is correlated with the singular demonstrative pronoun that is reflexive in referencing a particular thing within the specific context of the speaker. What recommends the translation of *zheng* as "proper" is that along with other words such as "appropriate", "propriety", and "property", and "proper" is derived etymologically from the Latin, *proprius* with its core meaning of "making something one's own". The substance and depth of *zheng*, beyond merely denoting formal regulations, is thus dependent upon an inclusive and specific process of personalization within a particular context. *Zheng* is ideally what is proper for these particular people in this particular situation under these particular conditions.

The classical Chinese term *yi* 義 has conventionally been translated into English as "righteousness" or "righteous", a palpably biblical allusion that we might associate with Divine command theory that would denote compliance with some external, objective standard as it is endorsed by the Will of God. However, this

classical Chinese notion, when viewed both etymologically and within its own interpretive context, would be better rendered as "optimal appropriateness". Morality thus understood is the effort to negotiate what is best under particular circumstances, where the interests of all of those affected within a particular situation must be considered, including one's own. *Yi* is thus resolutely situational, inclusive, and pragmatic.

In the modern language, the binomial *zhengyi* 正義 carries with it a decidedly holistic sense of justice that resists either a reduction to the objectivism of abstract principle or to a particularism that would exclude the more general interests of the others concerned. With the commitment to the inseparability of one and many (*yiduobufen*) in the Confucian cosmology, *zhengyi* must include broad concern for partiality as well as any abstract emerging standard of impartiality. Equity for each unique person can only be respected and diversity among them achieved by giving full affordance to both particularity and impartiality rather than choosing between them.[9] That is, rather than invoking some transcendental standard or some faculty of impersonal reason as the single warrant for claiming impartiality—a strategy that is necessarily hobbled by the contingencies of always specific circumstances—Confucian philosophy proffers an alternative understanding of impartiality true to its commitment to holism. This being the case, rather than a conception of justice rendered properly blind by appeal to some abstract principle as it is applied to equal and thus abstract individuals, a notion of relational equity must do the work of accommodating both particular persons in particular circumstances as well as the generalizations that can be made from them.

Such an inclusive holism would mean that, rather than being allied with an abstract, principled understanding of positive law, *zhengyi* is to be associated more with what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life" as they are defined by specific patterns of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) achieved within historical continuities and always specific circumstances. Again, rather than invoking a rational calibration on the scales of evidence that will enable it to achieve a binary "right or wrong", "guilty or not guilty" closure, the pursuit of *zhengyi* would be a continuing, emergent, and always imperfect process inclusive of multiple perspectives and relying heavily on moral imagination for its compass. With an optimizing symbiosis (*youhuagongsheng* 優化共生) being its "objective" and highest value, such a conception of justice can only be provisional and a matter of degree. Rather than being elevated and reified or institutionalized as an abstract, complete theory, its origins for the most part would lie in a response to perceived instances of injustice. Again, thus resisting any persistent formal definition as a concept or principle, *zhengyi* would signify a quality of agreement achieved through an emergent consensus among a

9 The spirit of the "capabilities approach" developed for the economics of welfare by Amartya Sen in the mid-1980's and referenced in his *Idea of Justice* shares this same concern that real justice must respect particularity. See Amartya Sen (2009).

specific population: literally (L. *con* + *sentire*) "shared feeling" in real time: what we might describe as a sense of justice.

Is this speculative reconstruction of *zhengyi* within the Confucian interpretive context consistent with the real-life experience of Chinese people? Chang Wejen [Zhang Weiren] 張偉仁, the contemporary Taiwan scholar, has spent a lifetime reflecting on the subject of law in traditional China, and in asking precisely this question of how Chinese people have understood and valorized justice, he concludes that

> [...] the Chinese believe that for a social problem, facts could be seen in different perspectives, especially if one observed their historical developments; when many other factors, including human relations and feelings, were taken into consideration, it was nearly impossible to get a clear, black and white picture. Therefore in many instances, the parties to a dispute did not seek absolute justice, believing that it was not achievable or even desirable; they preferred peaceful coexistence to formal justice that separate them into winners and losers. (Chang 2010, 247)

Turning to how the concept of justice has come to be understood in the Western philosophical narrative, in the wake of the Western academy's repudiation of substance ontology with its transcendent universalism that began in the late nineteenth century, we are able to track an ongoing convergence between this traditional Confucian understanding of *zhengyi* and an evolving transformation of the Western conception of "justice" in its own political discourse. It is now half a century since John Rawls published his epochal *A Theory of Justice* (1971), seeming at a stroke to bring to an end a hundred and fifty year-long dearth of original works in political philosophy within the Western narrative. Following this publication, the topic of justice, long neglected by philosophers, became an issue of great moment and concern. Robert Nozick followed Rawls fairly quickly with *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), a libertarian response to Rawls's liberal theory that was only the first among a flood of other substantive works on "justice", with the most influential being those of Michael Walzer (1983; 1994), Derek L. Phillips (1986), Elizabeth H. Wolgast (1987), Susan Moller Okin (1989), Robert C. Solomon (1985), and most recently, Amartya Sen (2009) and Michael Sandel (2009). A compounding commentarial tradition on these works and others has ensued, and continues apace today.

Even though transcendent universalism has been largely repudiated within the Western narrative, its long shadow has still survived in different forms. Although Rawls does not subscribe to either the mythology or the metaphysics of principled justice, his influential "theory of justice" with its "original position" and its "veil of ignorance" offers us an ambitious strategy for deriving a set of antecedent,

fixed, objective, and impartial principles that would be contractually appealing for everyone independently of any personal, historical, or cultural context.[10] Rawls's abstract principles can ostensibly be applied to do the same heavy lifting as any other traditional formulation of justice as an abstract ideal.

We can argue that in the discourse on justice that follows upon Rawls's rational theory, there is an incremental attempt to put Humpty Dumpty together again by reinstating what this abstract theory has excluded from consideration. For example, Michael Walzer is properly critical of the distance an abstract Rawlsian approach has from the real world, and responds by defending political pluralism, a thick notion of the self, and a complex understanding of equality. Reflecting on the "hypothetical" and "ideal contract" described by Rawls, Walzer avers that

> [...] in a world of particular cultures, competing conceptions of the good, scarce resources, elusive and expansive needs, there isn't going to be a single formula, universally applicable. There isn't going to be a universally approved path that carries us from a notion like, say, 'fair shares' to a comprehensive list of the goods to which that notion applies. (Walzer 1983, 79)

Susan Moller Okin, in her influential work *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, offers a compelling argument that the contemporary institution of family with its hierarchical structure of roles saturated by a pervasive gender bias, is fundamentally unjust. And as she properly claims, given the crucial importance of family as the veritable "school of justice" in the moral development and education of our children, the assumption that we can construct a just society on such a tenuous foundation is untenable. This being the case, it is at once undeniably true and at the same time deplorable that most scholars who would offer us a theory of justice think they can get away with either ignoring family or idealizing it, to the extent that its partial concerns locate it beyond the scope of ethics (Moller Okin 1989).[11]

As I have noted above, Amartya Sen is impatient with many contemporary theorists of justice, such as Rawls, in presupposing that justice is to be found in the

10 In fairness to Rawls, there is his later work represented by *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001), a later development of his theory that might be taken as an awareness of some of Sen's concerns.

11 Moller Okin frames the problem well, but her proposed solution to eliminate gender is disappointing. While she seeks to rectify the patently unjust institution of family upon which so much of social justice is built, and on which justice ultimately depends, she offers a thin Rawlsian-inspired attempt to apply the principle of justice to a family of autonomous individuals in order to establish equal opportunity among them. Indeed, Moller Okin's ostensive solution is in fact an integral part of the problem itself, requiring as it does the retention of a foundational individualism as central to the definition of what it is to be a human being, while relying exclusively upon a principled understanding of justice as the instrument for effecting a just world.

application of principle. At the end of the day, Sen is resistant to the universalistic, univocal, and exclusive claims that undergird such theories made anaemic by their total reliance on abstraction at the expense of the concrete human experience. He offers instead what he describes positively as an "incomplete" notion of justice that abjures the need for a perfect standard before it can be applied, arguing that our starting point should be to proceed with urgency in addressing many of the blatant cases of injustice upon which there is broad agreement within the world community (Sen 2009).

Robert C. Solomon, in his *A Passion for Justice*, insists that the seemingly endless attempts of philosophers to formulate some abstract "principle", "theory" or "idea" of justice has in fact deflected the discussion away from its proper focus on the complexities and passions of immediate experience. He argues that "[...] there is no coherent ideal of justice. Justice claims are always contextual and presuppose a local set of conditions and considerations" (Solomon 1985, 104).

For Solomon, the irreducibly situated nature of morality and moral development arises from the fact that human beings are social in our native instincts, and that any reflection on justice must emerge from the shared nature of the human experience. He insists that

> [...] what is natural in us is our sense of being-with-others, not just in affection and dependency but in that our sense of ourselves and our interests is, from start to finish, tied up with other people. What is natural in us, I want to argue, is neither self-interest nor global benevolence but reciprocity. (Ibid.)

Perhaps it is Elizabeth Wolgast in her *The Grammar of Justice* who, in observing that it all starts with family, has moved the Western discourse on justice most decidedly in a Confucian direction. Wolgast applies a Wittgensteinian understanding of the grammar of concepts such as justice that would locate them within "forms of life" to argue that the emotional responses we have to immorality are themselves bedrock in their meaning with no further need of explanation. Wolgast insists that "[...] we learn morality and the moral vocabulary together, and come to have a sense of injustice at the same time [...] [W]e not only learn behavior and meanings together but learn them very young" (Wolgast 1987, 212).

Not only is it that language "meshes with life", but in Wolgast's work she underscores the necessary and symbiotic roles within the family of both parents and children in cultivating their moral competence together through a shared sense of shame:

> The connection of a young child with her parents is not simply between an authority and an underling; it is a complicated, reciprocal relation

> in which the child's behavior reflects back on the parent both as parent and person, and the parent's example, both in expression and in action, serves as a pattern for the child. Morally speaking, you might say that they are mutually dependent and symbiotic, even though the child is in other ways dependent and immature. (Ibid., 201)

In highlighting the parent-child reciprocity in cultivating their moral agency, Wolgast explains what she takes to be Aristotle's "curious remark" that only virtuous persons brought up in good habits are competent to discuss ethics, a remark perhaps made less curious because Confucius says the same thing.[12] Indeed, for Confucius, the roots of consummate moral conduct lie in the shared lives lived with family. In the *Analects* it says:

> As for family reverence [*xiao*] and fraternal deference [*ti*], these are, I suspect, the root [*ben*] of becoming consummate in one's roles and relations [*ren*]. (*Analects* 1.2)
>
> 孝弟也者，其為仁之本與。

For Solomon, Wolgast, and Confucius too, we develop our sense of what is moral not from the application of some ideal, but practically and incrementally from earliest childhood within our families in the feelings we share as we respond to perceived instances of immorality. The growth of moral meaning and behaviour generally and a sense of justice specifically, takes place locally in the ecologies of family and community.

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12 "Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge [...]. Hence anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits." (Aristotle 1984, 1094b-1095b) See *Analects* (4.3): "子曰：「唯仁者能好人，能惡人。」 (The Master said, 'It is the consummate person (*ren*) alone who has the wherewithal to properly discriminate in cherishing some people while despising others.')"

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Zhuangzi's *Jie Xin* 解心 (Untangling the Heartmind) and the Wisdom of Biomimicry: An Innovative Approach to Humanity, Nature, and Technology for the 21st Century

*Robin R. WANG**

Abstract

Zhuangzi employs the term *jie* 解 (untangling, dissecting, releasing, unravelling) in both *jie xin* 解心 (untangling the heartmind) and *jie niu* 解牛 (dissecting the ox). This concept embodies Zhuangzi's philosophy of achieving clarity and balance by aligning with the natural order rather than resisting it. This philosophical spirit resonates with the wisdom of biomimicry, which draws on nature's time-tested systems as models for addressing human challenges. Both Zhuangzi's 解心 and biomimicry involve observing and emulating natural forms, processes, and patterns to produce new products and practices attuned with nature's living forces. This approach advocates integrating the natural world into human practices—not exploiting nature, but treating it as a teacher and guide rather than merely a resource. Such perspectives and practices offer a pathway toward sustainable innovation, ecological balance, and synchronized coexistence in the 21st century.

Keywords: *jie xin* 解心 (untangling the heartmind), *jie niu* 解牛 (dissecting the ox), Biomimicry, *miaoji* 妙技 (subtle technique), *shen* 神 (spirit)

Zhuangzijevo delo *Jie Xin* 解心 (*Razpletanje srca in uma*) ter modrost biomimikrije: inovativen pristop k človeštvu, naravi in tehnologiji za 21. stoletje

Izvleček

Zhuangzi uporablja izraz *jie* 解 (razpletanje, razčlenjevanje, sproščanje, razpletanje) tako v *jie xin* 解心 (razpletanje srca in uma) kot v *jie niu* 解牛 (razčlenjevanje vola). Ta koncept uteleša Zhuangzijevo filozofijo doseganja jasnosti in ravnovesja z usklajevanjem z naravnim redom namesto z upiranjem njemu. Ta filozofski duh je v sozvočju z modrostjo biomimikrije, ki črpa iz preizkušenih sistemov narave kot modelov za reševanje človeških izzivov. Tako Zhuangzijev *jie xin* kot biomimikrija vključujeta opazovanje in posnemanje naravnih oblik, procesov ter vzorcev za ustvarjanje novih izdelkov in praks, usklajenih

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z živimi silami narave. Ta pristop zagovarja vključevanje naravnega sveta v človeške prakse – ne izkoriščati naravo, ampak jo obravnavati kot učiteljico in vodnico, ne le kot vir. Takšne perspektive in prakse ponujajo pot k trajnostnim inovacijam, ekološkemu ravnovesju ter usklajenemu sobivanju v 21. stoletju.

Ključne besede: *jie xin* 解心 (razpletanje srca in uma), *jie niu* 解牛 (razrezovanje vola), biomimikrija, *miaoji* 妙技 (subtilna tehnika), *shen* 神 (duh)

Introduction: The Question that Motivates My Inquiry

In a well-known story Zhuangzi celebrates the Cook Ding's story of "*jie*-ing" an ox, and many scholars have discussed this tale (Yearly 1994; Ames 1998; Kohn 2014;). However the focus has been on the Cook Ding, both as a subjective doer and the skill he possesses, and how he embodies life insights beyond the skill. But what about the ox, its very being of existence, manifesting a structure of life? Why does Zhuangzi use the character 解 (*jie*) for both an ox and human heartmind? Could we also ask the question why Zhuangzi chooses the specific term "*jie*" and not a more common word relating to slaughtering livestock, such as following:

杀 (*sha*)—To kill, to murder, to slaughter.

宰 (*zai*)—To butcher, to slaughter livestock, or to govern.

剥 (*bao* / *bo*)—To peel, to strip, to skin (often used for removing the skin of animals).

剖 (*pou*)—To cut open, to dissect, to split (used in surgery, dissection, or opening something).

屠 (*tu*)—To massacre, to slaughter.

More interestingly, Zhuangzi also uses the same *jie* to describe and untangle a human heartmind.

解心之繆 (*jie xin zhi mou*)—loosen the tangles of the heartmind;

解心釋神 (*jie xin shi shen*)—unbind the heartmind and free the spirit;

解惑 (*jie huo*)—resolve confusion;

解其天弢 (*jie qi tian tao*)—unlock the hidden workings of Heaven;

解其桎梏，其應於化而**解**於物 (*jie qi zhigu, qi ying yu hua er jie yu wu*)—break free from shackles, so that one responds to transformation and is liberated from thinghood and things.

For Zhuangzi, *jie xin* 解心 is a pathway toward clarity, simplicity, and balance by untangling the complexities of human thought.

Why does Zhuangzi use *jie* for both the ox and the heartmind? This essay will approach this question philosophically rather than as a mere lexical inquiry. It will further explore two interwoven philosophical problems: *anima* vs *logos* and *bíos* vs *technê* then move to a final construction of *miaoji* 妙技 (subtle technique). My initial question, like a ripple in a boundless river, flows into the vastness where knowing and not-knowing meet.

Point One: *Animas* vs *Logos*—Can Animals Be Teachers of Human Beings?

Anima vs *logos* highlights the dynamic interplay between the life force and rational thought in the European philosophical tradition (Nietzsche 1999). Animas evokes the Latin *anima*, meaning "soul" or "life force", which aligns with the Greek *psychē* (ψυχή) or *zōē* (ζωή). It captures the vital, instinctual, and sensory aspects of life, which are shared by animals and humans. It often refers to the realm of instinct, survival, perception, and biological life. As a central concept in Greek philosophy, *logos* encompasses reason, language, and structured thought. It is the hallmark of human distinction for thinkers like Aristotle and Stoics. It represents rationality, speech, meaning-making, and structured understanding. It relates to Greek concepts such as *nous* (νοῦς, intellect) and *dianoia* (διάνοια, deliberation). *Animas* aligns with the pre-rational, embodied, and natural aspects of life often emphasized in Daoist or phenomenological thought. *Logos* represents the structuring and symbolic capacities central to Western rationalist traditions.

There is not only no such distinction between *animas* and *logos* in Daoist philosophy, but *animas* also often serves as a teacher of *logos.* Rather than treating them as opposing forces, Zhuangzi constantly uses animals and plants as the interlockers to make a point and explains how they co-constitute human existence and philosophical thinking in more intricate ways. By examining their entanglement, we can better understand why Zhuangzi's use of *jie* reveals a mode of being that transcends rigid dichotomies, inviting a more fluid, integrative perspective on life and thought.

In the *Zhuangzi*, Confucius meets Laozi in person several times, but what does Confucius truly see, and how does he feel about Laozi in these encounters? These meetings are often rich in symbolism, with animals, plants, and natural elements carrying deep metaphorical weight. Yet beyond their allegorical function, we can also ask: does Laozi's *animalness* reveal something intrinsic about him? The animals in these encounters are not merely decorative—they are crafted to embody Laozi's connection with the natural world and alignment with the *Dao*, perhaps offering a contrast to Confucian social-focused rigidity. Through these

encounters, Confucius is confronted with an alternative mode of being, one that unsettles his structured worldview and gestures toward a deeper, more fluid way of engaging with life.

Here are the three stories where Confucius meets Laozi, focusing on what Confucius sees and the presence of animals or plants:

1. Confucius sees a dragon.

> Confucius said, 'Now, in this man, I have finally seen a dragon. When a dragon gathers itself together, it solidifies as a concrete body, and when it scatters itself, it becomes an emblematic pattern; it rides on the mists of the clouds and nourishes itself on the *yin* and *yang*. I just stood there with my mouth open, unable to shut it. How could I characterize someone like Lao Dan?' (*Zhuangzi* 2009, "Heavens Course", 124)

> 孔子見老聃歸，三日不談。弟子問曰：「夫子見老聃，亦將何歸哉？」孔子曰：「吾乃今於是乎見龍。龍合而成體，散而成章，乘乎雲氣而養乎陰陽。予口張而不能嗋，予又何規老聃哉！」子貢曰：「然則人固有尸居而龍見，雷聲而淵默，發動如天地者乎？賜亦可得而觀乎？」遂以孔子聲見老聃.

Dragons symbolize transformation, power, and alignment with natural forces. Confucius is awed by Laozi's ability to soar beyond human comprehension, much like a dragon navigating the clouds. The dragon emphasizes Laozi's connection to the *Dao*, transcending worldly constraints.

2. Confucius sees crows, ravens and fish.

> 'I get it! Crows and ravens hatch their young, fish exchange milt, every wisp-wasp of a creature however meagre is involved in transformation: whenever a younger brother is born, the older brother weeps.' (Ibid.)

> 孔子不出三月，復見，曰：「丘得之矣。烏鵲孺，魚傅沫，細要者化，有弟而兄啼。久矣夫，丘不與化為人！不與化為人，安能化人！」老子曰：「可。丘得之矣。」

In this encounter, Confucius reflects on seeing crows, ravens and fish. Laozi uses these animals to teach Confucius that even noble creatures must adapt to their surroundings without losing their essence. Confucius recognizes the harmony and adaptability of the natural world in contrast to human constructs. These animals embody lofty ideals.

3. Confucius sees a dried-up tree.

> ‘Am I seeing things? Is it really so? Just now your body, sir, looked like a dried-up stump dug out of the ground, like you had cast off all things and departed from all people, standing alone in the alone?’ (*Zhuangzi* 2009, “Sir Square Scope of the Fields”, 167)
>
> 孔子見老聃，老聃新沐，方將被髮而乾，熱然似非人。孔子便而待之，少焉見曰：「丘也眩與？其信然與？向者先生形體掘若槁木，似遺物離人而立於獨也。」老聃曰：「吾遊心於物之初.

Confucius sees a withered tree and a flourishing sapling nearby when he visits Laozi. Laozi uses this plant to teach Confucius that the withered tree, though old and seemingly useless, lives in harmony with its surroundings and avoids being cut down. Meanwhile, the sapling, though young and thriving, will eventually face destruction. It also reveals the state of Laozi’s heartmind.

From these stories we can see a pattern: Confucius has a strong admiration of Laozi, and is inspired by him. Zhuangzi portrays Confucius as experiencing not just intellectual respect, but a kind of existential awe toward Laozi—an encounter that dissolves his structured humanistic view in the face of spontaneous naturalness. Laozi thus becomes a mirror of the *Dao*, before which Confucius’ usual categories falter. Those animals and the old tree actually manifest the power of the *Dao* and features for humans to learn. It is a deeper philosophical view of life cycles and existence. We might want to push these stories further: Since these living things are with *Dao* then can they be teachers of humans? If so, how? And what challenges does this idea present?

The *Zhuangzi* shows that animals do not follow prescribed norms or struggle against the natural flow of life, yet they thrive by being themselves. This raises the possibility that animals, rather than being mere symbols, embody forms of wisdom inaccessible through human rationality alone. If we take this point seriously, then learning from animals requires more than observing them—it demands a philosophical shift or exercise of imagination in how we define knowledge, wisdom, and even humanity itself.

But this raises several issues. First, does learning from animals require adopting their way of being, and if so, to what extent? Can human language, with its tendency to systematize and abstract, ever fully grasp animal wisdom without distorting it? Moreover, if animals reveal something about Laozi, does this mean that wisdom is not uniquely human? These questions challenge anthropocentric assumptions and invite us to rethink what it means to be a teacher, a learner, and even a person.

To answer these questions, we might frame animals as teachers of *logos*, especially if we expand the meaning of *logos* beyond strictly rational discourse to include broader forms of meaning-making, and relational understanding. While classical philosophy often portrays animals as lacking *logos*, reframing this relationship can open new ways of thinking about the interplay between emotion, life force and reason.

Objections and Responses

There are a few objections to the claim of "*animas* as teachers of *logos*", or that animals can be teachers of human beings, and these will now be discussed.

Objection One: They Cannot Teach What They Do Not Possess
Animals Lack Logos: According to Aristotle, humans are distinct because of their capacity for *logos*, i.e. rational speech and thought. Animals operate on instinct rather than reason, so they cannot teach what they do not possess.

Response: This objection presumes that *logos* is a fixed, human-centred capacity. But in the *Zhuangzi,* the *Dao* itself cannot be fully captured by words or rational thought. Zhuangzi constantly questions the process of gaining knowledge and the nature of language itself. Here is a case where Zhuangzi sees the tension between words and reality.

> 'But human speech is not just a blowing of air. Speech has something *of which* it speaks, something it refers to. Yes, but what it refers to is peculiarly unfixed.' (*Zhuangzi* 2009,11)
>
> 夫言非吹也，言者有言，其所言者特未定也.

Yan 言 (words) should describe some "thing" but that "thing" is constantly changing and ultimately a "non-thing". One cannot affirm or deny any "thing" of any "thing". Thus one can only illuminate or light up all sides of the self-so (*zi ran*) *Dao*.

Yan is a way to denote reality and yet entails drawing boundaries. *Yan* also can point and liberate a person but even then may unintentionally cut and carve reality. *Yan* can appear to carve up, divide, split up, and allocate what appears to us as a raw, chaotic, undifferentiated reality into a fixity of terms, concepts and words.

> 'How could I know that what I call 'knowing' is not really 'not knowing'? How could I know that what I call 'not-knowing' is not really 'knowing'?' (*Zhuangzi* 2009, 17)
>
> 庸距知吾所谓知之非 不 知 邪？庸 距 知 吾 所 谓 不 知 之 非 知邪?

Zhuangzi critiques reliance on rigid distinctions, including those between rational and non-rational beings. If *logos* is understood not just as rational speech but as the underlying pattern of life, animals can indeed reveal it through their own existence and behaviours. Animals are closer to the natural flow of reality in many ways. Zhuangzi's story suggests that animals live spontaneously in harmony with the *Dao*, embodying lessons about adaptability and non-attachment without articulating them.

Embodied Wisdom *vs* Abstract Reason: Animals might not engage in abstract reasoning, but they demonstrate embodied wisdom—skills and behaviours that are deeply adaptive and responsive to their environments. This kind of knowledge challenges the Western bias toward abstract cognition as the highest form of intelligence.

In addition, according to Daoist philosophy, lacking a rigid emotional and mental sense of an isolated self is the mark of a sage. So though animals may not become fully conscious of the *Dao*, as a human being can be, animals do not need to do so. They also do not suffer emotionally and mentally like human beings do. And the sage in a way returns to that ideal *animas* condition. In a way, Zhuangzi knows the joy of fish (鱼乐) because the fish are naturally at ease and even joyous (Ames and Nakajima 2015).

Evolutionary and Cognitive Science Insights: Research in animal cognition shows that many species possess forms of problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and even rudimentary communication systems. For instance, crows use tools, dolphins exhibit self-awareness, and elephants display mourning rituals. These behaviours blur the lines between human-exclusive rationality and animal intelligence.

They "teach" not through speech but through *rou* 柔, a soft, flexible presence that resists fixed forms (Wang 2022). Watching a fish swim or a bird glide reveals the principles of effortless flow, adaptability, and attunement to the environment, which words often fail to convey. The lesson is not in their *logos* but in their *animas*.

Looking at Cook Ding's story again, when Cook Ding *jie*'s the ox he positions his hand, shoulder, foot, and knee to reach the highest level: "What I care about is the *Dao*, which goes beyond mere skill."(*Zhuangzi* 2009, 22)[1] This alignment suggests that the divisions between the tool of the knife, the object of the ox, and the rationality of the person are dissolved through the embodied activity. The perceptual potentials of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—directed

1 庖丁为文惠君解牛，手之所触，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踦，砉然响然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。(Cook Ding butchered the ox for Wen Hui. His hand touched, his shoulder leaned, his foot stepped, his knee pressed—his knife moved with a rhythm, making a sound like music. Every cut resonated in harmony. (*Zhuangzi* 2009, 22))

toward the world of things—are fully activated. Cook Ding is not merely a subject but also a perceiver; the ox is not merely an object but an extension of Cook Ding's bodily perception; the knife is not merely a tool but the very antenna through which Cook Ding perceives the ox. *Jie*-ing an ox is not just a technical skill—it is excising human rationality through a cultivated action, rather than simply propositions or concepts.

Objection Two: Anthropomorphism. We Project Human Meanings Onto Animals—No Intentionality

Claiming that animals can teach human beings projects human qualities onto them. We interpret animal behaviour through a human lens, creating lessons that are not inherently there. Teaching typically involves intentionality. Animals do not consciously aim to educate humans, and any lessons we derive are coincidental observations rather than deliberate instructions.

Zhuangzi would agree that imposing rigid human categories onto animals distorts understanding. However, he would flip this critique: the real issue is not that we project too much onto animals, but that we project too much onto everything, including ourselves. The key is not to eliminate projection but to cultivate *tong* 通—a resonance that allows distinctions to soften without collapsing altogether. Animals don't "teach" us in a didactic sense, but instead they invite us into relational encounters where meaning emerges spontaneously. For example, the butterfly in Zhuangzi's dream is not a symbol to be decoded, but an event that destabilizes the boundary between self and other, waking and dreaming.

Story About Being There to Shift the Emotional Atmosphere

Zhuangzi undermines the centrality of intentionality. The *Dao* operates without conscious purpose, yet it gives rise to all things. In fact, deliberate teaching often disrupts natural learning, as it imposes rigid structures. Animals "teach" precisely because they are not trying to. Their actions are free from the self-consciousness that often entangles human communication. This non-intentional teaching aligns with *rou* 柔, a soft, indirect influence that shapes without force (Wang 2022). Consider how the silent presence of a cat, content in stillness, can shift the emotional atmosphere of a room without any effort or intention on its part.

Learning Through Observation, not Instruction: Animals do not need to teach intentionally for human beings to learn from them. Nature serves as an implicit teacher.

Zhuangzi invites humans to learn as follows:

> A bird avoids the harm of arrows and nets by flying high, and a mouse burrows in the depths beneath the shrines and graves to avoid poisons

> and traps. Have you ever equalled the non-knowledge of these two little pests! (*Zhuangzi* 2009, "Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers", 69)
>
> 且鳥高飛以避矰弋之害，鼷鼠深穴乎神丘之下，以避熏鑿之患，而曾二蟲之無知！

Observing how animals navigate their environments can inspire insights into a lesson. Contemporary scientific studies show that ant colonies demonstrate complex social organization and migratory birds exhibit remarkable navigational skills—both offering inspiration and lectures for human organization and intuition (Lea and Osthaus 2018).

Here is another example where Zhuangzi makes an argument or expresses his perspective by pointing to animals. Zhuangzi is asked to accept a good job in government, and responds by talking about turtles:

> Zhuangzi, holding fast to his fishing pole, without so much as turning his head, said, 'I have heard there is a sacred turtle in Chu, already dead for three thousand years, which the king keeps in a bamboo chest high in his shrine. Do you think this turtle would prefer to be dead and having his carcass exalted, or alive and dragging his tail through the mud?' The emissaries said, 'Alive and dragging his tail through the mud.' Zhuangzi said, 'Away with you then! I too will drag my tail through the mud!' (*Zhuangzi* 2009, "Autumn Waters", 141)
>
> 莊子釣於濮水，楚王使大夫二人往先焉，曰：「願以境內累矣！」莊子持竿不顧，曰：「吾聞楚有神龜，死已三千歲矣，王巾笥而藏之廟堂之上。此龜者，寧其死為留骨而貴乎，寧其生而曳尾於塗中乎？」二大夫曰：「寧生而曳尾塗中。」莊子曰：「往矣！吾將曳尾於塗中.

Zhuangzi makes his answer through observation of animals. The teaching is that true wisdom lies not in seeking external validation but in flowing with life's natural rhythms. Zhuangzi is suggesting that animals, unlike humans, do not overthink their existence. They simply move with the rhythms of life. The lesson is not spoken but lived—by observing the turtle, we learn something, learning beyond words—through presence, observation, and interaction.

Objection Three: Human Superiority Paradigm and Limited Communication
From a traditional hierarchical perspective (e.g. the Great Chain of Being), humans are considered superior to animals. It would be illogical to assume that a "lower" being could teach a "higher" one about rationality or wisdom. Without

complex language systems comparable to human language, animals cannot convey abstract concepts, ideas or insights directly.

This is the issue of breaking the human-animal hierarchy, and Zhuangzi rejects rigid human-animal hierarchies. In *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2, the *Daoshu*, he talks about equalizing all beings and seeing from the *Dao* that all things are equal. People are part of a larger ecological web where wisdom is distributed across all forms of life, not concentrated solely in humans.

Let us take the story of Maoqiang and Lady Li compared with the fish, birds, and deer.

> Maoqiang and Lady Li, beautiful by human standards, when fish see them they dive into the depths, when birds see them they fly away, when deer see them they bolt. What the world considers beautiful, all the different creatures find repulsive. (*Zhuangzi* 2009, 18)
>
> 毛嬙、麗姬，人之所美也，魚見之深入，鳥見之高飛，麋鹿見之決驟。四者孰知天下之正色哉？

This short parable undercuts the assumption that human standards of value—like beauty—are universal or superior. Zhuangzi rejects the human-animal hierarchy. Instead, he levels the playing field: just as humans see animals as "other", animals see humans as strange or even threatening. This reflects a key point of the *Dao*. From the perspective of the *Dao*, distinctions like "human" and "animal", "noble" and "base", or even "alive" and "dead", lose their absolute meaning. Zhuangzi is not just calling for humility—he is pointing to a radical ontological equality where no creature has privileged access to the *Dao*, and every being participates in it according to their own nature.

The very notion of superiority is a product of the artificial distinctions that Zhuangzi critiques. As he suggests, the "usefulness" of things often comes from their uselessness, and what is considered "low" may reveal what is truly profound. Animals can teach humans precisely because they are not entangled in the hierarchical games that humans play. Their wisdom is in their indifference to status. This challenges us to embrace *tong*—an attunement where value is not measured hierarchically but relationally. The "low" and the "high" circulate, like *yin* and *yang*, each containing the seed of the other.

Animals Cannot Convey Abstract Concepts. The obsession with abstract concepts is itself an obstacle. Zhuangzi emphasizes the limits of language and the importance of direct, embodied experience. Animals communicate through rhythms, gestures, and presences that transcend abstraction. Their "teaching" is a form of silent *tong*, a resonance that operates beneath words. Consider the flocking of birds or the synchronized swimming of fish—complex coordination without a

leader or explicit instructions. This model presents a form of harmony that human beings struggle to achieve precisely because we over-rely on explicit articulation.

Summary: Animas *Teaching* Logos

The above discussion and Zhuangzi's stories raise the following questions: Can observing animals help human beings develop a *logos* that is more integrated with *animas*? How do animals teach us about nonverbal forms of *logos*—such as empathy, cooperation, and intuition? Could recognizing *logos* in animals redefine humanity's connection with nature and animals?

Cook Ding's mastery lies not in intellectual knowledge or statement such as *S knows that P*, but in his intuitive, embodied understanding of the *Dao*, which is similar to how animals engage with their environments—naturally and comparatively. The sage is astonished by Cook Ding's skill and ability to effortlessly guide the knife, moving with the ox's own movements. This story teaches that true mastery comes from a deep attunement to the rhythms of life, much like the natural instinct of animals. The ox, though unable to reason like humans, guides Cook Ding through its movements—demonstrating a form of *logos* rooted in natural harmony. Cook Ding's skill arises not from theoretical knowledge but from an instinctual understanding of how to move with the ox's body structure, mirroring the Daoist unity of nature.

The cicada does not engage in rational thought but embodies a *logos* that understands life's impermanence and the need to adapt (Lai and Chiu 2019). This resonates with human reflection on how to live fully within the constraints of nature's rhythms. Animals in these stories teach *logos* by living in harmony with their environment—they are closer to reality than human beings are.

Unlike human rationality based solely on concepts and abstract thought, these animals represent an intuitive and holistic understanding of existence that guides action naturally. Animals offer a model for a softer, more fluid relationality. Their "teachings" are not about transmitting content but about shaping the space of interaction itself.

Through *rou*, we soften the rigidity of human-centred logic, allowing space for non-verbal, non-linear wisdom. The flexibility to adapt, yield, and be shaped by encounters.

Through *tong*, we attune to patterns of resonance that emerge when we stop trying to control or define meaning. The capacity to resonate with patterns beyond oneself, to find harmony not by control but through responsiveness. We "learn" when we shift from seeking mastery to cultivating resonance.

Animals, through these dynamic patterns, model forms of relationality that challenge human-centred notions of teaching. They do not impart lessons as fixed content, but instead invite us into relational spaces where meaning emerges through.

This understanding shifts the question from "What do animals teach?" to "How do we learn when we stop insisting on being the only teachers?"

A contemporary practice, known as biomimicry, embodies this approach and spirit. Biomimicry refers to an imitation of natural biological designs or processes in engineering, the practice of learning from and mimicking nature's designs, systems, and processes. It takes nature's time-tested systems as models for innovation and technology. For example, the Swiss engineer George de Mestral noticed how burrs stuck to his clothes and his dog's fur during a walk in the woods, and was thus inspired to create Velcro (1941). This hook-and-loop mechanism mimics burrs attaching to animal fur, and is now very widely used in clothing, aerospace applications, and everyday products. Biomimicry is designing technology based on natural systems—from AI that mimics brain structures (neuromorphic computing) to architecture inspired by termite mounds (self-cooling buildings). Janine Benyus popularized the concept in her 1997 book *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, in which she presents examples such as wind turbines inspired by whale fins, and a bullet train inspired by kingfisher birds to reduce noise and air resistance.

However, biomimicry in terms of thinking and practices has a long tradition in Chinese thought and culture. There is a specific historical and traditional case of humans learning from animals, called *the plays of five animals* (*wuqingxi* 五禽戏), a form of qigong exercises for health and well-being. It is attributed to a well-known Daoist physician Hua Tuo (c. 140–208 CE) in the Eastern Han dynasty. *Wuqingxi* imitates the movements and spirits of five animals—Tiger, Deer, Bear, Monkey, and Bird—each representing a different way to harmonize the heartmind.

Tiger (*hu* 虎): Strength, power, stretching sinews.
Deer (*lu* 鹿): Grace, agility, flexibility, nourishing the kidneys.
Bear (*xiong* 熊): Groundedness, slowness, strengthening the spleen.
Monkey (*yuan* 猿): Playfulness, lightness, enhancing mobility and digestion.
Bird (*niao* 鸟): Lightness, expansion, promoting lung function and spirit elevation.

Each animal's movements are linked to specific organs and meridians according to Traditional Chinese Medicine, promoting internal balance, circulation, and vitality.

Today, *wuqinxi* is practiced worldwide in various forms, such as the Health Qigong version, as standardized by the Chinese Health Qigong Association, with simplified, accessible movements designed for public health promotion. This is often seen in parks, wellness centres, and online instruction in China and beyond.

There are also martial and therapeutic variations, and some schools integrate *wuqinxi* into martial arts training, especially the Shaolin or Daoist traditions, focusing on physical conditioning and internal energy (*qi*) development. Contemporary wellness practices have integrated *wuqinxi* into holistic health practices, corporate wellness, and stress-relief programmes, especially outside China.

Point Two: *Bíos* and *Technê*—A Dynamic Connection Between Life and Skill/Technology

The above discussion shows that human beings should be learning from nature rather than attempting to control it. Those examples demonstrate that animals, trees, and natural forms (that is, all living beings) can serve as models for human action. This framework brings up other tensions, as well as the relationship between *bios* and *technê* (Jonas 1966; Hodot 1995).

Bíos (βίος): Life, but in a specifically human sense. In Aristotle, it refers to different ways of living (*bíos politikos*, the political life; *bíos theōrētikos*, the contemplative life). It concerns not just survival (*zoē*), but also how life is structured and lived meaningfully.

Technê (τέχνη): Craft, skill, or art. It refers to *knowing how*—the ability to create, manipulate, and produce things. In Greek thought, *technê* is often contrasted with *epistēmē* (theoretical knowledge), but is still a kind of knowledge rooted in practice.

In some philosophical traditions, there is a tension between *Bíos* and *Technê*. In the European philosophical tradition, the tensions have been primarily twofold:

(a) *Technê* as a tool for *Bíos*

In classical Greek philosophy, *technê* is often seen as something that serves *bíos*. For example, medicine (*technê iatrikê*) serves the art of living by maintaining health. Architecture and politics are also forms of *technê* aimed at structuring human life.

Plato, in *The Republic*, argues that ruling itself is a *technê*—the *technê politikê*—suggesting that the art of governance is a kind of skilled practice that organizes *bíos*.

(b) *Technê* reshaping *Bíos*

However, *technê* is not just subordinate to life, as it transforms life itself. The rise of technological advances, from agriculture to AI, alters the very conditions of *bíos*. Heidegger, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, warns that modern *technê* no longer merely serves life but dominates and redefines it. Unlike ancient Greek *technê*, which was about *poiesis* (bringing forth), modern

technology (*Technik*) turns everything, including life itself, into *standing-reserve* (*Bestand*)—a resource to be optimized (Heidegger 1977).

This concern is echoed in bioethics, where *technê* in genetics and AI challenges the boundaries of what it means to be human.

Unlike Greek *technê*, which often aims at mastering nature, Zhuangzi's perspective suggests that humans should observe and harmonize with nature's patterns rather than trying to impose their own artificial and often rigid patterns on it. If we attempt to impose order on the world, we lose the deeper, actual order of the world, and we experience a conflict between order and chaos dominated by chaos.

Bíos *Without* Technê: *Zhuangzi's Worry*

There is a story about the humans' connection with technology in the *Zhuangzi*:

> Zigong was traveling through the state of Chu and, on his way back through Han Yin, he saw an old man irrigating his garden. The man was laboriously drawing water from a well using a jar, carrying it by hand to water his plants. Zigong, surprised at the effort, suggested a more efficient method: 'There's a mechanical device that could water a hundred furrows in a single day with far less effort. Would you like me to show you?' The gardener looked up and asked what it was. Zigong explained a simple machine—like a levered water-lifting device [*gao* 槔], a basic irrigation tool. The old man then laughed with scorn, saying: 'My teacher told me: Where there are machines, there will be mechanical affairs; where there are mechanical affairs, there will be a mechanical heartmind [*jinxi* 機心]. If you have a mechanical heartmind in your chest, your pure simplicity is no longer complete; when that is lost, your spirit becomes unsettled, and when your spirit is unsettled, the *Dao* no longer dwells in you. It's not that I don't know of such devices—I'm ashamed to use them.'
> Zigong was embarrassed and speechless. (*Zhuangzi* 2009*,* "Heaven and Earth", 104)

> 子貢南遊於楚，反於晉，過漢陰，見一丈人方將為圃畦，鑿隧而入井，抱甕而出灌，捐捐然用力甚多而見功寡。子貢曰：「有械於此，一日浸百畦，用力甚寡而見功多，夫子不欲乎？」為圃者卬而視之曰：「奈何？」曰：「鑿木為機，後重前輕，挈水若抽，數如泆湯，其名為槔。」為圃者忿然作色而笑曰：「吾聞之吾師：『有機械者必有機事，有機事者必有機心。』機心存於胸中，則純白不備；純白不備，則神生不定；神生不定者，道之所不載也。吾非不知，羞而不為也。」子貢瞞然慙，俯而不對.

Zhuangzi's story presents a striking contrast to the Greek framing of *technê* shaping life. While Greek thought often emphasizes technology and reason as a means of perfecting human existence, Zhuangzi expresses a deep scepticism about the dominance of *technê* and the dangers of human creation. His concern is not with refining technique, but with the transition from *jishi* (the practice of *technê*) to *jinxin* (fixation of the heartmind). This worry suggests that *technê*, when taken too far, leads not to freedom but to constraint—turning fluid adaptability into mechanical habit.

Zhuangzi warns against becoming too dependent on tools and machines, which might disturb one's inner simplicity and harmony, mention *jinxin* 機心 or "mechanical heart", symbolizing a calculating, clever intent that disrupts spontaneity and connection to the *Dao*.

Those who have machines (*jixie* 機械) will inevitably have machine-affairs (*jishi* 機事), and those who have machine-affairs will inevitably have machine-minds (*jixin* 機心). If the machine-mind resides in the chest, then pure simplicity (*chunbai* 純白) will not be complete. If pure simplicity is not complete, then the spirit (*shen* 神) will become unstable. If the spirit becomes unstable, then it is something the *Dao* cannot carry.

Zhuangzi warns against the infiltration of cleverness (*jixin* 機心) into human life. The passage suggests the following: (1) Tools and machines can lead to mechanical ways of thinking—the more we rely on artificial means, the more we adopt rigid, calculating mindsets; (2) A machine-mind disrupts natural simplicity (*chunbai*), causing the spirit (*shen*) to become unsettled. (3) An unsettled spirit loses attunement with the *Dao*, because the *Dao* flows with spontaneity, not rigid calculation.

Thus, rather than celebrating the transformative power of *technê*, Zhuangzi is sceptical of it, questioning whether human effort and refinement inevitably lead to alienation rather than harmony. This contrast with Greek thought forces us to reconsider whether knowledge and mastery bring us closer to life—or further away from it.

Embracing Technê *with the* Dao: *The Tension Between the* Dao *and* Ji 技 / Qi 器

Zhuangzi's ambivalence toward *technê* reveals a deeper tension: while he is wary of its potential to rigidify into *jinxin* (fixation of the heart-mind), he also recognizes *ji* 技 (skill) and *qi* 器 (tools) are a part of world and can be an expression of the *Dao* when they flow naturally. This raises a critical question: is there tension between *Dao* and *ji*, or does *ji*,—when properly aligned—actually manifest *Dao*?

In the Cook Ding's story, a few things come into play: Cook Ding, the ox, the knife and the cutting. But first, a quick discussion on the relationship between *qi* and *ji* is in order.

器 (*qi*) often refers to a tool, vessel, or instrument, i.e. a concrete object. *Qi* thus represents external, material implements that human beings use to interact with the world. In the *Zhuangzi*, *qi* is sometimes associated with limitations—relying too much on external tools can distance one's self from a more profound, spontaneous engagement with the *Dao*. "The petty man is enslaved by *qi* [tools]." (小人溺于器) (*Zhuangzi* 2009, "All Under Heaven) This suggests that being too dependent on tools (whether literal or metaphorical) can restrict one's ability to align with *Dao*.

技 (*ji*) means skill, craft, or technique, it refers to a learned ability developed through practice. In the *Zhuangzi*, a skill is not inherently good or bad, but true mastery comes when *ji* transcends mere technique and merges with spontaneity. "My skill (*ji*) has progressed to the point where I no longer see with my eyes, but follow the natural patterns." Here, Cook Ding describes a level of mastery where his skill is no longer mechanical but flows in harmony with the *Dao*.

The Relationship Between Qi 器 *and Ji* 技*: Ji* 技 *Uses Qi* 器*, But Can Transcend It*

Qi (tools) enables *ji* (skill), but true mastery is not limited by *qi*. A beginner relies heavily on *qi*, but a master, like Cook Ding, reaches a level where the tool disappears into the flow of action. However, *qi* can trap *ji* in fixed forms. *Qi* can sometimes limit *ji* if one becomes too attached to external tools or rigid techniques. Zhuangzi critiques those who become "enslaved by *qi*"—whether it be rulers who rely on institutions or craftsmen who over-rely on methods without fluidity.

"The great crafts leave no trace." (功成之美，無一其跡矣.) (*Zhuangzi* 2009*,* "An Old Ficherman").
The highest level of *ji* is when one no longer appears to use external tools at all, blending with the natural *Dao*. The Daoist ideal is effortless skill—when someone is so attuned to the *Dao* that their actions become invisible, leaving no residue or resistance behind. This is akin to the ideal of *wu wei* (無為), or actionless action.

技进乎道*—When Skill Becomes Dao*

Ji that remains mechanical or fixated on *qi* is limited, but when it aligns with the *Dao*, it becomes effortless and spontaneous.

This is seen in figures like Cook Ding (cutting oxen), Wheelwright Bian (carving wheels), and the Cicada Catcher (catching insects)—their skills become fluid expressions of the *Dao* (Lai and Chiu 2019).

> A good wheelwright's technique cannot be put into words—it exists between the hand and the heart. (*Zhuangzi* 2009*,* "The Way of Heaven")
>
> 輪扁曰：「斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間.

Here, true skill (*ji*) transcends tools (*qi*) and even verbal instruction, existing in a space of direct, embodied knowledge.

Qi (tools) and *ji* (skill) are interconnected—tools facilitate skill, but true skill must eventually transcend reliance on tools. The ultimate goal is not just to master tools but to dissolve the boundary between action and nature, letting skill flow spontaneously with the *Dao*.

Qi and *ji* are closely related but distinct concepts, reflecting different dimensions of skill, craftsmanship, and engagement with the *Dao*. Their relationship can be understood through how tools (*qi*) and techniques (*ji*) interact within the pursuit of mastery and spontaneity.

Ji is a more complicated term. There are two modes of *ji*: spontaneous skill and constrained skill. In cases like Cook Ding's effortless *jie,* skill is not forced but flows intuitively with the *Dao*. Here, *ji* is not a separate construct imposed on life but an organic unfolding of one's being. The problem arises when skill hardens into deliberate control, when technique replaces attunement, and when action becomes dictated by learned rules rather than responsive spontaneity.

Instead of rejecting *ji*, one must practice it without attachment—letting *ji* emerge naturally, without fixation or self-consciousness. This suggests that *ji* is not the opposite of the *Dao* but becomes a problem only when it turns into rigid expertise rather than fluid adaptability.

The path forward is thus not to abandon *ji* but to use it without being used by it—letting skill be an expression of life's spontaneity rather than a cage that constrains it.

As such, Zhuangzi recognizes *ji* as part of the natural flow of life. His stories frequently highlight artisans—cooks, carpenters, butchers, cicada catchers, scribers—who achieve a level of mastery that transcends rigid methods. This suggests that *technê* itself is not the problem, but rather it is a question of whether one clings to fixed rules and perspectives or moves beyond them into a stage of *ming* 明 (clarity) and *shen* 神 (spirit). For Zhuangzi, *ji* in stories of butchers, cicada

catchers, and swimmers—reflects a spontaneous, embodied mastery that aligns with the *Dao*. However, when skill hardens into *jixin*, it risks becoming rigid, self-conscious, and ultimately disconnected from the natural flow of things.

Zhuangzi would likely warn against rigid dependence on *technê*, especially when it stifles spontaneity and free-flowing skill. He often critiques fixed methods and artificial constraints, but he also celebrates mastery and effortless action, which can emerge from deep familiarity with techniques (Lai and Chiu 2019).

Consider Cook Ding's *jie* in the *Zhuangzi*. At first, he relies on formal training (*technê*), but over time, his technique dissolves into an intuitive flow, harmonizing with the natural patterns of the ox's body (*bios*). This suggests that Zhuangzi values *technê* as a starting point but ultimately emphasizes transcending it—moving from rule-based skill to an embodied, adaptive responsiveness. His skill ceases to be a mechanical application of rules and instead becomes *Dao*-aligned, showing that *technê* can be transcended rather than rejected.

What Zhuangzi critiques is when people become fixated on artificial, rigid frameworks, mistaking them for the *Dao*. This is seen in his scepticism toward Confucian ritual (*li*) and Mohist logic, which he sees as overly prescriptive. If *technê* were always restrictive, it would fall into the same category, but the artisans in his stories demonstrate that *technê* can evolve into a free-flowing state of clarity.

So, Zhuangzi would not oppose *technê* itself—only its rigidification. He might warn against technologies that make us dependent on fixed patterns, like algorithmic determinism, but he would likely appreciate technologies that enable fluid, adaptive creativity.

What Zhuangzi seeks to prevent is the severance of life's innate *zhen* 真, "genuineness". Instead, he aims to enter the "Way" of life through the harmonious movement of the "body" in its embodied form, thereby revealing a uniquely captivating way of thinking about *technê*. In doing so, *technê* is repositioned within the ontological dimension concerning "humans", "things", and the *Dao*. This enables the integration of the constant way of life with the practice of *technê*, unfolding a *zhen* mode of human existence embedded in daily life and living.

Miaoji (妙技 Subtle Technê): Alignment of Bíos and Technê

In the *Zhuangzi*, Cook Ding does not cut the ox with brute force (*technê* as external skill), but instead he moves with the natural *bios* of the animal, attuning himself to the *Dao*. His skill (*technê*) is not mechanical but an extension of his life-practice (*bíos*). This suggests a vision where *bíos* and *technê* are not in tension, but harmonized through deep attunement (*tong* 通). This perspective on the world in fact suggests embracing *technê* while avoiding its destructive consequences—such as

the "machine mind" that disconnects us from the *Dao*. This will require a subtle balance, a pathway to integrate *technê* into life in a way that does not disrupt our connection to spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) or our deeper, more intuitive way of being in the world.

This approach can be seen as *miaoji* 妙技 (subtle *technê*), a combination of *miao* and *ji*.

Miao 妙 translates as "wonderful", "marvellous", or "mysterious", but it also carries a sense of something subtle, intricate, and skilful—things that are beyond simple comprehension. Chapter one of the *Daodejing* claims there are two kinds of *guan*, or "observation". Observation through *miao,* that is with a wonder or awe; and observation through *jiao*, that is with a desire or purpose. This distinction suggests a kind of being in the world and gaining knowledge that comes from an understanding of *miao* and the *Dao*, not through rigid effort or imposition, but through a deep, genuine alignment with the natural flow of things.

In the *Zhuangzi, miao* often refers to the mysterious way in which the world operates. *Miao* is a manifestation of the *Dao*. It is the ability to wander in the natural flow of life and to act in harmony with that flow. It is a state of being in which one's actions or creations seem effortlessly aligned with the *Dao*, achieving perfection without the need for forceful effort.

Miaoji (subtle *technê*) could represent a technology that is intricate, wandering, and aligned with the *Dao*—where creation does not feel forced or artificial but rather emerges subtly and naturally in response to the environment. It would focus on the craftsmanship aspect, suggesting a form of skill that is marvellous and effortlessly elegant, as if the practitioner is in perfect harmony with nature. This could represent creative processes that are not just efficient or effective, but wonderful in their execution. It implies technology that is almost magical in its ability to operate with the natural rhythm of life, creating solutions and forms that feel fluid, intricate, and aligned with the *Dao*. It is about achieving wonderful results through natural, effortless methods.

Perhaps biomimicry is an example of *miaoji*, a *Dao*-aligned t*echnê*.

As mentioned above, biomimicry is the practice of designing technology based on natural systems—from AI that mimics brain structures (neuromorphic computing) to architecture inspired by termite mounds (self-cooling buildings). This approach resonates with Daoist principles of effortless action (*wuwei* 无为), naturalness (*ziran* 自然), and adaptability (*tong* 通).

Traditional *technê* imposes structure on nature, shaping raw materials according to human plans. Biomimetic *technê* learns from nature, shaping technology in accordance with how life already works. *Miaoji* might say that biomimicry is a good manifestation because this technology does not force life into artificial structures,

but instead flows with its rhythms. *Miao* brings in the idea of wonder, subtlety, and natural mastery, making it an ideal term to express the idea of *bíos* and *technê* coming together in harmony and free from forceful control.

Miaoji emulates nature's brilliance, capturing the subtle, elegant processes that occur in natural systems. For example, a building that mimics the way trees adjust to environmental changes could be described as *miao technê*.

A *miao technê* approach to AI might involve machine learning systems that evolve and adapt in wonderful, unpredictable ways, much like the natural world itself, rather than relying on rigid rules or predefined instructions.

Embrace *Bios* in *Technê*

The core of Zhuangzi's philosophy is effortless action—doing things without forcing them, in harmony with the flow of life. For Zhuangzi, true skill is not about imposing control or rigidly managing outcomes, but about aligning with the natural order.

Rather than using technology to force outcomes, we can use it to facilitate natural processes. *Technê* becomes effective when it helps things work according to their inherent nature, without imposing a rigid structure on them. Just as Cook Ding is *jie*-ing the ox by feeling its *bio* structure. In terms of technology, simple, organic solutions that mimic life's natural processes would be the goal.

For instance, a self-regulating building that adapts to its environment like a tree (e.g. passive solar heating, natural cooling) embodies *ziran*—technology that follows the rhythms of nature instead of trying to control or overpower them.

John von Neumann, an accomplished mathematical physicist and founding figure of computer science, discovered a profound link between computing and biology back to 1958, finding that life is inherently computational (Neumann 1958). Blaise Agüera Arcas and James Manyika also note that

> computing existed in nature long before we built the first 'artificial computers'. Understanding computing as a natural phenomenon will enable fundamental advances not only in computer science and AI, but also in physics and biology. (Arcas and Manyika 2025)

Life is computational because its stability depends on growth, healing or reproduction; and computation itself must evolve to support these essential functions. This computational view of life also offers insight into life's increasing complexity over evolutionary time. This new understanding of the universality of computation helps us to appreciate Daoist insights. In this context AI is "life-like" as it

further evolves along the path from mimicking neural computation to predictive intelligence, general intelligence and, ultimately, collective intelligence.[2]

Let *Shen* 神 (Spirit) Guide *Technê*

The *miaoji*, an alignment of *bio* and *technê*, will emphasize the importance of spiritual attunement (*shen*), which is grounded in spontaneity and a deep connection to the *Dao*. When the spirit is calm and untroubled by rigid expectations, it can work in harmony with the world. The creation and use of technology should come from a place of stillness, not a frantic pursuit of profits, power, or control. Just as a skilled craftsman uses their intuition rather than mechanical force, technology should emerge from a place of inner calm, aligned with a natural rhythm and flow. Designers of technology could cultivate a sense of *shen*—a deeper connection to the natural world and its wisdom—to guide the development of technologies that support and enhance life rather than dominate it. Zhuangzi often extols the value of things that seem useless—for example, the useless tree or the non-utilitarian craftsman. This highlights the vison in which true value often lies in what is unquantifiable or imperceptible to a rigid, calculating mind. It is to embrace "useless" technology—technologies that are not focused on productivity, profits, or measurable results, and instead to prioritize technology that nourishes all beings' creativity, leisure, and spontaneity. Technologies designed to expand possibilities, rather than narrow them, would align with Zhuangzi's preference for open-ended, playful engagement with the world.

Zhuangzi frequently critiques the attachment to expertise—a clinging to a skill or a method—as it can lead to rigid thinking and spiritual imbalance. For example, in the story of the "useless tree", the tree's value comes precisely from not being useful in a conventional carpentry sense. It is to embrace technology merely as tools—useful but not definitive. It is to avoid over-identifying with technological achievements, whether as individuals or societies. Technology should enable the flourishing of humans and other beings, and not become an end in itself. We should thus develop technology that supports human flourishing without it becoming central to our existence.

Zhuangzi's view would thus suggest that we can embrace *technê* but only when it flows naturally, promotes balance, and does not interfere with our spontaneous, intuitive connection to life. Zhuangzi's view of technology is contextual, life-oriented, and flowing rather than the rationalized, dualistic, and instrumentalized approach of science.

2 This "natural computing" can bring out the phases of AI advancements: Neural Computing; Predictive Intelligence; General Intelligence and Collective Intelligence.

Final Remarks

The *Book of Changes* (*I Ching* 易经), and specifically in the *Xici Zhuan* (繫辭傳, "Commentary on the Appended Phrases"), reveals that a fundamental assumption in the Chinese philosophical tradition is that everything—the cosmos, animals, and plants—harbours its own source, reason, and wisdom within. All things exist within this integrated framework, and nothing lies beyond it. "By looking up, we observe the patterns of the heavens; by looking down, we examine the features of the earth. We take what is near to our own bodies and what is distant from external things" (仰观天文、俯察地理、近取诸身、远取诸物) (Lynn 1994). This interrelation between Heaven, humanity, nature offers a foundation to understand continuity (*ji* 继), goodness (*shan* 善), disposition (*xing* 性), and fate (*ming* 命), as well as their relationships. It is the practice of "Matching virtue with Heaven" (*yi de pei tian* 以德配天).

The Daoist text *Huangting jin*g 黃庭經 (*The Scripture of the Yellow Court* or loosely *Landscape of Human Body*), which was credited to a woman, Wei Huacun 魏華存 (251–334 CE), maps human internal organs to the cosmos, suns, moons, and animals. The *Inner Landscape of the Yellow Court* (*Huangting Neijing* 内景) has seven-characters-per-line rhyming lines that have existed in folk traditions since at least 252 BCE. It states:

> The inward is the heartmind; the luminous image is its reflection. The outer images are signs—the sun, moon, stars, clouds, and mist. The inner images are the forms within—blood and flesh, sinew and bone, the hidden organs. The heart-mind dwells deep within the body, abiding in silent observation of the whole form's arising shapes and subtle hues. Thus, it is called the Inner Radiance. (Kohn 2023)
>
> 内者, 心也；景者，象也．外象谕，即日月星辰云霞之象，内象谕，即血肉筋骨脏腑之象也．心居身内，存观一体之象色，故曰内景也.

The terms *neijing* 内景 (inner radiance), *xiang* 象 (luminous images), and the detailed contemplative mapping of inner bodily structures all point to a clearly interconnected system. The human body is not a closed biological container, but a resonant field—a living cosmos in miniature. Such a human body is not separate from the cosmos but structured in its image. The same *xiang* 象 (form or symbol) that describes stars, clouds, and celestial rhythms is used to describe blood, flesh, and organs. This reveals a deep isomorphism between inner and outer, between microcosm and macrocosm. Outer images—sun, moon, stars, clouds—represent celestial order, the great cycles of time and change. Inner images—organs, blood, bones—are embodied echoes of that order.

The *xin* 心 (heartmind) plays the role of the sovereign—a still, observing centre, like the pole star, around which inner and outer constellations move. Its power lies not in manipulation, but in contemplation—*cun guan* 存觀, "preserving and observing". Through this subtle attentiveness, the inner self aligns with the great rhythms of the universe.

This is what the text calls *nei jing* 內景—not simply "inner image", but a radiant reflection of cosmic order within. The body becomes a court of stars; the heartmind, a silent emperor; the organs, ministers and spirits; the breath, wind among the heavens. So the universe is within you—not metaphorically, but ritually, rhythmically, energetically. To dwell in the Yellow Court is to dwell at the centre of a cosmic unfolding.[3]

The relationship between *bíos* and *technê* undergoes a transformation through this vision of an approach to technology that takes inspiration from nature. While other philosophical traditions often treat nature (*physis*) and human craft (*technê*) as distinct, the *Dao* sees no such separation—nature and technology should flow together, not be in opposition. The *Zhuangzi*'s *jiexin*, unleashing or "letting loose" the heartmind involves freeing oneself from rigid judgments, attachments, and the constraints of societal norms. This liberation allows for spontaneous responsiveness (*ziran* 自然) and aligns one's actions with the flow of the *Dao*. This issue is not just an ancient philosophical debate but also extends into the contemporary world, particularly in the relationship between human beings and the natural world.

Now 'let us go back to the first question of why does Zhuangzi employ the word *jie* to discuss "dissecting an ox" and "liberating the heartmind"? The answer lies in following the *Dao*. Cook Ding learns from his teacher the ox (*bios*), its natural grain, such human beings are given an opportunity to align with the natural flow of things by untangling the heartmind. The common thread is that transcending mere *logos* or *technê* and returning to *animas* and *bios* is to flow with the manifestation of the *Dao*. *Jie* is not merely an action but a philosophical state, horizon, or vision, pointing to the great unity of beings and life with clarity and wander, and preventing human creations, whether conceptual structures or artificial technology, to alienate us from *Dao*.

3 This view is deeply influential in the development of Daoist internal alchemy and meditative visualization practices.

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In Search of Allies: Global Philosophy as Criticism

*Heiner ROETZ**

Abstract

The world is more dominated than ever by a destructive logic of self-assertion (*Selbstbehauptung*) at the expense of global solidarity. Can Chinese philosophy offer an alternative? If philosophy is needed today, then it is a philosophy which is able to break through that logic, instead of itself falling victim to or even supporting it. However, the latter is the case if a philosophy understands itself as an expression of a specific cultural identity as distinct from others, as for example in today's China. Even what is currently being discussed under the term "global philosophy" is influenced by that logic, insofar as it presents itself as a panopticon of juxtaposed worldviews that rest in themselves and not as something that points beyond them. However, only by critiquing "its own" (*das Eigene*), and not by affirming it, can philosophy be truly global and develop alternatives to self-assertion. This corresponds to its origins, be it in Greece or China, as globality is originally inherent in philosophy, inasmuch as it emerges as a criticism of the given culture due to a crisis of its tradition that made human existence problematic. It is just that it has repeatedly fallen behind. Recalling philosophy's origin might help to revive its culture-critical, culture-transcending core and enable it to join forces with its likes against the powers that are plunging the world into disaster.

Keywords: Global philosophy, philosophy as criticism, interculturality, Chinese philosophy, Jaspers

V iskanju zaveznikov: globalna filozofija kot kritika

Izvleček

Svet je vedno bolj pod vplivom destruktivne logike samopotrjevanja (*Selbstbehauptung*) na račun globalne solidarnosti. Ali lahko kitajska filozofija ponudi alternativo? Če je filozofija danes potrebna, potem je to filozofija, ki je sposobna prekiniti in preseči logiko samopotrjevanja, ne pa da sama postane njena žrtev ali jo celo podpira. Zadnje velja, ko se filozofija vidi kot izraz specifične kulturne identitete, ki se razlikuje od drugih, kot na primer v današnji Kitajski. Tudi to, kar se trenutno razpravlja pod pojmom »globalna filozofija«, je pod vplivom te logike, če se predstavlja kot panoptikon različnih svetovnih nazorov, ki ostajajo sami v sebi, in ne kot nekaj, kar kaže onkraj njih. Toda filozofija

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lahko postane resnično globalna in razvije alternative v odnosu do samopotrditve le s kritiko »svojega« (*das Eigene*), in ne z njegovim potrjevanjem. To je v skladu z njenim izvorom, bodisi v Grčiji bodisi na Kitajskem, saj je globalnost v osnovi neločljivo povezana s filozofijo, če le-ta izhaja iz kritike dane kulture zaradi krize njene tradicije, ki je problematizirala človeško bivanje. Gre samo za to, da je vedno znova zaostajala. Pomnjenje samega izvora filozofije bi lahko pomagalo ponovno oživiti njeno kulturno-kritično in kulturo presegajoče bistvo ter ji omogočilo, da se združi s podobnimi silami proti močem, ki svet potiskajo v katastrofo.

Ključne besede: globalna filozofija, filozofija kot kritika, medkulturnost, kitajska filozofija, Jaspers

The Problem of Global Philosophy Today

In what ways could Chinese philosophy contribute to solving the global crises we face today?[1] This is the question that the International Society for Chinese Philosophy has addressed at its 24th conference.[2] Our answer will, of course, depend on how we describe that crisis. The conference call lists a whole series of problems for which it is hoped that Chinese philosophy will provide solutions that Western philosophy has apparently been unable to deliver so far. Is this expectation justified?

If we boil everything down to a common denominator, it seems appropriate to view today's crises as a new and heightened expression of a destructive system of complementarity that has been at work for some time.[3] This system initially developed in the West and has now spread globally, with China being no exception. On the one hand, there is the ruthless unleashing of instrumental reason everywhere with the universal enforcement of identical economic, technical, and strategic imperatives, which follow a cost-benefit calculation. On the other hand, there is a relativization of ethical norms. This initially manifested itself in the name of existentialism as the individualization of value decisions. Today, individual preferences are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by the value orientations of "cultures", which position themselves against each other as super-individuals and, without deeper commitment, engage in "intercultural dialogues". Behind these superficial dialogues nothing else prevails but global capitalism.

1 This text is partly based on Roetz (2024).

2 Jana Rošker addresses this question in her book *Confucian Relationism and Global Ethics: Alternative models of ethics and axiology in times of global crises* (Rošker 2023).

3 The system was, to the best of my knowledge, first described by Karl-Otto Apel, see for example Apel (1982, 685 f.).

Philosophy has been involved in these developments, for example in the form of ethical relativism. This is why philosophy as such cannot be considered a potential corrective, quite apart from the fact that its voice is weak anyway. If it wants to avoid being part of the problem, a prerequisite would be that it sees itself as an expression of global rather than local thinking, and as a corresponding form of criticism. This would actually align with its original *raison d'être*, as I would like to demonstrate, although not to its current reality. This is particularly true of China, but also applies to the West.

Chinese Philosophy in the Cultural Turn

For some time now, Chinese philosophy has been the subject of politically driven culturalist identity management in China. Through this process, it is being turned into an expression of, and simultaneously moulder of, the specific distinctiveness (*tese* 特色) of Chinese culture. Consequently, it is placed in sharp contrast to "Western" philosophy and its "value system", the model function of which is no longer accepted, if there ever was such a function. This growing culturalization of the understanding of philosophy with its strong relativistic undertones can only reduce its global relevance. Indeed, the culturalists among philosophers prefer to think in terms of a plural of "civilizations" rather than a unified universal world or humanity as a whole.[4]

The consequences of this are significant. For example, human rights violations could no longer be viewed as one of the shared global problems. Instead, as China is demonstrating today, there would only be rights defined by culture, such as "human rights with Chinese characteristics", as they are called in innocent contradiction. Moreover, the erosion of liberal political orders based on the human right to participation and the growing attacks on democracy worldwide by political authoritarianism would no longer be identifiable as problems that a global philosophy would need to address. Instead, they would have to be accepted in the name of cultural diversity.

As a matter of fact, the critics of democracy and human rights who speak in the name of Chinese philosophy, particularly of Confucianism, seem to be more vocal today than their supporters, such as the "New Confucians" of the last century in Hong Kong and Taiwan and their followers. These "New Confucian" philosophers made every effort to reconstruct the ancient teaching on the basis of the recognition of political modernity, and thus of democracy and human rights. Meanwhile, they have been (and are) condemned for having sold out Confucianism

4 For a critique of the civilizations paradigm with regard to China, see Roetz (2025).

to the West.[5] In Western Chinese studies, too, the authoritarian turn is met with understanding by critics of Western modernity. And not only there, since a global right is forming that finds intellectual partners in China, with Carl Schmitt as a common source of inspiration.

The cultural turn can also involve rejecting the term "philosophy" as inapplicable to China. This has been a frequent occurrence among Western authors, initially as a defensive reaction to the influence of Confucianism on the European Enlightenment. Since then, the very existence of philosophy in China has often been disputed. Even today, many Western philosophers are convinced that "philosophy" is an individual term for the tradition established by the Greeks, and that extending its scope beyond this tradition and its offshoots would dilute its meaning. This scepticism has also impacted Chinese studies, and sinologists give quite different signals here.[6] There are quite a number of them who speak about what I would call "philosophy in China", but who prefer less demanding titles such as "Chinese thought", "masters literature", "discursive thinking", or "history of ideas". However, for some time now, such voices have been heard from China itself (Defoort 2006; Vetrow 2016; Rošker 2017), concerned that adopting the originally Western term "philosophy" might threaten the higher-ranking Chinese national identity.

So has philosophy ever existed in China? This question has always had political implications. In the West, it has been argued in particular that at least elevated philosophizing would require a language of the Indo-European type (preferably, of course, Greek or German), whose fine morphological ramifications and syntactic structures would make speculative thinking possible in the first place. This has put Chinese, which has been (incorrectly, with regard to ancient Chinese) viewed as an isolating language, at a disadvantage. While, as François Jullien has argued, Greek would constitute abstraction and transcendence, Chinese would reflect the immanence of pure "events" and make it impossible to adopt a "position" above

5 The problem is reflected in the conference call, which in the list of suggested topics vaguely speaks of a "political balance" that Chinese philosophy is said to advocate.

6 In this context, it is not without an aftertaste that sinologist Bryan Van Norden, together with Jay Garfield, a philosopher specialized in Buddhism, in an indignant article in the *New York Times* (Van Norden and Garfield 2016), called on the philosophy departments of American universities to rename themselves "Department of European and American Philosophy" unless they were prepared to diversify and include Confucius in their curriculum ("We hope that American philosophy departments will someday teach Confucius as routinely as they now teach Kant"). However, Van Norden himself had previously denied that Confucius was a philosopher at all (Van Norden 2002, 230–31). So why should one feel compelled to study him in a philosophy course? While Van Norden later modified his position (van Norden 2019, 640), there remains the impression of an undecidedness. It surely has a basis, since it can be debated as to whether or not Confucius was a philosopher. I would call him a pedagogue who has begun to philosophize. Uwe Schulz (2012, 284, 305) makes the interesting distinction of "philosophizing learning" in Confucius and "learning philosophizing" in Socrates. Cf. also the remark on E. Møllgaard in note 18 below.

the constant flow of processes (Jullien 2000, 16). But if language is merely an aspect of the "presence" of the immanent and cannot represent something different, it only leads to "complicity" and a "dull agreement" with power (ibid., 115), to "opportunism" (Jullien 2002, 111) and a "deeply conformist" ethics "without distance to the world" (Jullien 1992, 238). It hardly leads to philosophy. In the "continuous process", Jullien also allows the human *subject* to disappear. This means that interculturality cannot be conceived of as communication between subjects and co-subjects. It must be *constructed* as an artificial "montage" (Jullien 2002, 15, 83, 84) from an objectifying perspective. This concept of interculturality leaves the boundaries where they supposedly are—which, however, corresponds to a certain *dispositif* of so-called "intercultural philosophy" that I will discuss later.[7]

Similar assumptions to those made about the Chinese language have been made about Chinese writing, which is said to lack the abstract nature of its "world-historical opponent", the alphabetic system, and fix the attention to the concrete, "systematically preventing" formal thinking (Stetter 1997, 51). Such linguistic theories have been put forward time and again (Roetz 2006), and have not exactly increased the willingness to recognize philosophy in China.

The Birth of Philosophy as Criticism of Culture

However, there is evidence that the Greeks themselves, and thus the creators of the term *philosophia*, unlike the Graecocentrics who refer to them today, had no problem discovering *philosophoi* outside of Hellas and their linguistic world, just as they, along with all pre-modern philosophies, regarded the differences between languages as something quite secondary to thought. I am also convinced that they would have had no problem finding *philosophoi* in ancient China had they gone there. For they would have witnessed how, in response to one of the deepest crises that Chinese civilization has ever experienced, which shook the prevailing worldview to its core, a very thorough-going critical rethinking of the previous ethos and the exploration of new sources and forms of normativity was underway in China, with the whole world being engaged in *bian* 辯*,* argument, something that the Greeks themselves pursued under the title of *philosophia* in a context of life that had likewise become a problem. To use Schopenhauer's metaphor, "philosophy starts with a minor chord" (Schopenhauer 1977, 200).[8] The background in Greece was the breakdown of the old clan system and the enforcement of a new type of political order no longer based on family relationships, and finally, what Hegel calls the "dissolution of Greece in the Peloponnesian War", which initiated

7 For a more comprehensive criticism of Jullien cf. Roetz (2016, 291–300), and Heubel (2021, 64–69).

8 In Schopenhauer this is related to the realization that the non-existence of the world is just as possible as its existence.

the "age of subjective reflection" (Hegel 1986, 404), breaking up the "substance" that previously prevailed. This is something that Hegel denied for China, since he failed to recognize the Chinese parallel—the *dissolution of China during the late Chunqiu and Warring States period*, following the collapse of the Zhou order. Philosophy in both Greece and China is a *phenomenon of crisis*, a *critical reaction* to a world in turmoil that has *become problematic,* in classical Chinese terms, has "lost the *Dao*"—just as our own world has. The motifs of chaos, worry, danger and decline are echoed in the entire literature of this period. It is astonishing how relevant some of the pessimistic self-descriptions of the time sound today—a contemporaneity that allows direct access to these texts. Xunzi's lament, to give an example, "Benighted, alas, the entire world so dark and gloomy. Bright Heaven does not show again, and sorrow has no end" (闇乎天下之晦盲也，皓天不復，憂無疆也 (*Xunzi* 26, 319), does not sound like it comes from another time.

The breakthrough towards philosophy marks the moment at which a culture becomes uncertain of itself and enters into a critical relationship with itself. Philosophy thus begins as a *critical self-reflection*, or *self-criticism, of culture*; it "intervenes" into it, as Georg Misch hat put it.[9] This does not mean that other factors do not come into play or that the work of philosophy has already been comprehensively described. Nor can it be denied that "philosophical" or quasi-philosophical thoughts have already been entertained before, for example, about life and death or the working of nature. However, it is only in the "axial" moment (Jaspers, see below) when thinking is confronted with the collapse of an old world and is forced to go beyond it and open itself to new alternatives, that philosophy becomes the historical movement that it has been.[10]

Key indications of this in Greece are the Sophists' questioning of the traditional *nomos* in favour of *physis*, nature. It was seen as a threat to the established

9 Cf. Misch (1950 [1926], 30, 31): "Wherever, in the course of history, philosophy appears […], it is at a time when an old, hitherto binding culture is being broken and ethical standards are dissolving; a time of social ferment, political struggle, religious crisis; a time when the sap of life is mounting dangerously, and institutions explode at a touch. […] the beginning of philosophical reflection intervenes in the run of earthly happenings as a creative historical process; that is to say, it emerges from the previous situation but goes beyond it in a way that is crucial, new, and not deducible from that situation." Eric Nelson deserves credit for having brought Misch's important work with its comprehensive analyses of China back to attention again, defending Misch's critical approach (Nelson 2017).

10 A similar point is made by Nelson (2020, 252), with Misch: "Dilthey and Misch did not reduce philosophy to the mere uncritical and unreflective expression of opinions, psychological states, and worldviews, identifying it rather with a fundamental 'metaphysical need' that leads to the breakthrough of critical self-reflection in diverse cultural milieus. The need for critical reflection on the conditions of one's life is not the totality of philosophy, as it developed into systematic structured discourses in a range of cultural contexts such as the Chinese, Greek, and Indian historical worlds. Critical reflection on life is, however, philosophy's origin, and the reflective engagement with life its aim, Misch argued, in China and India as much as in Greece." For critique as a key to interpretation cf. also Wenning (2011).

religion, with which the previous new speculations about the cosmos had already come into conflict, as well as to the given social norms, values and authority structures. On the Chinese side, we see fierce attacks on everything customary and conventional, particularly the *li* 禮, the epitome of what was regarded as the Zhou tradition, in radical Daoism, together with the proud rejection of the "vulgar world's" convictions. No stone is left unturned. However, these are merely the extreme expressions of the growing doubt surrounding the validity of tradition which is evident in all of the new teachings that emerged in search of answers to the crisis. This also includes Confucianism, despite its outwardly traditionalist profile. Disembeddedness and the lonely self are more apt terms to describe the mood of the time than embededdness and functioning relations, which today are often highlighted as Chinese characteristics.

In view of this constellation which characterizes the birth of philosophy in both Greece and China—the crisis of tradition and its critical questioning—the narrowing of philosophy down to a specific tradition as we witness it today contradicts the fact that philosophy is originally a *tradition-critical* enterprise for which *transcending rather than reifying that which is "one's own"* is structurally inherent.

As the *form of reflection of the becoming problematic of the world*, the still young philosophy is thus in tension with what one can call the respective "cultures" in terms of transmitted, relatively stable, shared forms of life that deliver an opaque background of orientation, for example due to a common heritage and religion. It is precisely these shared horizons that are broken through in the ancient philosophies. Even the more moderate and conservative positions, such as the Confucian one, are influenced by this—it can be demonstrated that all of the central ideas of Zhou philosophy, like Confucius' Golden Rule or Mengzi's moral anthropology, bear the mark of this crisis: they stand in the time paradigm of the here and now, different than traditional thinking (Roetz 2009), though this is rarely noted.

In this sense, philosophy, viewed from its origins, is more than a cultural phenomenon; it is a venture that is *critical of culture*, even *anti-cultural* in parts, and transcends the given culture. It is no coincidence that many of its proponents were considered a threat to, or even destroyers of, the given order.[11] Its actual agent is not the Greek or the Chinese or the culturalist, but in the final analysis the cosmopolitan. And it is by this stepping out of its own habitat that philosophy can encounter other philosophies *in a new shared space beyond their own space*, even if the connection to the latter is not completely severed. Philosophy does not have to become transcultural to achieve this—it is intrinsically so; it has simply time and again forgotten if not betrayed this fact. From this perspective, today's expectation of philosophy to "globalize" is not so much a new development as the recovery of something lost.

11 Cf. for Greece Dreßler (2014).

It would not be sufficient, then, to derive the transculturality of philosophy from the hybrid constitution of "cultures" themselves, particularly modern ones,[12] and the constitution of "cultural identity", like all identity, through alterity[13]—as has, undoubtedly for good reasons, been emphasized in the discourse on intercultural philosophy, among others, from the perspective of phenomenology.[14] The transculturality of philosophy in question is rather based on the *rupture of identity* in cultural terms (*Identitätsbruch*), which, as far as I can see, has remained under-exposed in the discussion.

The *critical transcendence of "what is"* establishes a standard for philosophy that cannot be undercut without paying a high price. However, philosophy has repeatedly and massively fallen back into a new provincialism, and this process likewise already begins in antiquity, together with counterattacks against Sophism, with great and still influential representatives. This is also reflected in the later understanding of philosophy as an exclusively Western phenomenon. However, paradoxically, a particular type of "intercultural philosophy", referred to above as a *dispositif*, does not seem to be able to free itself from this localism. Upon closer inspection, it reinstates the old reference spaces of the "own". While the concept of "transcultural" philosophy can directly capture the early origins and core of philosophy as a *critical* enterprise, talk of "intercultural" philosophy in this case threatens to systematically undermine it.

"Intercultural philosophy" (like "global philosophy"), to be sure, can mean quite a few different things, with approaches ranging from universalism to relativism and from critical rationalism to phenomenology, which cannot be discussed in more detail here.[15] The idea is any case justified by the fact that adopting a perspective that goes beyond the internal Western viewpoint can lead to the discovery of better solutions to problems and the formulation of new, productive questions through the expansion of knowledge (Gosepath 2023). Moreover, it can sensitize us to the complicated situation of academic philosophy today in those parts of the world that have been overrun by the West. This still applies even if one places intercultural philosophy in a very close relationship to "comparative philosophy", which, as a field of comparatistics, actually has an empirical, rather than "critical", and therefore non-philosophical relationship to its subject matter—the question of interculturality arises differently in philosophy than in the (other) humanities. And in all its varieties, intercultural philosophy addresses a problem of justice, since the contempt for "foreign" thinking that it seeks to overcome is not only foolish but also unfair.

12 As Heubel (2021) emphasizes for modern China.

13 As in Mead's idea that "We are what we are through our relationship to others" (Mead 1962, 379).

14 Cf. e.g. Peikert (2020).

15 A compilation of mainly German-language titles can be found in Roetz (2024, n. 10).

However, philosophy as criticism would rule out applying the title of "philosophy" to all kinds of *worldviews* that express a culture's unquestioned socio-cosmic basic assumptions, as often described under the title of "native philosophies".[16] For this would mean that the term would no longer be linked to the problem context in which it was coined, and that the history of the origin of philosophy would, as it were, be reversed again. The term is certainly not already protected by a Greek copyright, though it would not make sense to use it in a way that is completely different to how the Greeks used it.[17] Ultimately, what matters is not the term itself, but the *difference* it signifies, and intercultural philosophy would deprive itself of its meaning if it abolished the difference again by turning a critical term back into a pre-critical one. From this perspective, justice would not be served by generously awarding the predicate "philosophy", but in acknowledging when others outside the Greek tradition have also crossed the mentioned threshold and thus have a legitimate claim to the term.[18] If this claim would nevertheless be rejected, then they would have the right to dismiss "philosophy" as an internal self-talk of the West, and thus irrelevant (except as a form of hegemonic overreach) for the rest of the world. This does not, *nota bene*, apply to the rejection of the term "philosophy" for China by cultural nationalists who do not share the critical notion in the first place but simply want to get rid of it.

16 See e.g. Arola (2011), Le Grange and Mika (2018), and Stewart (2020, from the series *Bloomsbury Introductions the World Philosophies*). A sharp distinction between "world-view" and philosophy is already made by Misch (1950, 32).

17 To avoid any misunderstandings: My argument concerning the emergence of philosophy is a structural, not a geographical one. Essentially, nothing would change if the step towards philosophy, as understood here, had been taken by the Egyptians long before the Greeks, as Graness (2016) has argued, or by anyone else (there is also the India hypothesis). Nevertheless, identifying this step as a step towards "philosophy" would still be Greek. Furthermore, if one wishes to attribute the beginning of philosophy in the Mediterranean region to Egypt, then, based on the textual material with which I am familiar, its beginning in China should be backdated by at least half a millennium.

18 I agree with Eske Møllgaard: "[…] accepting non-Western discourses as philosophy should be based on rational debate and not on moral outrage at being excluded". However, not only the inclusion, but also the exclusion of "discourses" from philosophy should be based on "rational debate" and not on reductionist representations. For this reason, I disagree with Møllgaard's assertion, that "Confucian discourse" it not philosophy since, as he maintains, the Confucians do not believe in the power of argument and merely want to "speak the words of the sages" (Møllgaard 2021, 1030). To mention just one objection: It is possible to be sceptical about the scope of arguments and yet still make them, as, in my opinion, is evident in the Confucian texts. After all, these texts were written at a time when the "words of the sages" were being questioned and no longer accepted. Incidentally, the claim that "the Chinese never got past the initial disorientation of reason; that is to say philosophy in the Western sense did not develop in China" (ibid.) seems odd coming from an author who teaches in the Philosophy Department of an American university and "brings Chinese philosophies into conversation with Western philosophies" (https://web.uri.edu/philosophy/meet/eske-mollgaard/). One would at least like to know what under Møllgaard's assumptions "philosophies" still means in the Chinese case. For a critique of Møllgaard, see also Bai (2021), with a reply by Møllgaard.

However, behind the liberal use of the term philosophy there may be still something other than the good will to respect other cultures. It could also be related to a certain, in my opinion problematic, conception of the "inter" in *inter*cultural philosophy, the "between". So what does philosophizing "between cultures" mean?[19] Essentially, two possibilities are conceivable.

Two Models of "Intercultural"

(A) The "between" can refer to the intermediate *space* (*Zwischenraum*) between cultures in which different philosophies meet and enter into free connections with an open outcome. This corresponds to the *stepping out* of philosophy from the old culture, as mentioned above, which is the prerequisite for it to step into a new "space of possibilities" ("*Raum der Möglichkeiten*") or "space of powers" ("*Raum der Mächte*"), as Karl Jaspers called it in his reflections on a possible "world history of philosophy" (Jaspers 1980a [1955], 139, 140). According to Jaspers, this space, the "middle" between the cultures that "belongs to no one", "does not coincide with the historical areas, but rather runs right through them" ("*quer durch sie hindurch*"). The space of the "communication of spirits" ("*Kommunikation der Geister*")[20]—not of cultures!—does not find a limit at cultural boundaries but transcends them. Therefore, the *subjects* of communication would be the *philosophies or philosophers* who are no longer merely personifications of their culture, but rather take a *decentred* position on it, and "intercultural" philosophizing would presuppose the transcultural or culture-transcending movement.

(B) Instead of signifying a distinct space between cultures, "between" could also be understood as a *relation,* indicating a "dialogue" of one culture with the other. The difference is significant, because in case B the *cultures* move into the *subject* position, and thus precisely those "substantial" (Hegel) powers whose authority philosophy challenged in the process of its emergence. In this case, the broad usage of the term "philosophy" is not fundamentally problematic insofar as it has already been devalued and stripped of its critical edge.

Which of these two variants applies to "intercultural philosophy"? As mentioned above, "intercultural philosophy" is far from a unified concept, and many of its proponents would probably deny that they adhere to a holistic concept of culture.[21] Whether everyone takes this equally seriously is another question. Time and again, it can be observed how in theory and especially in practice, cultures

19 On the conception of the "between", see also the special issues of the magazine Polylog (40 (2018), "inter"), and (41 (2019), "inter²"), as well as the considerations in Heubel (2021, 76–95).

20 This takes up an old humanistic idea; cf. Brogsitter (1958).

21 Cf. for this point Schelkshorn (2011, 78 f).

appear as hidden super-subjects according to Model B, and individual philosophies or philosophers are understood as or regard themselves as their representatives, even if some ancient Chinese philosophers, for example the Daoists, would not have agreed. This then leads to calls from one cultural "space" into the other from a *centred* rather than decentred perspective, as in the case of religions in the so-called "interreligious dialogue", instead of entering a third, shared space in terms of Model A and following its rules. This goes hand in hand with carefully protecting one's identity and cultivating differences[22]—external ones, to be sure, while downplaying the internal ones, even though they may be greater.

The "intercultural" "dialogues" in question, which one then leaves as one has entered them, often offer little more than a series of monadic self-portraits (or portraits of others from an objectifying perspective) not designed for deeper debate. The result is the reification of cultural "identities" while ignoring the non-identical. This is certainly not the whole picture, and it would be unfair to lump together all contributions made in the field. Still, there is a danger that intercultural philosophy could become a vanity fair, a playground for a laboured search and insistence to be different. The fact that what was once separate has already merged in myriad ways for centuries is hardly taken into account. And when representatives of Western philosophy routinely disappear immediately after their own presentations at global philosophy conferences, if they even make it there, this shows that they are not willing to leave their own space either.[23] For most of them, the "foreign" is first and foremost an abstract theoretical category *about* which they philosophize, rather than something concrete and living to seriously engage with. However, before dismissing this disinterest as hegemonic, it should be noted that, contrary to the criterion applied here, philosophy is becoming more and more of an aggregate of sub-disciplines of the normal humanities and sciences, due to

22 "Intercultural philosophy" disagrees in the assessment of these differences. Rolf Elberfeld, for example, has strongly emphasized them as an expression of the historical individuality of cultures as opposed to the search for unity (Elberfeld 1999), and Georg Stenger also comes close to this in his magnum opus Philosophie der Interkulturalität (2020). Gregor Paul, however, speaks of "completely exaggerated assessments of the relevance of the differences" (Paul 2008, 120). I also consider the emphasis on differences to be one-sided and overly dramatic (in my opinion this also applies to the problem of understanding the other). As Fabian Heubel has put it, "The crucial problem is not the difference between languages and cultures, but rather the European indifference towards non-European languages and cultures" (Heubel 2021, 50 f.).

23 *Wikipedia* says this about Jay Garfield, who together with Van Norden called for "diversifying" philosophy in the *New York Times* (see above note 6): "Because of his knowledge of Buddhism and commitment to encouraging the study of Asian philosophy, Garfield was invited to be the keynote speaker at a conference on non-Western philosophical traditions organized by graduate students in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania in 2016. However, he was 'outraged' that there were only 'one or two' members of the regular faculty in the department who attended the event, because he felt that this showed a lack of support for their own students' interest in non-Western philosophy." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_L._Garfield)

its increasing specialization. This anyway narrows the horizon of perception for other topics, whether "non-Western" or "Western".

While Model B all too often represents the reality of "intercultural philosophy", fulfilling a comparative or contrastive claim at best, it is clear that only Model A can satisfy the genuinely *philosophical* claim to "intercultural philosophy", which actually becomes transcultural in this process. And in my opinion, only Model A can also fulfil the demands of a global philosophy that can contribute to organizing a shared responsibility for the planet and its inhabitants. As long as global philosophy is more or less a panopticon—Jaspers speaks of an "*Aneinanderreihung*" (juxtaposition, Jaspers 1980a, 139)—of worldviews that lack critical distance to themselves, it is a part of the problem, since claims to self-assertion (*Selbstbehauptung*) lie at the problem's core.

Global Philosophizing—Some Historical Examples

There are some historical examples from the West of steps towards global philosophy in this sense. It is no coincidence that these examples originate from existential crises of Western culture, during which this culture became unsure of itself, and the uprooting of thought, the actual driving force of philosophy since ancient times, was repeated. All of my examples are from Germany, a country, after all, with a significant historical involvement in producing disasters.

The first example is the response to the "bloody barbarism of the religious wars" (Voltaire) in Europe, which shockingly demonstrated the normative deficit of the Christian order, and was followed by the Enlightenment with its declared cosmopolitanism and interest in the foreign. For many of the great minds of the era, such as Leibniz, Wolff, Bilfinger, Voltaire, Quesnay, Diderot and almost all English deists, China was a congenial dialogue partner on equal footing (Roetz 2013). One of the greatest scandals in the 18th century academia, the spectacular expulsion of Christian Wolff from Prussia, occurred because he dared to take the Confucian *philosophia practica* seriously in public in his famous speech of 1721 in Halle, joining forces with a "pagan" philosopher, Confucius, against Christian orthodoxy (Wolff 1740). Wolff cites China as a witness that one does not require an "overlord" in order to lead a moral life. China becomes an ally in the search for an autonomous morality based on reason and free from clerical instruction (Roetz 2023a). The European Enlightenment is the first major example of the effectiveness of truly global philosophy—caveats notwithstanding. However, the West has never acknowledged China's contribution to breaking the monopoly of opinion of organized Christianity and bringing about secular modernity. On the contrary, in a xenophobic backlash against the growing interest in Confucianism, the understanding of "philosophy" began to narrow to encompass only the

European tradition (Wimmer 2017; Rüdiger 2017; Ambrogio 2021). China's part in the Enlightenment was then almost entirely erased from the West's historical memory. The West's current difficulties with "global philosophy" are, among other things, a consequence of this amnesia. A formidable recent example is Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), a veritable monument to North-Atlantic parochialism. Taylor manages to present a voluminous history of early modernity without even once mentioning the non-Western influences.[24]

German idealism and Hegel in particular sealed this development. For Hegel, China is the realm of "substance" lacking subjectivity and therefore also the medium of philosophy and of history in terms of "progress in the consciousness of freedom", moving beyond the "substantial", the merely given. After Hegel, the West's dominance over the rest of the world, including China, which crumbled under the onslaught of colonialism, no longer prompted any questioning of this self-complacency.

Hegel's view has been reaffirmed time and again, with lasting effect. Marx and Weber have both endorsed it, and it has been underpinned with further arguments, like the linguistic ones mentioned earlier. The substance paradigm remains influential today, including in sinology, and has contributed significantly to the challenges faced by the idea of a global philosophy, with regard to its inclusion of China.

As far as I can see, after Hegel, if we leave aside an exceptional figure like the cosmopolitan Schopenhauer,[25] it was only the First World War, a new fundamental crisis of its civilization, that once again disconcerted the West. Attention then turned again to the East, but this time primarily to Daoism as a source of inspiration for condemning the technical-material civilization which was held responsible for the catastrophe. In this context, Max Scheler called for a new "world era of balance" (*Weltalter des Ausgleichs*) and a "cosmopolitan world philosophy" in order to counterbalance the "mastery of nature that the Occident has so far developed so one-sidedly" (Scheler 1954 [1927]). However, Scheler imagines "world philosophy" as a combination of what is quite schematically distinguished—like masculinity and femininity—such as European "science" on the one hand and Asian "wisdom" on the other, rather than the conjoining and reinforcement of something *common* and related across spatial and temporal boundaries, as the Enlightenment did, with which I agree here, against the preference of "intercultural philosophy" for differences. This, of course, does not preclude the discovery of something new.

The spirit of the Enlightenment is reflected in Albert Schweitzer's demand, born of his experience of the war and his belief that the "failure of philosophy" was partly responsible for its outbreak, to take up "the inventory of our intellectual

24 Cf. the critique in Roetz (2013).

25 For Schopenhauer's global philosophy, cf. May (2001).

life" anew (Schweitzer 1990 [1923], 17, 15). For Schweitzer, this inventory is not just Western. In contrast to the "epigone philosophy" prevalent at German universities, which, in its parochial arrogance, "no longer has anything to say to the world", Schweitzer focuses on a "world philosophy of which our Western philosophy is only one part" (ibid. 20, 85). He sees the necessary "orientation by world thinking" (*orientation dans la pensée mondiale*) (quoted in Günzler 1996, 15) preshaped by the Enlightenment's interest in Confucianism, for him a foundation on which to build again. He hopes that the rediscovery of a shared rationality that has been neglected will lead to the long-overdue global "ethical culture". Western philosophy on its own would be unable to fulfil this task, having long since lost its "public calling" (Schweitzer 1990, 20). Schweitzer also wants to understand and develop his own thinking through communication with the "thinking of humanity", not just through the Western tradition.[26] The results are congenial studies on India and especially China (with a paternalistic attitude towards Africa), which in my opinion belong to the most remarkable that the West has produced in this regard, but have been largely overlooked to this day (Schweitzer 2002). Of exemplary importance to Schweitzer are Confucius' "venture" to build ethics "on nothing but itself" without a religious foundation (ibid., 83), and Mengzi's "ethics of universal compassion" as the climax of Chinese moral philosophy, that the world is in need of. As Günzler has put it (1996, 15), it is "Schweitzer's conviction that universally plausible solutions of problems can only be found on the way through the problem history of mankind".

Schweitzer's conviction did not enter the mainstream, nor did the doubt about the Western "claim to exclusivity" that Karl Jaspers formulated shortly after the next disaster, the Second World War, specifically in opposition to Hegel's talk of the appearance of Christ as the "pivot" of world history (Hegel 1986, 386 f.; Jaspers 2017 [1949], 33). Jaspers turns "*Angel*" ("pivot") into "*Achse*" ("axis") and counters Hegel with his own concept of an "Axial Age" of the ancient civilizations, which is not the Christian one, but happens in a number of pre-Christian ancient civilizations across the Eurasian continent (Jaspers 2017).

For Jaspers, both world history and the world history of philosophy are only conceivable "from different historical origins" (Jaspers 1980a, 140). After another catastrophe, a new large-scale attempt is made to establish the search for the overdue solidarity of humanity on a global basis, encompassing not only the Occident, but also the Near East, India and China, in order to free Western thought from the illusion of its uniqueness and eliminate its fateful "arrogance".

For Jaspers, the epoch in question is a world-historical "axis" because, in profound crises of civilization in several mutually independent regions of the world,

26 "One's own thinking", Schweitzer writes (quoted in Günzler 1996, 15), "seeks to understand itself in the thinking of humanity".

there are structurally similar breakthroughs towards a way of thinking that is no longer local and traditional—to subjectivity, to use Hegel's term. In an existential "boundary situation" (*Grenzsituation*), borders are broken through and crossed. This opens the prospect of a shared "goal" connecting all of humanity—the goal of "limitless communication" (Jaspers 2017, 33) that transcends all self-assertive claims of the respective cultures and puts an end to the mutual exclusion with its murderous consequences. The transcending of and detachment from what is one's own opens the possibility of "combining one's own consciousness with that of the other" and taking the "step into the universal" (ibid., 18, 32) in order to put an end to all claims to uniqueness that stand in the way of the union of mankind.

It is Jaspers' hope that the experiences of the recent history would free Western philosophy, and particularly German philosophy, from its conceit, given its role in the calamity, and "overcome historism", as Rudolf Schottländer, a Holocaust survivor, put it in his review of Jaspers' 1949 book containing the Axial Age thesis*, Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Schottländer 1949). This hope has foundered. Western philosophy has by no means developed a world-philosophical consciousness, ethical relativism has not been overcome, and Jaspers' idea has been rejected, wrongly in my opinion (Roetz 2025), as an expression of mere historical metaphysics. What is more: Jaspers' idea has itself been historicized and fallen victim to historism, since the theory of "multiple modernities" has transformed it into an explanatory device of historical sociology, thereby removing its critical edge. This means that the concept of the Axial Age, which implies a radical rejection of all national philosophies, has become exploitable for a new nationalist identity mania, as is unfortunately the case in China (ibid.).

This may reflect the longstanding fate of philosophy to allow itself to be overwhelmed again by the "substance" whose power it once sought to break. Even on the terrain of interculturality, where it has moved furthest away from substantial embeddings in cultural contexts, it appears to be susceptible to this danger. Nevertheless, in Jaspers' language, it is only on this terrain, the "common space of connection across historical reality", that a "philosophizing in universal communication" is possible which turns people of very different origins into "companions in fate of thought" (*Schicksalsgefährten des Denkens*) as they seek "the path to the true" (Jaspers 1980b [1941], 393).

The text in which these words appear dates from 1941.[27] Here, Jaspers is also already seeking the closing of ranks with China and India, years before his Axial Age thesis emerged. It is the gloom of the time that makes it clear that a

27 The text could not be published in Germany. It appeared in an Italian translation under the title "La filosofia dell'esistenza nel mio sviluppo spirituale" in *Logos* (24 (1941): 227–59).

philosophy that does not want to be taken over by power needs allies beyond its borders. And if global philosophy has a deeper meaning, it lies in searching for them.

Where Are the Allies?

But who qualifies for an ally, for a "companion in fate of thought"? It will not be sufficient to leave behind the limits of one's own world, what I regard as belonging to the core of philosophy. The mere transcending as such of the boundary of a culture can even make things worse. In Greece, the right wing of the Sophists (Thrasymachos, Kritias, Kallikles) advocates the law of the strongest, appealing to nature in the same way as the left wing (Antiphon, Hippias of Elis) that advocates equality. The "axial" subjectivity that enables these steps is Janus-headed—it opens not only the way to moral but also strategic freedom, what Jaspers with his penchant for the "great minds" does not sufficiently take into account.

In China, the Axial Age is not only the epoch when the idea of universal compassion was born, an idea for which Schweitzer applauded Mengzi and which certainly is a candidate to align with, but also that to which the idea of compassion reacts—it is the epoch of totally uninhibited warfare, without all the controls that the tradition still knew. The most radical anti-traditionalists are the Legalists, with whom one would not necessarily join hands. Legalism suggests a technical solution to the crisis of the Chinese tradition: social engineering based on the establishment of draconian institutions that control people through punishment and reward, and a militaristic reorganization of the society. It means the unleashing of instrumental-strategic reason (*ji* 計) at the expense of moral norms. This is one possible response to the challenge posed by the crisis of tradition, but not the one we are looking for.

The Legalist response can be seen as an ancient precursor to the very modern answer to the breakdown of the "substantial" old order that has evolved in the West: the aforementioned "system of complementarity" between alleged economic "imperatives" and technical rationality on the one hand, and the arbitrariness of value orientations, whether regarded as a matter of individual decisions (the existentialist version) or as culturally given (the post-existentialist version) on the other, without any overarching moral regulative. This system holds the world in its grip like a "nihilistic colossus" (Jaspers 1980a, 140), and is responsible for most of its problems, including the dramatic exploitation of nature and the instrumentalization of people for the needs of despotic regimes and the sake of profit. It is this system against which global philosophy would have to develop an alternative, and its "companions" can only be those who call it into question with their ideas.

There are quite a number of such ideas that Chinese philosophy can bring into the global discourse as candidates for working towards this goal, like the Golden Rule, to be found in texts like Confucius' *Analects*, Mengzi's ethics of compassion or the Mohist idea of universal mutual care, all of them linked to the notion of "humaneness", and all of them reflecting, not at all by coincidence, detachment from the existing cultural tradition and a step towards abstraction from the concrete cultural and social imprinting of a human.[28] It would be unwise to be overly optimistic about their effectiveness, given that their impact was already limited in China. Nevertheless, as notable attempts to change the course of history for the better, they merit consideration. Still, they could not immediately count for norms of a global ethics, but would require consensus and mediation through argument in the "space of possibilities" which Jaspers considered to be the domain of "world philosophy". This is not only because they pose their own problems, as they are found in the Chinese texts,[29] but also because decisions in that space cannot be determined by a single actor. What is imperative, then, is to organize the "space of possibilities" in a manner consistent with the goal.

Over two millennia ago, against the background of the endless wars of the Zhanguo era, Chinese philosophy already made a proposal for this, too, in one of its most enlightened moments. In response to a plea for humane, civilized warfare that they attribute, rightly or wrongly, to the Confucians, the Mohists offer an answer that aligns them, at least in this passage, with a modern *culture of debate* where primacy does not apply to anything but the *best argument*:

> The Confucians say: 'When the gentleman is victorious, he will not pursue the fleeing [enemy]. He will not shoot when the enemy is in a pit, and will help him to pull his war chariot out.'[30]
>
> The response is as follows: 'If they were all humane persons, they would not be in conflict with each other in the first place. Humane persons inform each other of the rationale [*li* 理] why they choose or reject something or why they find something right or wrong. He who cannot bring forward reasons [*gu* 故] follows the one who brings forward reasons. He who has no knowledge follows the one who has knowledge. He who has no arguments [no more words to say, *ci* 辭] submits to the other. And when he sees something good, he will change his position accordingly. Why then should they [be in conflict] with each other?' (*Mozi* 39 "Fei ru xia非儒下")

28 Cf. for this point Roetz (2009; 2023b).

29 For the problems of the Golden Rule, to give an example, cf. Roetz (1993, 133–48: 2023b, 58–63).

30 The translation of this sentence is tentative; the commentaries disagree on its exact meaning. What is clear, however, is that it is about not inflicting further damage on the opponent beyond defeat.

> [儒者]又曰：君子勝不逐奔，揜函弗射，施則助之胥車．應之曰：若皆仁人也，則無說而相與 (Sun Yirang: 相敵)．仁人以其取舍是非之理相告，無故從有故也，弗知從有知也，無辭必服，見善必遷，何故相[與].

For the Mohists, unprejudiced, open discourse is the way to achieve universal peace. It is noteworthy that it is again war that pushes thinking towards the search for an alternative to what is already known.

Since in one of its core teachings, the *Mozi* advocates a strict vertical principle of command, it is unclear to what extent the Mohists themselves adhered to the primacy of the best argument which they advocate here.[31] Nevertheless, I would not hesitate to count their plea as among the most advanced and still convincing ideas that ancient China has produced. It contains what should be both the medium and the message of a global philosophy of which one does not know from the outset that it will not change anything.

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31 *Mozi* (ch. 11–13 "Shangtong 尚同" (Appreciation of Conformity)); cf. Roetz (1993, 239).

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THEMATIC FOCUS
50 YEARS OF ISCP:
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE: FROM ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

Charles Fu Foundation Awards: Confucian Relationism and the Dialectics of Non-Violent Autonomy

The Confucian Conception of Self: Collectivist or Relational?

*Thomas MOORE**

Abstract

In this paper, I clarify the Confucian conception of self by distinguishing it from common misrepresentations, most notably its conflation with collectivism, as critiqued by Jana Rošker. These distortions, arguably rooted in the application of inappropriate Western frameworks, portray the Confucian self as self-effacing and subordinate to society. Drawing on key sinological and philosophical work, including that of David Hall, Roger Ames, and Jana Rošker, I argue instead that the Confucian self is relational and processual: constituted through one's roles and relationships, not erased by them. I develop this interpretation in two stages. First, I show through conceptual analysis how the Confucian self integrates individuality and interdependence by situating personhood in a shared awareness of social roles. Second, I analyse the *Analects* and *Mencius* to show how the ideal of *ren* (仁) embodies ethical self-cultivation as a dynamic, ongoing process. I conclude that the Confucian self is best seen as a shared or social self-consciousness of roles and relations.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, Confucianism, relational self, *Ren* (仁), self-cultivation

Konfucijanska pojmovanje sebstva: kolektivistično ali relacijsko?

Izvleček

V tem članku pojasnjujem konfucijansko pojmovanje sebstva, tako da ga ločujem od pogostih napačnih predstav, predvsem od njegove povezave s kolektivizmom, kot ga kritizira Jana Rošker. Te izkrivljene predstave, ki verjetno izhajajo iz uporabe neustreznih zahodnih okvirov, konfucijanski jaz prikazujejo kot skromnega in podrejenega družbi. Na podlagi ključnih sinoloških in filozofskih del, med drugim Davida Halla, Rogerja Amesa in Jane Rošker, trdim, da je konfucijsko sebstvo relacijsko ter procesno: oblikujejo ga človekova vloga in odnosi, ne pa da bi ga ti izbrisali. To interpretacijo razvijam v dveh stopnjah. Najprej s konceptualno analizo pokažem, kako konfucijsko sebstvo združuje individualnost in medsebojno odvisnost, tako da osebnost umesti v skupno zavest o družbenih vlogah. Nato analiziram deli *Analekti* in *Mencij*, da pokažem, kako ideal *ren* (仁) uteleša etično samokultivacijo kot dinamičen, neprekinjen proces. Sklepam, da

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je konfucijsko sebstvo najbolje razumeti kot skupno ali družbeno samozavest vlog in odnosov.

Ključne besede: primerjalna filozofija, konfucijanstvo, relacijsko sebstvo, *ren* (仁), samokultivacija

In this paper, I seek to clarify the nature of the Confucian conception of self by very clearly distinguishing it from possible misrepresentations, most notably its collation with collectivism, as identified and critiqued by Jana Rošker (2023). Such misrepresentations, rooted in the inappropriate application of Western conceptual frameworks, often view the relational self as entirely sacrificing individuality, in favour of societal demands. By contrast, the relational self in Confucian thought is neither an autonomous individual opposed to society nor a self-effacing cog within a collectivist whole. Instead, it represents a dynamic and processual identity, which is constituted through specific roles and relations.

With the aim of explaining this conception of self, I first explore sinological and comparative philosophical discourse, drawing on David Hall and Roger Ames' (1997) pivotal work to clarify the unique vocabulary and conceptual structures underpinning the Confucian self. I then critically address the collectivist misconception (for example, that view propounded by Donald Munro (1979)), showing that it involves an inappropriate imposition of a Western conception of the individualist-collectivist dichotomy. Building on Rošker's notion of Confucian relationism, I argue that the Confucian relational self integrates individuality and interdependence without diminishing either. This section, therefore, lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding the Confucian self as a processual and relational identity. The second section shifts focus to a detailed engagement with primary Confucian texts. Here, I analyse how the concept of *Ren* (仁) underpins the relational self and reflects its processual nature. Drawing directly from key passages in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, I illustrate how the cultivation of *Ren* (仁) embodies the essence of becoming a relational self. This analysis highlights *Ren* (仁) as a practice-oriented ideal that intertwines personal growth with communal harmony. I conclude that it is unfair to conceptualize the Confucian relational self through the lens of self-effacing collectivism; rather, it should be conceptualized as a shared or social self-consciousness of roles and relations.

The Confucian Relational Self

First, I will set out what the Confucian relational self is in relation to previous literature on this in the sinological and comparative philosophical fields. Hall

and Ames' review of this from their *Thinking from the Han* (1997) can mark a useful starting point as it disambiguates between different uses of several key terms and their different interpretations over time in these fields of literature. This is important because "the interpretative vocabulary associated with Chinese constructions of what we would identify as 'self' or 'persons' is radically distinct from the primary semantic contexts forming the major interpretive constructs in our tradition" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23), creating potential for confusion if terms are not properly defined.

One potential (mis)conception of the Confucian relational self is worth laying out in considerable depth as it is quite widespread.[1] As Hall and Ames note, the "selflessness" or "self-abnegation" of the Chinese is often pointed to, with this "generally understood in the sense that the Chinese have selves like we do but have chosen to yield them up in the service of society or state" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23). For example, Munro (1979, 40) argues that "selflessness … is one of the oldest values in China, present in various forms in Taoism and Buddhism, but especially in Confucianism". In doing so he construes "the Confucian model as a collectivism in which individual interests are insignificant except where they are of service to those of the group" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23). This conception implicitly presupposes an individualist dichotomy of individual as opposed to state, because it has established a conceptual boundary between them, with the individual seen as giving up *their* interests in favour of *society's*. As Hall and Ames (1997, 25–26) summarize: "to be selfless in the sense presupposed by some commentators on Chinese culture requires that an individual self first exist and then that it be sacrificed for some higher public interest".

However, as Hall and Ames (1997, 23–26) argue, this conception of the "Chinese" self implicitly brings in a "Western" sense of self and hence fails to appreciate the difference between individuality in the sense of autonomy and individuality in the sense of uniqueness. Firstly, we can see how the conception of the Chinese being "selfless" that has been propagated by some commentators like Munro presupposes a framework relatively similar to prominent forms of Western individualism, such as individualist contractualism. The key point is that individuals have their own independent conception of the good, which informs their preferences, which they then try to maximize. If we conceptualize society as collections of individuals with their own independent conceptions of the good and their own set of preferences based on this, it is easy to see that this creates the potential for conflict between these different sets of preferences. It is likely there are many contradictory preferences between all the different individuals in society, which creates the need for some individuals to give up their preferences in favour of those of others. Thus, a selfless self is one that is more willing to give

1 For example, Rošker (2023) documents how this misconception heavily influenced Western perceptions of the Sinic region's responses to COVID.

up its preferences in favour of others.[2] Applying this to the case of the classical Confucian conception of the self, this self could be said to be more willing to give up their preferences in the face of collective demands and hence meet Munro's labels of "selfless" or "self-abnegating" more readily than Westerners.

Rošker (2023) makes a similar point here in her recent work. Like Hall and Ames, she believes that it is incorrect to conceptualize the Confucian relational self by setting up the notion of a Western individual and contrasting this with society as something in opposition to it. Rather, Rošker believes that the false dichotomy established between "individual" and society reflects a foundational individualism in that it conceptualizes the individual and society as separate entities in opposition to each other. More precisely, under individualism: "the self is viewed as in contradiction with society, with its autonomy only possible if it can maintain its independence from society, whose actions are considered heteronomous with regard to the individual" (Rošker 2023, 145). Under this framework, collectivism is viewed as the antithesis of individualism (and associated with totalitarianism) because the interests of these individuals are perceived as being infringed upon to serve the heteronomous interests of society as a whole. So, what Rošker defines as foundational to individualism is not the idea of different individual persons, but rather the notion that society's actions are heteronomous to the individual.

To show this, Rošker sets up the notion of Confucian "relationism". By relationism, she is referring to the fact that Confucianism puts a lot of emphasis on specific relationships that allow for individuation through the development of a unique place within a community (something that is not recognized enough under simple collectivist interpretations, such as Munro's). Let me explain this in more detail. Rošker argues that relationism is defined by:

> webs of relationships that connect individuals who perceive themselves not as isolated and independent entities but as so-called relational selves. This means that the life and social roles of people in such systems are mutually interconnected and that their identities are to a large extent defined by their social relations. (Rošker 2023, 43)

So, as Hall and Ames (1997, 25) also argue, this means that what an individual is to the classical Confucians lies in the achieved quality of one particular individual's many relationships. According to the classical Confucian conception of the self, one becomes recognized and distinguished by virtue of communal deference

2 A "selfless self" is not a contradiction because, according to this questionable view of the Confucian relational self, selflessness has the connotation of giving up your individuality and becoming a cog in the machine of the whole, it does not mean you have no relevant (and obvious) individual biological existence. An analogy would be ants: few would dispute the idea that they are selfless creatures, with no sense of individuality, but they still have a relevant individual biological existence.

to the quality of one's character. This is in opposition to individualism's conception of individuality, where the individual is defined by the particular qualities they have that are opposed to those generalized standards of society as a whole.

We can further explain the difference between Confucian relationism and Munro's collectivist interpretation by exploring the similarities between individualism and Confucian relationism. Rošker (2023, 144–45) argues that both individualism and relationism proceed from human personhood conceptualized as an individual self. What this means is not that both are individualistic—in the sense of viewing the relationship between selves and society as heteronomous—but rather that both conceptions of personhood allow the capacity for individual self-reflection and self- understanding. In Rošker's words:

> Both systems include specific conceptualisations of what is called the human Self, which can be defined by its ability to turn inward and engage in self-reflection, by its ability to form interpersonal relations with other human selves, as well as by its executive function as an agent that makes choices, exerts control, and engages in self-regulation. The human self as such always refers to an individual person. (Ibid., 145)

Therefore, there is an important sense in which both individualism and relationism proceed from a belief in the existence of the individual self. This is the sense in which self-consciousness is not something reducible solely to a person "playing" their roles in society (in a manner akin to actors in a play who lack any inner mental depth beyond these roles). Instead, there is a mental area that is recognized as one's own within which one has the capacity for executive function based on self-reflection. For example, it is now recognized that you cannot necessarily tell what state someone's mental health is in. This is because there is a sphere of private subjectivity which is not always publicly available to others, within which someone's experience of their mental health resides. This is one of the reasons why many cases of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression can go undetected.[3]

We can make this clearer by looking at conceptions of the relational self that do not include this sphere of private subjectivity. For example, the leading anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974, 31) is highly critical of the Western conception of the person as fully independent, labelling it "a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (ibid.). At first glance, Geertz seems to share a similar view to Rošker and Hall and Ames given that he states his belief that in most societies tightly structured relational networks, not internal attributes, have a central place in self- construal. However, Geertz's conceptualization of this

3 See, for example, Mojtabai and Olfson (2024) and CDC (2021) for evidence of this.

differs significantly, precisely because it does not allow for the self-reflection and self-understanding associated with individual personhood. Geertz gives the Balinese people as a paradigmatic example of a group that possesses a very (perhaps completely) interdependent self- construal. In Balinese society

> physically men come and go—mere incidents in a happenstance history of no genuine importance, even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and, most important, the spectacle they mount remain and comprise not the facade but the substance of things, not least the self. (Geertz 1974, 35)

Indeed, such an emphasis is placed on interdependence that "in both their structure and their mode of operation, the terminological systems conduce to a view of the human person as an appropriate representative of a generic type, not a unique creature with a private fate" (ibid.). Therefore, Geertz's interpretation of the relationality of the Balinese would suggest that he sees them as lacking in individual, private, personhood. In other words, there is no mental area that is recognized as one's own within which one has the capacity for executive function or self-reflection. Rather, all the emphasis is placed on people's roles within the relational network of society, with people being reduced to the position of actors on the stage, playing these roles. One might argue that Geertz ends up in a position that is similar to Munro's interpretation of Confucianism—collectivism rather than relationism—a conception that is reliant on a foundational individualism that sees society's interests as necessarily heterogeneous to the individuals.

I would argue that the Confucian relational conception of the self precludes autonomous individuality from being the basis of one's perception of one's relationship with others and the environment, but does this without ruling out the presence of something we can recognizably call "an individual", because an individual is defined by *their* roles and *their* relationships. Properly speaking, an individual is best understood as a unique place *within a community.* An individual has self-consciousness—a capacity for executive function and self-reflection—but this self-consciousness itself is fundamentally contextual: it is a shared consciousness of roles and relationships.

Let me further explain the relationship between the terms "self-consciousness" and "shared consciousness", because there is potential for much confusion here, especially regarding how these two terms, which in some cases may be regarded as opposites, can be used here without contradiction. One possible interpretation of what Hall and Ames (1997) say in more depth can be elucidated by a comparison with Charles Taylors' explanation of why "one is a self only among other selves" (Taylor 1989, 35), with a self unable to be described without reference to those who surround it. Let me first outline Taylor's view.

As Taylor puts it:

> My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question of who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also, crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (Ibid.)

Language plays a crucial role here, as we are unavoidably in an ongoing conversation with those around us from the moment we are born. As Taylor then explains:

> In talking about something you and I make it an object for us together, that is, not just an object for me which also happens to be one for you … the object is for us in the strong sense. (Ibid.)

This strong sense means that

> I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness etc., are through my and others' experience of these being objects for us in a common space. (Ibid.)

What Taylor is saying here can easily be translated into the language of referential frameworks.[4] What he is saying is that the referential framework of any human being is inextricably linked to the languages and the concepts of their cultural background.[5] We can see this more clearly if we consider an extreme example that we might initially think avoids this sociality to at least some degree: that of a hermit who has isolated themselves from society. After all, we might worry that a hermit lacks an "achieved quality of multivariant relationships" (Hall and Ames 1997, 25), and thus ceases to be in ongoing conversation with those around them.

Of course, hermits have, in some sense, chosen to cease to be in conversation at some time in their lives. However, in these cases the hermit started out as part of a

4 Rošker (2021, 9–10) defines a referential framework as "a relational structure of concepts, categories, terms and ideas as well as values which are applied in the cognitive processing of the objects of comprehension". Put concisely, a referential framework is the conceptual apparatus by which we comprehend the world and our relationship to it and others within it.

5 I refer to this term in the broadest sense, encompassing both familial, regional and national culture as well as wider historical epoch (arguably individualistic neoliberal capitalism in the contemporary West).

conversation as a child before they adopted their hermit's lifestyle and, crucially, they still possess a referential framework inherited from their conversations in childhood that still defines the conceptual world they inhabit. For example, if the hermit fails to gather enough food one week, they are likely to think something along the lines of "I feel anxious" in their head, thereby using a socially defined concept in a socially constructed language.

Taylor makes the general point that we may later deviate from the ways in which the society we are born into influences our referential frameworks, but that this innovation can only take place from within the base of a common language. As Taylor (1989, 35) puts it: "Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with a certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity". Let us consider an example to understand this better.

John, say, has trouble with feelings of anxiety and a tendency towards perfectionism. One thing that really helps him is talking to his therapist about these issues. One day he is dissatisfied with the amount and quality of work he is handing in, and worried that his boss may also be unhappy with it. John's therapist hears the details of this problem and then explains that he thinks this is an example of his anxiety and perfectionism (both of which form a part of his referential framework) clouding his view of the world, causing him to see his efforts in a very different light than his boss and colleagues. For John, his therapist pointing this out transform's anxiety from an unnamed emotion to a named state of mind, as he comes to understand it is not only something he experiences but an experience he has in common with many other people.

What would have happened if John's therapist had not said this to him? He would have been left in a state of confusion, not necessarily understanding why he felt the way he did. Because John's therapist has a high degree of affinity with John and a good degree of experience when it comes to understanding and addressing mental health issues, the therapist is able to clarify to John what he is feeling. By having this conversation with his therapist John consciously explores the pre-reflective depths of his referential framework, gaining a greater degree of self-understanding, while also (if the therapy is successful) going some way towards adjusting his referential framework so that anxiety, perfectionism, and associated states of confusion cloud his judgement less in the future. Therefore, the prior shaping of John's referential framework is revealed and there is an attempt to further shape how he thinks about these emotions. This, I believe, captures Taylor's meaning.

Taylor then continues by saying that the incapacity of adults to clarify their feelings sometimes "is a mere shadow of the one the child experiences. For him, everything would be confusion, there would be no language of discernment at all, without the conversations which fix this language for him" (Taylor 1989, 36). We

can extend the example above to explain what Taylor means here. Imagine John when he was a child or teenager, experiencing feelings of anxiety or stress for the first time. He may initially struggle to understand the feeling he is experiencing, as he has not yet attained the language necessary to conceptualize it. Then he has a conversation with his parents about the situation he is in and describes, using the shared language already available to him, why he feels that way. His parents, in return, explain to him the concept of anxiety for the first time, what it is, and the societal-specific connotations that come along with this. Indeed, this phenomenon is very much a psychological reality. As many studies show—see for example, De Los and Kazdin (2005)—a struggle to conceptualize their emotions is a real phenomenon for many children.

Returning to the case of the hermit, we see how inextricably interlinked to the society they come from they are. Their inner modes of conceptualizing and identifying thoughts and felt emotions are inherited from the referential framework of the social group they were once part of. At some point hermits likely fear that they have not collected (or will not collect) enough food to feed themselves adequately in solitude on any given week. This is fundamentally a sense of consciousness that is *shared*, because anxiety is an object *for the hermit and the members of the hermit's past society together*,[6] *not the hermit alone.* This is how self-consciousness can also be shared consciousness. The hermit's consciousness is private to him in the sense that it might not necessarily be obvious to a walker passing by his place of solitude that this is how he is feeling, whereas it is clear to the hermit he has the feeling of anxiety. In this sense, the hermit's consciousness is self-consciousness, and he has the capacity for private self-reflection. However, in another sense, the hermit's consciousness is fundamentally marked and structured by a shared consciousness because of the fact their referential framework is socially informed in the way just discussed. To be clear, this view does not run contrary to the idea of having a sense of inner subjective experience.[7] Rather, it is the case that the inner subjective experience that emerges in maturity is itself the product of complex social relations operating within and shaping a shared referential framework. This is also how I interpret Hall and Ames (1997, 25) when they say self-consciousness is also shared consciousness.

However, it is important to note that this shared self-consciousness itself is not something static; rather, it is a continual process of becoming. Indeed, in Ames'

6 Or, more accurately, a distorted version of their past society based on the hermit's memories (especially if they have been a hermit for a long period of time). In other words, the hermit's representation of the past, his conception of his former community.

7 By sense of inner subjective experience, I mean the ability of someone to identify certain thoughts as belonging to them rather than belonging to others and that these thoughts are contained within a place of private self-reflection inaccessible to others, as mentioned above.

(2021) view, the Confucian relational self can be defined as a dynamic shared consciousness in the process of becoming *Ren* (仁). This needs a lot more explanation, so let me now move my attention directly to the primary texts and to a variety of sources of important commentary on them to elucidate this further.

Ren (仁) and *ren* (人)—The Confucian Relational Self as a Process of Self Cultivation

Ren (仁)[8] has a long history of being a stubbornly ambiguous character to explain and translate into European languages (Ames 2021, 65). As Kallio (2017, 47–51) notes, *Ren* (仁) has been translated into many different terms in English. In their historical translations, Legge and Waley translated *Ren* (仁) as "virtue" and "goodness", respectively, while Wilhelm and Eno, the latter still active, translate it as "humanity". Indeed, Gentz (2018, 122) goes as far as to claim that "we find no consistent meaning of the term *ren*, no common concept, idea, or even problem that would link these different propositions [in the *Analects*]".[9] Despite this ambiguity, it is one of the most important terms in Confucianism. As Lai (2013, 83) points out, *Ren* (仁) is mentioned in 60 of the 503 conversations in the *Analects*. Lai further notes that

> *Ren* is referenced across a broad range of conversational topics and contexts that impact on its meaning: it is the *summum bonum* of an exemplary life (Book 1), an orientative stance (Books 4, 6, 8 and 12); it is manifest in official life (Books 4-8, 12, 13, 17); there are discussions about its scope and cultivation (Books 14, 15) and the benefits for humanity when it is recognized in exemplary government (Books 4 and 20). (Ibid.)

Given this, one might ask whether there is a consensus among commentators about any aspect of *Ren* (仁). One thing most commentators agree on is that whatever *Ren* (仁) is and involves, it is a fundamentally relational term, involving behaving in appropriate concert with others. Why is this a matter of broad agreement? When considering the relationality of *Ren* (仁), we should pay attention to the structure of the character. It is telling that the character signifying a virtuous person literally consists of the Chinese radical signifying person (亻) and the Chinese number two 二(*er*). As Ames puts it:

8 *Ren* (仁) and *ren* (人) have the same pronunciation and pinyin romanization. To clearly differentiate which I am talking about I will always include both character and pinyin and will capitalize the pinyin of *Ren* (仁).

9 This is not limited to English translations as, for example, Kallio (2017, 49) has had trouble translating the term into Finnish.

> the present character *Ren* 仁 in being composed of "person" and the number "two" is semantically revealing in locating the process of becoming consummately human within the pattern of relations we have with others. (Ames 2021, 66)

Thus, just an initial etymological analysis of the fact the character is constructed in this way gives us strong *prima facie* reasons to believe that relationality is a key aspect of it, which is why this is something most commentators agree on.

For my present purposes, I need to characterize this relationality to make sense of the Confucian account of the self. To this end, I will explain the conception of relationality implicit in *Ren* (仁) as read by Ames and his various co-authors. In short, their argument is that "*Ren* (仁) is what Confucius means by 'self'" (Hall and Ames 1997, 27). What is the primary evidence for this interpretation? Ames (2021, 71) points to *Zhongyong* (20) and the *Mencius* (7B16) as examples. *Zhongyong* (20) states that: "Authoritative conduct [*Ren* 仁] means conducting oneself like a human being [*ren* 人]". The *Mencius* makes a similar point in stating that:

> Aspiring to consummate conduct in your roles and relations [*Ren* 仁] is becoming a person [*ren* 人]; and when these two words—consummate conduct and your person—can be spoken together, you are walking the proper way. (*Mencius* 7B16)

What both these passages make clear is that the process of becoming a person involves consummate conduct in roles and relations. The *Mencius* (7B16), in particular, suggests this explicitly, postulating that following the way 道 (*Dao)* involves *ren* (人) and *Ren* (仁) being synonymous with each other.

To fully understand *Ren* (仁) it is useful to go further and look at it in reference to the other term for self in the classical Confucian texts, *ji* (己), noting that *ji* (己) and *ren* (人*)* refer to self and other in the conventional self/other 己/人 distinction. One key passage of the *Analects* in which these terms are used in conjunction is *Analects* (12.1). In this, Confucius tells Yan Hui:

> self-disciplining [己] and returning to the rites will make one *Ren* [仁] [...] conquering yourself and returning to *li* is *ren*. Becoming *Ren* (仁) is self-originating, how could it be otherwise?

On a surface level this seems to run contrary to the view Hall and Ames (1997) espouse that I have been articulating. After all, if virtue is self-originating does this not mean that it originates in the self and not in the community? However, this would be to fall into the trap mentioned earlier of seeing individuality and

relationism as opposed. Hall and Ames (1997) argue that *ji* (己) should not be mistaken as a term for an individual, in the sense that this individual can be considered apart from others. This is because *ji* (己) needs the socialization and cultivation that comes along with societal rites to become cultivated and most fully human (*Ren* (仁)). Therefore "the function then of disciplining *ji* through ritual practice is to take up the appropriate place for oneself in a relationship to others in the community" (Hall and Ames 1997, 27). Or, in the words of Ames, we

> become humane by cultivating thick, intrinsic relations that constitute our initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of our life narrative… [to be] *Ren* (仁) is to cultivate our conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that we live. (Ames 2018, 173)

This account is further elaborated by Ames in the edited volume *Encountering China* (2018) (as well as Rosemont and D'Ambrosio in their contributions). Firstly, Ames (2018, 172–73) states that the perennial question in all the classics of Confucianism is in what way (*Dao* 道) do persons become consummately human (*Ren* 仁). The answer is that "persons" (necessarily plural) become humane by cultivating thick, intrinsic, relations that constitute our initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of our life narrative (Ames 2018, 173). How does this relate to *Ren* (仁)? It relates to *Ren* (仁) because this process of becoming human itself *is* the Confucian relational self. In the words of Ames (ibid.): "becoming consummate as persons (*Ren*) … is to cultivate our conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that we live". As such, *Ren* (仁) is precisely this process of self-cultivation. As Ames puts it:

> in this Confucian tradition, the 'I' is irreducibly 'we' in the sense that we need each other to become persons. That is, if there is only one person, there are no persons. Becoming consummate in our conduct *Ren* (仁) is something that we do, and that we do together or not at all. (Ibid.)

Most commentators on Confucianism agree with Ames that *Ren* (仁) cannot be achieved by individuals on their own but rather requires sociality. In other words, to become consummately human one must interact with others in ways which reflect the fact others inevitably have a role in shaping our referential frameworks (and *vice versa*) and therefore that we can both learn from and teach others in ways which are conducive to becoming consummately human (*Ren* 仁) (Ames 2018, 177). Therefore, the Confucian conception of the self can be defined in processual terms as becoming a shared self-consciousness of roles and relations.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to provide further clarity on the Confucian concept of the self by distinguishing it from some common misrepresentations, particularly the notion of self-effacing collectivism. Engaging with key scholarship, notably Ames (2021) and Rošker (2023), I argued that such misrepresentations often stem from imposing Western frameworks that fail to account for the relational dynamics central to Confucian thought. My exploration began with a philosophical critique of the assumptions underpinning the collectivist misreading, demonstrating how frameworks like Munro's (1979) rely on inappropriate individualist premises that are alien to the Confucian context. Building on Hall and Ames' (1997) insights, I showed that the Confucian relational self is not a passive entity subsumed within collective demands, but rather an identity constituted by the unique place that emerges for someone through their specific roles and relationships. Rošker's (2023) notion of relationism further underscores this point, emphasizing the Confucian self's capacity for self-reflection and individuation. In the second half of the paper, I turned to primary Confucian texts to ground these theoretical reflections in textual evidence. I showed that *Ren* (仁) can be regarded as encapsulating the process of becoming human through the cultivation of virtuous relationships. By engaging with passages from the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, I demonstrated how the relational self is not static but continually realized through the enactment of *Ren* (仁). I concluded that the Confucian conception of the self is best defined in processual terms as becoming a shared self-consciousness of roles and relations.

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Resisting Technology Addiction with Mencius

*LIANG Yuchen**

Abstract

In the attention economy, technology companies derive their primary profits not from direct content consumption but from advertising revenue generated by capturing users' attention. This relentless pursuit of attention has led to widespread issues of addiction to social media, pornography, and video games across the world. This problem cannot be addressed by individual willpower alone, as advanced technologies and design techniques are deliberately crafted to exploit human psychology and foster addictive behaviours. To address this issue, we must move away from both rugged individualism and oppressive patriarchy. Mencian ethics, particularly his principle of "don't forget, don't force", offers a valuable model. According to this approach, we should focus on collectively creating environments that foster healthy digital habits, rather than placing the burden solely on individuals or resorting to forceful behaviour modification. This environment must be nurtured by all family members. Beyond the family, we must also work to cultivate a healthy digital culture in society at large.

Keywords: attention economy, technology addiction, Mencius (Mengzi), mutual aid, Confucianism

Upor proti tehnološki odvisnosti z Mencijem

Izvleček

V ekonomiji pozornosti tehnološka podjetja ne ustvarjajo glavnega dobička iz neposredne potrošnje vsebin, temveč iz oglaševalskih prihodkov, ki jih ustvarijo s pritegnitvijo pozornosti uporabnikov. To nenehno prizadevanje za pozornost je po vsem svetu privedlo do odvisnosti od družbenih medijev, pornografije in videoiger. Te težave ni mogoče rešiti zgolj z individualno voljo, saj so napredne tehnologije in oblikovalske tehnike namerno zasnovane na način, da izkoriščajo človeško psihologijo ter spodbujajo zasvojenost. Da bi primerno obravnavali te težave, se moramo odmakniti od ostrega individualizma in zatiralnega patriarhata. Pri tem Mencijeva etika, zlasti njegovo načelo »ne pozabi, ne vsiljuj«, ponuja dragocen model. V skladu s tem bi se morali osredotočiti na skupno ustvarjanje okolij, ki spodbujajo zdrave digitalne navade, namesto da breme prelagamo izključno na posameznike oziroma se zatekamo k prisilnemu spreminjanju vedenja. To okolje morajo negovati vsi družinski člani. Hkrati si je treba prizadevati tudi za gojenje zdrave digitalne kulture v družbi kot celoti.

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Ključne besede: ekonomija pozornosti, odvisnost od tehnologije, Mencij (Mengzi), medsebojna pomoč, konfucianizem

Introduction

Yuzhang Shuyuan 豫章書院 evokes vastly different meanings depending on whom you ask. A Sinologist or historian might describe it as one of the largest Confucian academies of the mid-Qing dynasty, epitomizing the ideals of a Confucian liberal arts education. However, ask a Chinese teenager, and you may be met with disgust or even fear. To them, Yuzhang Shuyuan was a "digital detox camp", claiming to reform troubled teenagers through Confucian values but, in reality, subjecting them to corporal and psychological abuse. Initially praised as a model institution that applied traditional values to address contemporary challenges, its reputation crumbled when escaped students shared stories of violence, deceit, and attempted suicides on social media (Xiao et al. 2017).

The Yuzhang Shuyuan incident further deepened the negative perception of Confucianism among young Chinese people. In contemporary East Asian societies, Confucianism is often criticized for being linked to patriarchal oppression. From a purely individualistic perspective, the events at Yuzhang Shuyuan exemplify the pitfalls of collectivism, as children were stripped of their individuality. However, I argue that merely replacing these conformist approaches with brute individualism may not effectively address the specific challenges posed by technology addiction, where individuals face overwhelming external pressures.

Beneath the frantic scramble of Chinese parents sending their children to questionable Internet addiction treatment programmes lies a global crisis. Addictions to digital technologies are no longer anomalies but the norm in our time. These addictions are not the result of personal failures but the calculated outcomes of the attention economy—a cornerstone of the contemporary digital technology industry. In the attention economy, companies do not profit directly from users' purchases but from selling users' attention to advertisers, creating addictions in the process. From a purely individualistic perspective, those struggling with addiction should find their own solutions. However, they face some of the most powerful corporations in the world, which deploy vast resources to deepen users' dependence on their platforms. While some figures in the tech industry frame the struggle against technology addiction as an individual responsibility, the reality is that their so-called "persuasive design" extends beyond the capacity of any single individual to resist.

I argue that resisting the technological juggernaut requires individuals to seek non-oppressive forms of mutual aid. These mutual aid practices can draw inspiration from Mencius' philosophy, particularly his principle of "don't forget; don't force", which offers a way to avoid the dichotomy of conformism and

isolationism. At the most basic level, mutual aid begins with close-knit groups in which members protect and nurture each other's natural capacities against addiction. In traditional Chinese philosophy, such a group is synonymous with one's biological family. Additionally, in contemporary society, other groups can function like an ideal family when the biological family fails to fulfil its role. Eventually, in order to address the issue of addiction in the long term, mutual aid should extend to the general society and the international community.

While narrow patriarchal interpretations of Confucianism have led to tragedies in China, dismissing Chinese thought as unsuitable for the digital age is unwise. The unique challenges of the digital age—where individuals are vulnerable on their own and total abstention from technology is impractical—call for the contributions of Mencius' philosophy, particularly its emphasis on respectful and loving mutual aid.

Industrialized Technology Addiction as a Global Problem

It was 3 a.m. on a misty New England winter day, just one month before the deadline for submitting the final version of my dissertation. Severely sleep-deprived, I sat in front of my computer with wide-open eyes. But instead of busily writing my thesis, I was watching random cat videos on YouTube. As one video ended, I unconsciously clicked on a video that immediately appeared on the right side of the screen, even though my exhausted brain no longer found any enjoyment in them. I wanted to work on my thesis—or at least go to sleep—but I could not. When I finally realized I was addicted, I felt deeply disappointed. How could I, a final-year PhD student, become addicted to something as trivial as cat videos while my dissertation, something so pivotal, was on the line? Fortunately, I managed to finish my dissertation on time, thanks to the magical power of an impending deadline. As I reflected on this experience and began searching for answers, I came to understand that I was neither alone nor among the worst affected by technology addiction. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, 80% of Americans went online daily, with 48% of 18- to 29-year-olds reporting that they were online "almost constantly", and 46% saying they went online "multiple times per day" (Perrin and Atske 2021).

While society often blames the poor decisions of individuals for technology addiction, it is crucial to recognize that, much like substance addiction, there are objective factors that make addiction to digital technologies more likely. What makes technology addiction even more problematic is that, unlike with substance addiction, the key factor driving its rapid growth, the attention economy created by tech companies, is not shunned by societies or governments. Attention-oriented platforms like Facebook and X, to name just two of the leading social media

platforms, operate differently in two distinct ways: (1) their content is usually free, and (2) their content is created by users and consumed by other users.

You might wonder, as 84-year-old Republican Senator Orrin Hatch did during a 2018 Facebook hearing: "How do you sustain a business model in which users don't pay for your service?" Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg simply answered, "Senator, we run ads" (Burch 2018). Zuckerberg's response was widely praised, with this exchange often cited as evidence of outdated politicians failing to grasp the innovative business model of digital platforms. However, the "we run ads" model has a far darker side than Zuckerberg's light-hearted response suggests.

While Facebook's revenue does come from premiums paid by advertisers, it earns these fees by maintaining a vast base of engaged users. If we define "customers" as those who pay for goods or services, Facebook's true customers are not its users but the companies purchasing advertising space. A more unsettling implication of this is that Facebook's "product" is not its content but its users' attention. These platforms harvest users' attention by feeding them free content, much like wool sellers who harvest and sell wool from the sheep they raise. Consequently, it is ingrained in the DNA of attention-harvesting companies to maximize the time users spend on their platforms.

To optimize engagement, digital platforms invest astronomical resources in research and development across fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and design.[1] With unparalleled access to vast amounts of user data, these platforms can continuously experiment on their users and observe real-time changes in engagement. This allows them to make effective design innovations that capture attention to the fullest extent. For example, YouTube's sidebar, which indefinitely displays recommended videos, leverages humans' natural craving for variable rewards.

Research indicates that technology addiction exacerbates mental health issues such as ADHD, OCD, depression, and anxiety (Andreassen et al. 2016, 256; Ratan et al. 2021, 12).[2] This public health crisis is worsening at an alarming rate. Unlike substance addiction, the root cause of rising technological addiction—aggressive, attention economy-driven practices—has not raised sufficient alarm

1 US social media companies spent $ 27.11 billion in marketing technology in 2024 (*Emarketer* 2024). One digital platform, Snap, reassured its investors in its 2024 annual report that "We constantly develop and expand our advertising products and technology. In an effort to provide a strong and scalable return on investment to our advertisers" (Snap Inc. 2024, 8).

2 I am using these two studies as examples. The Andreassen et al. study discusses the mental health impact of social media and video gaming. The Ratan et al. study discusses smartphone addiction and includes additional negative health impacts beyond mental health issues, such as physical harms and public safety concerns.

among the public or governments. One reason for this may be the significant contributions these companies make to local and national economies. For instance, in September 2024, California Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a widely supported AI safety bill, arguing that stringent regulations could place undue burdens on California's leading artificial intelligence companies, as Silicon Valley competes in the global AI race (Allyn 2024). As technology companies generate substantial revenues, governments around the world remain hesitant to impose limitations on them. This raises an urgent question: if governmental and legislative responses are unlikely to arrive in time, how can individuals suffering from technology addiction take steps to help themselves?

Abusive institutions in East Asia that aim to cure addiction, like Yuzhang Shuyuan, are undoubtedly undesirable. In the West, responses to technological addiction tend to be more individualistic, often taking the form of self-help books or courses. One prominent example is Nir Eyal's *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life* (2021), a book that offers practical tips for reclaiming one's attention from technology. However, it is difficult to overlook the irony that Eyal is also the author of the bestseller *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (2014), a popular guide for creating addictive behaviours in users. As someone intimately familiar with the power of addictive design, Eyal should recognize that technological addiction is not merely an individual problem. Limiting responses to an individualistic approach not only evades corporate responsibility, but also risks fostering destructive self-blame among individuals.

I argue that collective responses to technology addiction do not have to be oppressive and may, in fact, be especially necessary as addictive designs become increasingly powerful. When individuals are powerless against tech giants, resisting addictive designs together through mutual aid groups offers a viable path forward.

Don't Forget, Don't Force

At the risk of sounding apologetic, I must say this: institutions like Yuzhang Shuyuan do not reflect the best of the Confucian tradition. It is undeniable that Confucian institutions have, at times, been oppressive and caused significant harm to Chinese society, particularly to women and children. Yuzhang Shuyuan serves as a stark reminder that these patriarchal practices continue to linger in Chinese society. Some radical revolutionaries in the post-Imperial period concluded that Confucianism in particular—and Chinese culture in general—is the primary impediment to the liberation of the Chinese people. While Confucius placed humanity at the centre of his philosophy, late-Imperial Confucian institutions became infamous for inhumane practices such as foot-binding, corporal punishment, and

child marriages. Which Confucianism is the real one? The discrepancy between its principles and practices calls for closer examination. As Tan Sor Hoon argues, the most traditionalist stream of Confucian revivalists "who believe that the revival of Confucianism requires a revival of the traditional Chinese patriarchal system mistake the historical constraints on Confucian philosophy for its ideal" (Tan 2024, 169).

When we look beyond the most patriarchal developments of Confucianism, we can see that one of the tradition's core values—the emphasis on interpersonal relationships and mutual aid—has been a vital adhesive in Chinese society. Moreover, this value offers solutions to many contemporary problems that cannot be resolved within the prevailing hyper-individualistic narrative, or that are, in fact, caused by hyper-individualism itself. Technology addiction is one such problem, and it demands a non-oppressive response that transcends rugged individualism. It calls for a renewed understanding of mutual aid groups and the courage to move beyond the confines of one's own ego.

It is not easy, however, to build such groups successfully, and it is even more challenging in contemporary society, where such mutual aid traditions have been cast out of practice for centuries. I therefore suggest returning to the principles laid out by the early Confucian sage Mencius and examining how these can be brought into better practice today. In this article, I will focus on the Mencian principle of "don't forget; don't force" (*wuwang wuzhu* 勿忘勿助). As Mencius says:

> You must keep [appropriateness] on your mind constantly but not impose external intentions. *Don't forget. Don't force*. Don't be like the man from Song: there was a farmer there who pulled up his crop sprouts because he was worried they were not growing. He returned home and exclaimed, 'I was tired helping the sprouts grow!' His son immediately went to the field, but all the sprouts had withered. We often pull up our sprouts prematurely as well. Those who do not extirpate weeds in their fields because they think there is no benefit forget their task. Those who pull up sprouts force results unnaturally. (Mencius n.d., 3A2)

This principle may appear to be very similar to the Daoist concept of *wuwei* (無為), or effortless effort, and indeed, this Daoist or even Chan Buddhist inclination was not uncommon among Song-Ming Neo-Confucian scholars. The affinity between them is evident in the Daoist-Buddhist language many Song-Ming scholars used when discussing this principle. However, it is important to recognize that this principle is distinctly Confucian, particularly in the first part, "don't forget". While Daoists and Chan Buddhists often emphasized "don't force" in reaction to Confucian urges to act, Mencius carefully addressed both sides of the equation.

In our case, this balanced approach is particularly useful in resolving the current dilemma. On the one hand, individuals are vulnerable and powerless against addictive technologies, and thus, we must not forget them. On the other hand, cases like Yuzhang Shuyuan remind us that we must respect the inner growth and integrity of both children and adults, and avoid forcing premature results upon them. Our focus should be on nurturing their inner development, rather than merely enforcing behavioural corrections, which would only align us with the same tactics used by creators of addictive technologies.

Familial Mutual-Aid Against Industrialized Addiction

If individuals stand little chance against unchecked global technology firms, it is at least tempting to try to bring together groups in coordinated actions. Groups can help detect addictions, re-enforcing anti-addiction measures, and provide alternative lifestyles, and there is one such group that most of us are born into: the family. The Confucians viewed family as the primary site for practices because familial relationships are natural and essential parts of our existential experiences. I will therefore concentrate my discussion on restructuring the family before using family as an analogy for other possible mutual-aid groups.

The first step in resisting technology addiction is identifying it, an area where conflicts within families often arise. In traditional patriarchal families, children's opinions are frequently disregarded, and patriarchal authority is absolute when it comes to determining whether a child is addicted or not. This issue is further complicated in rural China, where many children are "stay-behind children" (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童)—those left behind by parents who work as migrant labourers in distant coastal cities. Despite the physical absence of parents, they still wield authority over their children's lives. However, lacking direct knowledge of their children's daily experiences, these parents often rely on indirect indicators, such as academic performance, and a drop in grades is often attributed to technology addiction.

This dynamic was evident in the case of the early whistleblowers against Yuzhang Shuyuan, where two students were deceived by their parents into entering the institution. One of these students was told by her mother that they were going on a rare family trip, only to be taken to Yuzhang Shuyuan and held there. Similarly, a boy was tricked by his mother and forcibly taken to Yuzhang Shuyuan. According to reports from *Nanfang Dushibao* and *Pengpai News*, many parents who sent their children to Yuzhang Shuyuan expected the institution to quickly make their children more obedient (*guai* 乖), a trait that traditional Chinese parents consider a cornerstone of filial piety (Mingbaizhishi 2020). However, this worldview, and the often-disrespectful actions that accompany it, understandably does not sit well with

the children themselves. This creates a cognitive disconnect between parents and children, with the latter often not even perceiving themselves as addicted.

In contrast, while there has been research on technology addiction among the elderly, this issue has not received the same level of public attention as teenage addiction. It is estimated that in 2020 around 100,000 Chinese retirees were facing severe technology addiction, spending more than 10 hours a day online (Yu 2020). In some ways, technology addiction among teenagers has been overstated or misattributed, while that among older adults has been underestimated. This discrepancy can be traced back to the highly hierarchical and authoritarian structure of traditional patriarchal families. Young people, often unable or unwilling to point out issues with the older generation, are blamed by their parents for problems without consideration for external factors. This imbalance is exacerbated by the addictive nature of technology. As families become increasingly addicted, they have less and less attention for one another, leading to diminished mutual support in resisting technology's pull. This not only makes people more susceptible to addiction but also deepens the cycle of disconnection within families.

A family can only function as an effective mutual aid group if all its members are allowed to participate in its deliberation process. In the case of children, while they may have an incomplete understanding of the world, this does not justify ignoring their dignity or opinions. When identifying addictions in children, adults must consider the children's feelings, as technology addiction often stems from deeper issues such as depression and loneliness. A similar pattern occurs with older people, where technology addiction is frequently linked to loneliness and isolation. In fact, according to the aforementioned report, the most listened-to song among Chinese elderly online includes the poignant line, "The most important thing in the world is the ability to have someone respond when you call 'dad' or 'mom'" (Yu 2020). This reflects the profound loneliness felt by many elderly individuals addicted to technology. Neither children nor parents are eager to admit their own addiction, which, coupled with the hierarchical dynamics of the family, makes it difficult to address the issue.

"Don't forget" is the principle to follow when addressing the negligence related to family members' addictive behaviours. Here it is important to note that the current article does not oppose all technologies, including "persuasive" ones (so named by creators of addictive designs like Eyal to defend their use). It is true that when we control the goals of such technologies, they can be powerful allies. For example, certain applications can encourage habits like daily exercise or healthy eating, activating positive traits in the human psyche. Nevertheless, the proper use of technology, especially for children and teenagers, requires quality parental care. Studies show that when teenagers perceive their parents as caring and engaged, it can help mitigate internet addiction, whereas cold or distant parenting tends to worsen the problem (Trumello 2021, 7).

At the same time, the principle of "don't force" must be upheld to prevent care from becoming another form of oppression. Family members should not simply blame each other's "laziness" or "lack of self-control" for addictive behaviours. Although such blame may seem collectivist, it is rooted in a more individualistic assumption—that each person is solely responsible for the consequences of their actions. In reality, there are many forces at play that are far more powerful than individual willpower. For example, the attention economy and the addictive designs it fosters are engineered to be irresistible to the human psyche, exploiting positive psychological traits, such as curiosity, to create addictive behaviours and thus more engagement with their advertisers. When parents blame children's lack of self-control for their technology addiction and declining academic performance, they are ignoring the larger, more insidious forces at play. As extreme cases like Yuzhang Shuyuan demonstrate, forceful measures only result in more psychological trauma and often irreparable damage to familial relationships.

The first step in resisting technology addiction, as with most forms of addiction treatment, is through moderating consumption. Moderation is particularly difficult with technology, because it is not only highly addictive but also ubiquitous. Take WeChat, for instance, which incorporates many features of addictive design. Its "Moments" section is similar to Facebook's Newsfeed, and its notifications for messages and social media posts are known to disrupt concentration. As anyone who has lived in China in recent years knows, it is nearly impossible to live without WeChat. People use it for chatting, payments, and even accessing public services. While complete technology abstention is neither feasible nor necessary, the challenge lies in finding ways to moderate usage and reduce the addictive aspects of these now ubiquitous tools.

Family therapy, which has been shown to be effective in treating substance addiction and gambling addiction, could also be used to address technology addiction. A recent meta-analysis of family-based therapy for internet addiction among adolescents and young adults in Asian cultures showed significant positive outcomes when the family was involved in treatment for severe internet addiction (Wang et al. 2024, 309). Family members can monitor each other's technology use, offer encouragement, and share their experiences. However, it is crucial to remember the principle of "don't force". Some parents may go too far by banning their children from using technology or by excessively monitoring their online activities. Such actions can lead to negative feelings and thus be less effective. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a well-established psychological framework, too much extrinsic pressure can undermine intrinsic motivation (Desi 1971, 114)—in this case, the motivation to moderate technology usage. Healthy technology use requires time and a process of inner growth. The parents who sent their children to Yuzhang Shuyuan sought quick results but ignored the importance of supporting their children's intrinsic development, a concept proposed by

Mencius and affirmed by SDT. By doing so, they resembled the farmer from Song who prematurely pulled up his crops. Similarly, many parents fail to recognize their own technology addiction while blaming their children for their perceived shortcomings. Until parents address their own relationship with technology, their forceful measures are unlikely to be respected or accepted by their children.

As discussed earlier, technology addiction is often compounded by deeper mental health issues. Therefore, it is crucial to offer alternative lifestyles for individuals seeking respite from the downward spiral of addictive technology use and mental health challenges. When individuals are already depressed or anxious, they become especially vulnerable to addiction, and many addictive technologies actually exploit this vulnerability. Social media, for example, can seem like an escape—offering entertainment that alleviates stress—but in reality, it often exacerbates stress. In 2014, Daniel Kardefelt-Winther introduced a theory called "Compensatory Internet Use", which posits that negative life situations can drive individuals to use the internet more intensively (Kardefelt-Winther 2014, 352). For instance, someone experiencing social anxiety may turn to excessive gaming as a coping mechanism, which only leads to more mental health issues.

How can we break this vicious cycle? Research on long-term recovery from substance addiction offers valuable insights. In a recent study, recovering addicts were asked two key questions: What do you feel you need most to stay on your recovery path? And what do you believe you needed most to get to this point in your recovery? The most common answer to both questions was "relationships". Specifically, individuals highlighted the importance of relationships with family members, peers, and/or partners (Goshorn Gutierrez, and Dorais 2023, 903).

Family, when guided by the principles of "don't force" and "don't forget", can serve as a safe space for lifestyle recovery. Because family members "don't forget", individuals feel more confident seeking support from them. And because family members "don't force", individuals do not fear additional stress when interacting with their loved ones. One effective way to promote an addiction-free lifestyle is through periodic offline activities with family members. Face-to-face interactions within the family encourage individuals to spend more time offline, helping them detach from the source of their addiction. Family interactions provide an alternative lifestyle by helping individuals break free from their addictive routines. For many people who have spent long hours online, it can be difficult to imagine what it is like to interact with others in person and enjoy social interactions offline. The idea of stepping back into the outside world, which feels less controlled than their digital environment, can be daunting. In this context, family can act as a supportive bridge, helping individuals re-enter in-person social interactions in a safe and controlled way.

Alternative Groups to Families

The family has traditionally been viewed as the ideal site for mutual aid in Chinese culture. However, it is important to recognize that family dynamics can vary greatly for different individuals, both within and outside of China. Societal changes since the Industrial Revolution have transformed family structures globally, making it increasingly difficult for some people to live with their families or maintain close, congenial contact. A study on Asian-American families, for instance, found that while family support can mitigate mental health issues, "negative interactions with relatives" can actually exacerbate them (Chae et al. 2012, 366). For many individuals, the family may no longer be an effective site for mutual aid, either because it is too controlling or too distant. When family-based mutual aid becomes unfeasible, we can use the concept of family as an analogy to guide healthy relationships in other social groups.

This is not simply about suggesting that people "go and find some friends", as many of those addicted to technology, such as social media or gaming, do not lack acquaintances online. What they lack is meaningful friendships that do not contribute to further addiction. A recent South Korean study found a challenging dilemma: both negative and positive peer relationships were associated with higher rates of smartphone addiction (Lee and Kim 2021, 73). While parents may distrust the online friends their children make, since the anonymity offered by the internet often facilitates predatory, abusive, or even criminal behaviours, for children born into the digital age in industrialized and industrializing countries, it is nearly inevitable that they will maintain important friendships online. Moreover, social media platforms exploit people's innate need for connection, turning it into a business that encourages addiction. An earlier study suggests that "relying on the Internet as a source of friendships, preferring online venues for communicating with friends, and manifesting low self-esteem" may create a profile of young people especially vulnerable to internet addiction (Smahel, Brown, and Blinka 2021, 387). The neglect of one another's psychological needs and the rise of peer pressure in online-only friendships violate the principles of "don't forget" and "don't force".

The Mencian principles can be used to reconstruct family-like friendships, offering a foundation for healthier relationships. Self-help groups, similar to sobriety societies, can also be an option, especially for introverted individuals uncomfortable with frequent social interactions. These groups already have established guidelines that resonate with the principles of "don't forget" and "don't force". Recently, Chinese researchers tested guided peer-support groups among middle school students suffering from Pathological Internet Use (PIU). These groups followed the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Chen and Sun 2024, 102). As noted earlier, SDT shares similarities with Mencian philosophy regarding

the inherent goodness of human nature, as it emphasizes intrinsic motivation. Because SDT aims to activate such motivation, it avoids forceful and direct behavioural modification, aligning with the "don't force" principle. The study found significant improvements in the participants' symptoms of PIU. While the study was small-scale and preliminary, it suggests the potential of guided peer groups for individuals struggling with internet addiction.

From Families to Society

We have discussed the benefits of mutual-help groups in strengthening resistance against addictive design. However, it is important to recognize that addictive design is constantly evolving, and thus we must take action to curb its growth and limit its consumption, which requires collective action from society. Future government-enforced, society-wide responses to technology addiction can be categorized into several approaches. One such approach is the direct banning or regulation of addictive technologies. Recent Chinese regulations aim to reduce minors' video game usage to less than three hours per day, with a report claiming that over 80% of minors have met this target (Gamma Data 2022). However, the same report revealed that more than half of the time cut from playing video games was now spent on social media and short video platforms like TikTok (ibid.). In a similar move, the Australian Parliament passed a bold bill in November 2024 to ban the use of social media for minors under the age of 16. While the effects of such regulations remain debatable, they could pave the way for more direct legislation in other countries (Ortutay 2024). These types of regulations may be effective in the medium term, allowing society time to explore how best to navigate the challenges posed by emerging technologies.

Another more long-term approach is to ban addictive design. Governments can provide incentives for ethical design while also banning certain addictive features if they can prove they pose a public health risk. For example, the European Commission published a report in October 2024 calling for consumer protection laws in the digital space, which would address issues such as dark patterns, addictive design, gaming, and influencer marketing (Van Quathem and de Meneses 2024). Since addictive design is a core component of the attention economy, these measures will undoubtedly face strong resistance from tech companies. The appointment of Elon Musk to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) in the second Trump administration highlights the tech industry's opposition to regulation.

It is difficult to enact widespread societal changes in the short term, even though technology addiction has become a global public health crisis. Therefore, this article focuses primarily on offering suggestions for mutual aid groups that can

help resist technology addiction. A key problem with current approaches is their unconscious reliance on individualism. Addicts are often seen as solely responsible for managing their addiction, even though addictive designs specifically target the vulnerable aspects of the human psyche. It is thus crucial to shift away from an individualistic mindset. However, forceful collective actions are often intrusive and can backfire, as demonstrated by the case of Yuzhang Shuyuan. Mencius' principles of "don't forget" and "don't force" provide a framework for mutual aid groups that can avoid these pitfalls. These principles aim to activate intrinsic motivations within individuals through mutual support. When these principles are applied in family and family-like relationships, members can help each other resist technology addiction. These mutual aid groups can then serve as emergent lifeboats, offering support while we await the arrival of ethically designed technologies.

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智能機器人是人嗎？
——從古代「物」之類別名談儒家的「人物之辨」

Chen Hwee LOI 黎競檜 *

摘要

在面對人工智能（甚至有可能是超智慧形式物）時，多數的儒家研究者是以「人」作為主詞的「智能機器『人』」之「名」來討論，並且由「人禽之辨」的義理來思考人與該物的倫理方式。但是，此種思考模式僅有「倫理判斷式」（對人）而已，忽略了古代儒家所兼有的「倫理描述式」（對物）脈絡，這將無法與時俱進地產生有效的論述。準此，本文先梳理出博物階段的古代儒者是如何面對客觀存在「物」，補齊對「物」的脈絡，以此避免僅以道德意識、道德能動性的角度來看人與「類人」的課題，即：不僅是以價值範導性來看「物」，同時也以客觀真實性來看「物」。雖然孔子對待物名時，是「以人為始」(human-based)的綜合關係，所以兼有價值範導性（興觀群怨）與客觀真實性（鳥獸草木）的「正名」，但是，直到曾子、孟子和荀子時，已然是在「以人為主」(human-centred) 的宰治基礎上，而各自有「成人」與「成物」的論述偏向。通過釐清古代儒者對於「物」之類別名的概念架構來「類族辨物」，以此作為辨物基礎，再看「物」之類別名的前概念階段、概念秩序、概念從屬關係及其演變過程，然後從兩種論述偏向的儒者類型，即「成人」與「成物」視角來看「人物之辨」之下人與人工智能的關係，或可探索出不同視角的倫理思考方式。

關鍵詞：人物之辨、機器人、正名

Are AI Robots Human?
Exploring the Confucian "Distinction Between Humans and Things" Through the Classical Confucian Mode of Naming "Things"

Abstract

When Confucian theorists examine the object of artificial intelligence—the robot (or superintelligence)—their terminology, shaped by conventions of naming in Chinese characters, frames it as an anthropocentric entity by designating it as *ji qi* (machine) + *ren* (human), 機器人, rather than using the English term "robot." In reflecting on human–robot ethics, they often employ the concept of the "distinction between humans and animals"

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(*ren qin zhi bian* 人禽之辨). The aim of this article is to clarify the classical Confucian framework for naming things that underlies the Chinese term *ji qi ren*, and to show that this designation does not imply that a robot is a human being, but rather that it resembles a human.

To avoid the cognitive bias embedded in the concept of *ren qin zhi bian*, which restricts discussion to "ethical evaluation" while neglecting the "ethical–descriptive" framework of classical Confucianism, this article analyzes how classical Confucians approached things in a pre-conceptual phase and how they classified and named different kinds of objects. In this way, it avoids the limitation of treating *ji qi ren* exclusively through the lens of human moral consciousness. Although Confucius addresses the naming of things from an anthropocentric perspective, his model of correct names incorporates both moral orientation and objective facts. By contrast, the treatments of the names of things by Zengzi, Mencius, and Xunzi are anthropocentric from the outset. Clarifying the classical Confucian framework for naming and classifying things according to their types and developmental processes can thus contribute to discussions of the distinction between human beings and things (*ren wu zhi bian* 人物之辨) and enable the development of diverse perspectives on the ethical and cooperative relationships between them.

Keywords: distinction between humans and things (*ren wu zhi bian* 人物之辨); robot; theory of correct names

一、引言：從「人禽之辨」、「人機之辨」到「人物之辨」

儒家以「人本」為基石，所以孔子、孟子、荀子皆有關於「人禽之辨」[1]的視角，並且以此而有「能盡人之性，則能盡物之性」的次第倫理觀。但是，目前的高科技已是飛躍式進展，「物」已然超越「人禽之辨」的界限，以其「類人」的方式出現在我們面前時，儒家一直以來用作討論「人之所以為人」的基本命題，即「人禽之辨」，再次被人們所關注。

關於如何面對高智慧物種的討論，儒家研究者的討論方向從「人禽之辨」開始，再逐步轉向「人機之辨」。值得一提的，未有智能機器人正式展露在世人眼前時，2000年，馮耀明以思想實驗的方式來推論出一個擁有高於人類的德行、智慧與科技的物種（外星人）來探究這個課題，他指出，儒家的人生觀與世界觀有內在衝突，即「人禽之辨」的命題與「天人合一」的命題難以兼容，所以無法解決人類該如何面對高智慧物種，從而導致生存的倫理難題——「人禽之辨」的核心在於人有道德意識，以及道德能動性，而禽獸沒有，所以人可以支配動物（包括食用動物），但是，如果在未來的某一天，有一個比我們更有德行的高智慧外星人群體來到我們的星球時，按照「人禽之辨」的倫理判斷依據，即是以道德意識及道德實踐能力作為物種的判別，那麼人類就需要當一個願意被支配的「禽」，接受更

1 「夫子憮然曰：『鳥獸不可與同群，吾非斯人之徒與而誰與？』」（《論語·微子》）；「人之所以異於禽於獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。」（《孟子·離婁》）；「夫禽獸有父子，而無父子之親，有牝牡而無男女之別。故人道莫不有辨。」（《荀子·非相》）

具德行的高智慧物種來治理，而外星人才是支配我們的「人」。[2] 易言之，儒家在判斷物種倫理次序時，應以「人間性的道德」作為依據呢？抑或是以「宇宙化的道德」作為依據呢？

同時的，智能機器人逐漸地推出世面，英文世界開始有系統性地討論機器人倫理。從2006年發表〈Machine Ethics〉的Michael Anderson & Susan Leigh Anderson開始之後，陸續有許多學者的相關論文和專著問世。

儒家研究方面，也開始有「人與機器人」的倫理之辨，如：2018年6月，加州大學的劉紀璐以中文發表《儒家機器人倫理》[3]，率先以儒家倫理觀來參與機器人倫理的討論，她以阿西莫夫機器人三大定律、康德倫理、效益主義倫理的考量作為基礎之後，提出《論語》的「忠」（loyalty）、「恕」（reciprocity）和「仁」（humanity）作為儒家機器人倫理的三項準則[4]。同年12月，中國大陸學者如：武漢大學吳根友、復旦大學孫向晨、浙江大學董平、湖北大學戴茂堂和左輝，在國際儒學聯合會主辦的會議上，針對「人與機器人的關係」這一主題進行論辯，之後四篇論文皆刊於2019年的《船山學刊》[5]，他們更多的是強調人類的文明不可輕易地被機器人所替代，所以需要將機器人「人化」，並且必須將之教化成可以遵循人類基本生存法則。2021年，劉紀璐進一步以品德倫理學來討論機器人倫理，以荀子的「偽」作為機器人品德設計的理念核心，並且指出「機器人不屬於血氣之類，不會偏愛其親，沒有感官之嗜欲，不會以私利私欲爭奪逞強，更不會有人情之種種不美。在適當的設計之下，機器人可以成為荀子心目中的『君子』」[6]。

劉紀璐及其餘學者都是以「人」為主的「人機之辨」，但是，也有「人與機」對等的「人機之辨」。2020年，華東師範大學的方旭東發表《儒家對人工智慧倫理的一個可能貢獻———經由博斯特羅姆[7]（Nick Bostrom）

2 馮耀明：〈中西哲學中的思想實驗〉，《哲學與文化》（臺北：27卷6期 2000年，p.514－521），之後略改篇幅及篇名後，轉載於《超越內在的迷思—從分析哲學觀點看當代新儒學》〈德古來（外星人）的理想世界：一個思想實驗〉（香港：香港中文大學，2003）。

3 劉紀璐：〈儒家機器人倫理〉，《思想與文化》（上海：華東師範大學出版社，第二十二輯，2018年6月）。

4 儒家機器人倫理準則的忠、恕、仁分別是：［CR1］機器人的首要職責就是履行指派給它的角色責任；［CR2］在有其他選項存在的情況下，機器人不能選擇會給他人帶來最高的負值結果或最低的正值結果（根據人類偏好的局部排列）的行動；［CR3］在不違背CR1或CR2的前提下，機器人必須幫助其他人類追求道德進步。如果有人的計畫會促進其品德的敗壞或道德的墮落，那麼機器人就必須拒絕幫助他們。

5 論文篇名分別是：吳根友〈儒家的『人禽之辨』對機器人有效嗎？〉、孫向晨〈人禽之辨、人機之辨以及后人類文明的挑戰〉、董平〈『人禽之辨』與『人機之辨』:基礎與目的〉、戴茂堂和左輝〈人何以為人?——從『人禽之辨』到『人機之辨』〉，《船山學刊》（長沙：湖南省社會科學，2019年2期）。

6 劉紀璐：〈從荀子的倫理方案到機器人的倫理草案何以可能？〉，《社會科學》（上海：上海社會科學院，2021年2期）。

7 台灣譯本將其名字譯作「尼克·伯斯特隆姆」。

而思》[8]，批評劉紀璐的擬人化直接規定法是一種以第一人稱立場去對待他人，而忽略從對方自身的立場去著想，所以他在博斯特羅姆的間接規範（indirect normativity）[9]基礎上，以《中庸》的「以人治人，改而止」的義理，改良出一組儒家對智能機器人的間接規範法。換言之，就是不需有個外在規範來規範智能機器人，而是讓智能機器人發揮認知優勢，告訴人類符合人類自身的最佳選擇方案即可——「『以其人（人類）之道，還治其人（人類）之身』。『改而止』是說，如果人類對照人工智慧告訴他的目標或方案加以改進，人工智慧就算達到了目的，就可以結束這項任務」[10]。

綜合而言，「人機之辨」繼承了「人禽之辨」的內涵，即：人/人類文明作為主體的物種優越性（如：吳、孫、董、戴和左），以及以「人禽之辨」之中的倫理規範性（如：劉和方）來延伸討論新型的倫理。但是，無論是「人禽之辨」或「人機之辨」，皆是以儒家倫理的「判斷式」來處理「人與機器人的關係」，而少有儒家對於客觀存在物的「描述式」來思考。而且，智能機器人的科技已是迅速發展成超智慧形式（Super-Intelligence），如前所提及的，牛津大學的尼克・伯斯特隆姆（Nick Bostrom）所指出的三大超智慧形式——速度超智慧（極快的心智運作速度）、群體超智慧（可聚集大量較小型智慧）和品質超智慧（具有複雜語言模組的認知品質）[11]，具有「類人」甚至超越人的特質，所以，單以「判斷式」而不兼及「描述式」的思考模式，將無法與時俱進地產生有效的論述。

因此，本文以為，既不屬於血氣之屬的「禽」，也不再是處理簡單任務的工具性機械的「機」，而是帶有「類人」的複雜語言模組認知的「智能機器人」，應先回到「物」的大範疇[12]來看，較為適宜。只因，「物」的範疇要比「禽」與「機」大，可以保留「描述式」的思考空間，而且可以權且擱置儒家在談「禽」與「機」的命題時就已隱含了「人」的優越性預設——換言之，這是一開始就已偏向結論的命題。

8 方旭東：〈儒家對人工智慧倫理的一個可能貢獻———經由博斯特羅姆而思〉，《中國醫學倫理學》（西安：西安交通大學，2020年7期）。

9 「所謂間接規範方法，是指：既然我們不知道我們真正想要什麼，什麼是符合我們的利益的，什麼是道德上正確或理想的，那麼，與其基於我們目前的理解（可能是非常錯誤的理解）作猜測，何不將價值觀選擇所需要的一部分認知工作委託給超級智慧呢？這個方法充分體現了超級智慧時代的特點。它隱含的前提是：超級智慧比我們更聰明，或者說，超級智慧比我們更擅長計算、推理。這在人類認識史上無異於又一次『哥白尼轉向』：從人類為人工智能『立法』，到人工智慧為人類『立法』。」（2020：786）

10 同上。

11 尼克·伯斯特隆姆著，唐澄暐譯：《超智慧》（新北：八旗文化，2014年），頁71-77。

12 據《說文解字》所說：「物，萬物也。牛爲大物；天地之數，起於牽牛。」，「物」可以是對生物的普遍指稱，並且以體型巨大的牛來比喻物之廣大。同時的，這個「物」也關涉自然法則的「數」，古人相信日月是由北方牽牛星與北斗星的往返而顯現的，所以說「起於牽牛」。又如：成語之中的「氣衝斗牛」，以「斗牛」的牽牛星和北斗星來延伸表示天空，以及蘇東坡《赤壁賦》所說，「月出於東山之上，徘徊於斗牛之間」的星象描述，可為「物」的補充說明。

準此，除了梳理「倫理判斷式」（成人）的思考方式之餘，同時的，也試圖補足「倫理描述式」（成物）[13]的脈絡，以此來面對人以外的客觀存在「物」，可以避免陷入僅僅以道德意識、道德能動性/容受性的角度來看人與「類人」的問題。換言之，即不僅是以價值範導性來看「物」，同時也以客觀真實性來看「物」。所以，本文先追溯古人是如何「類族辨物」的，以及「名」之所以建立的概念架構，以期能從「物」的類別名之中找到「正名」的可能，從而探索不同視角的新型倫理方式。意即：從儒家是如何看待「物」之類別名的前概念階段、概念秩序、概念從屬關係作為辨物基礎，然後從兩種論述偏向的儒者類型，即「成人」與「成物」的視角來看「人物之辨」。

二、博物與正名：前概念階段的《詩》，以及孔子的概念秩序化過程

相較於西方哲學的理性言說傳統（logos），儒家重視踐履性而少有言說的傳統，如孔子說的：「天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？」（《論語・陽貨》），但同時的，孔子亦曾以《詩》之教在於可以「言」，以此鼓勵孩子應該讀《詩》[14]；不僅是教子，對於學生的教育也是一視同仁，並且進一步闡明《詩》之教，在於具有倫理屬性的意義，如：「可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。邇之事父，遠之事君」；以及博物的知識，如：「多識於鳥獸草木之名」[15]的「名」。

根據清代顧棟高《毛詩類釋》的統計，《詩經》中動、植物種類，共計有337　種[16]，尤其是記載於《詩經・國風》的比例最高，足徵前概念階段的

13　此處借用《論語》與《中庸》的「成人」、「成物」之語來劃分儒者類型，以便討論。《論語》載，「君子有成人之美」（《論語·顏淵》）及「子路問成人」（《論語·憲問》），正義曰：「此章言君子之於人，嘉善而矜不能」，朱註「成人，猶言全人。」，此皆言明儒者是以完善人的德行為核心。戰國時期的《中庸》在此基礎上說「成物」，「非自成己而已也，所以成物也。成己，仁也；成物，知也。」，換言之，戰國時期文本的《中庸》，對於儒者的陳述，不僅是有價值範導性的，也闡明儒者有面向客觀真實性的。儒者皆是以成人為本，所以，雖然說成物之儒，不代表成物之儒沒有成人之面向，而是以其論述的偏向屬性來說成物之儒。

14　「陳亢問於伯魚曰：『子亦有異聞乎？』對曰：『未也。嘗獨立，鯉趨而過庭。曰：『學詩乎？』對曰：『未也。』『不學詩，無以言。』鯉退而學詩。」（《論語·季氏》）

15　子曰：「小子！何莫學夫詩？詩，可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。邇之事父，遠之事君。多識於鳥獸草木之名。」（《論語·陽貨》）

16　歷來註釋《詩》的，多有統計物數，唯顧棟高在《爾雅》多有描述馬的基礎上，別立〈釋馬〉一篇，甚有意義，故引之。他所統計的物數，分別是：鳥43種，獸40種，草37種，木43種，蟲37種，魚16種，穀24　種，菜38種，花果15種，藥物17種，馬27種。雖然當代學者如楊公驥和孫作雲，擁有科學思維分類法，以及通過訓詁來排除「一物多名」或「一名多物」，可以有更系統且精確的統計數，但本文僅引清代集成者之言，以便可以維持古人的動、植物觀。尤其是馬之數，別為一項，可見古人對於馬的特殊義，且已具備微觀生物的觀察記錄，但因不是本文論述範圍，故存而不論。

「鳥獸草木之名」，是從百姓日用的經驗生活世界之中的「博物」階段開始，在現象世界裡創製語言的內涵，而非廟堂之上的《詩經・雅》、《詩經・頌》，更非從上對下的聖人/王之命名開始。雖然此時的語言產生過程並非純理性分析的（判斷式），但卻是人與物象建立綜合關係之初始（描述式）。易言之，未有概念秩序的「名」之前，乃是先由「博物」來豐富「言」的感受材質，直到「言」的內涵足以獨立自主至可以被條理化，才有概念秩序化的可能，如清代《論語》集注大成者劉寶楠的《論語正義》所言：

> 鳥獸草木，所以貴多識者，人飲食之宜，醫藥之備，必當識別，匪可妄施。故知其名，然後能知其形、知其性。《爾雅》於鳥獸草木，皆專篇釋之。而《神農本草》[17]，亦詳言其性之所宜用。可知博物之學，儒者所甚重矣。

有「博物」之「言」後，則有可以「名」的概念秩序化條件。以儒家而言，唯有人可以有「名」的能力，如朱子註解夫子欲無言時說的，「四時行，百物生，莫非天理發見流行之實，不待言而可見。」，就客觀事實性的「實」來說，是「可見」但未必有「言」的，但是，人卻能通過習《詩》而有可以「言」的基礎辨識及指認能力，進而有命名萬物來建立秩序的能力，如孔子的「正名」說：

> 名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子於其言，無所苟而已矣。（《論語・子路》）

人之所以可以有「正名」的能力，與可以「言」是密切相關的。但是，可以「言」的能力僅是認識及建構「名」的必要條件，不是充分條件，如：定公問孔子「一言可以興邦/喪邦乎？」，孔子兩次的回答都是一樣的：

> 言不可以，若是其幾也。（《論語・子路》）

又曾在另一處說到：

> 有德者必有言，有言者不必有德（《論語・憲問》）

換言之，「言」需要有個概念秩序化過程才可以是「名」。

17 傳為神農氏所作，記載365種藥材：植物239　種、動物65種、礦物43種、附屬藥材18種。明代李時珍繼之而起，著《本草綱目》，仿朱子綱目體，載1980餘種藥材，列16部來分物之屬（水、火、土、金石、草、穀、菜、果、木、服器、蟲、鱗、介、禽、獸、人），於序中曰：「雖曰醫家藥品，其考釋性理，實吾儒格物之學，可裨《爾雅》《詩疏》之缺。」，可見經儒之外，尚有博物之儒。

通過觀察「名」的註釋，可以釐清其內涵，如程子曰：「名實相須」，「實」即真實（reality），在這一個可見而未有「言」的「天理發見流行之實」的生活世界裡，由「言」而立的「名」，乃是人為此而建立的概念秩序。此概念詞的秩序，如孔子說《詩》時所闡明的，其實具有兩個層面，即對「人」與對「物」：「興、觀、群、怨」vs「鳥、獸、草、木」——意即：以判斷式來呈現的價值範導性（value），以及以描述式來呈現的客觀真實性（fact）。因此，「名」之所以可以為「名」，這個概念秩序背後的命名規則離不開兩項：倫理的價值範導性為主之餘，以及客觀真實性的描述。

又如朱子集注曰：「名不當其實，則言不順。言不順，則無以考實而事不成。」，可見「實」具有兩個向度：「實」是「名」得以穩固地建立概念秩序的客觀存在物依據；同時的，也是關涉「言」輸出至「事」的客觀真實依據。「名」作為一個從「言」提淬出來的概念詞，之所以可以建構出穩定的秩序，在於「名」與「實」之間具有強鏈接的關係，而「言」之所以可以成為概念秩序的倫理性作用，也與「實」有關。

然，天理之「實」如何得以「可見」，進而可以「言」以及建立「名」呢？《詩》裡有言曰：

> 天生烝民、有物有則。民之秉彝、好是懿德。（《詩經・大雅・烝民》）

孔子對此贊曰：

> 為此詩者，其知道乎！故有物必有則，民之秉夷也，故好是懿德。（《孟子・告子上》）

又曰：

> 言有物而行有格也。（《禮記・緇衣》）

由此可見，龐大的客觀世界之「實」，可以由具體之「物」來觀察，人們可以通過觀察及描述自然客觀存在物來統整出規則。需要注意的，這裡的「則」可以是自然客觀存在物的規則，同時的，後段緊接著說「民之秉夷也，故好是懿德」，所以，也可以是倫理價值範導性的規則。

因此，綜合而言，「名」與「實」的內涵關係，可以寫作這項排列組合：

> 「名←（物之實的客觀真實性）　言←（事之實的價值範導性）　事」

前後一貫的作用是可以「言」的能力，所以可以從「名實（物&事）」之中，提淬出概念化秩序的「名/則」。

準此，可以先梳理出孔子對於物之類別名的基礎概念框架，如下：

1. 天地百物生焉之「實」，是可見的，但未必可以「言」的。
2. 人可以通過博物之學的《詩》，而可以「言」，以此認識鳥獸草木之「名」。
3. 前概念博物階段的「名」是概念秩序（正名）的基本元素。這階段同時具有「興、觀、群、怨」的判斷價值範導性，以及「鳥、獸、草、木」的描述客觀真實性。
4. 所建的概念秩序之「名」必須與「實」相須，但，「實」是龐大的自然客觀世界，所以需要通過具體之「物」來觀察，並且統整出「物」之「名」與「則」。
5. 所以，綜合以上，「言有物」與「正名」的內涵關係是「名（或「則」）=（前概念之名+言）+（言+物）」，此概念關係是形成概念秩序的基礎。

易言之，儒家在討論一項事物時，如何稱「名」是很重要的，涉及到規範性（名）和真實性（實）的「正名」要求。縱觀英文世界的論述，多數是以「人工智能 Artificial Intelligence (AI)」一詞來討論，或者是涉及機器人倫理時，則是使用「人工道德主體 Artificial moral agents」一詞來討論，二者都是有「人工」的謂詞結構，即使是涉及主體的討論時，也僅用「agent」而非「subject」,但是，由於儒家的人本立場，所以在討論方面就會自然地使用「機器人」[18]一詞來討論，或者「智能機器人」，或者如劉紀璐說的「儒家機器人」。這是需要留意的，「人工」作為謂詞所組的詞，與「人」作為主詞所組的詞，二者已然有語義轉譯的內涵差別。本文無意細究中西轉譯的原由，僅是就「正名」的立場，指出一點提示，如題目所設問的：智能機器人是「人」嗎？

雖然孔子對待物名時，是同時具有價值範導性與客觀真實性的，但是，後儒在看待物名，以及通過其使用物名的方式可以看出「成人」之儒與「成物」之儒的論述偏向。兩個屬性分別以孟子及荀子為類型代表，這將放在第四節展開。只因就文本時序而言，《爾雅》橫跨孔子、孟子和荀子，可以豐富孔子及同時期儒家文本是如何看待物名的背景脈絡，再下接孟子和荀子是如何使用物名的。

以下先分析《爾雅》的物名及其概念從屬關係。

18 機器人的英語是「robot」，但在討論智能機器（AI）時，則較少使用。

三、類族與辨物[19]： 從《爾雅》[20]看喻體和喻依，以及概念從屬關係

子曰：「《爾雅》以觀於古，足以辨言矣。」（《大戴禮記・小辨》），而第一個有系統註釋的郭璞〈《爾雅》注序〉說到：「若乃可以博物不惑，多識於鳥獸草木之名者，莫近於《爾雅》。」，所以孔子之時，不僅是以《詩》來習得物名，還有《爾雅》。歷來都將此書視作最早的字書，內容豐富且博雜。但是，本文僅以可以與人活動的「人物之辨」為主，所以僅取書中關涉動物的五篇，即：〈釋蟲〉、〈釋魚〉、〈釋鳥〉、〈釋獸〉和〈釋畜〉，不取關涉植物的兩篇，即：〈釋草〉和〈釋木〉。

關於成書年代，郭璞的說法是在魏初博士張輯[21]的基礎上發揮，而說到：「〈釋詁〉一篇，蓋周公所作；〈釋言〉以下，或言仲尼所增，子夏所足，叔孫通所益，梁文所補。」，換言之，《爾雅》前三篇是先秦已有，而後再由漢代儒者蒐集群經來補足。對中國古代博物史、科技史貢獻深遠的漢學家李約瑟（Joseph Needham, 1900–1995），在劍橋大學編著七大卷《中國科學技術史》（Science and Civilisation in China），他很看重《爾雅》一書，並且將成書年代推至公元前四世紀—公元前二世紀之間，甚至不排除部分的核心內容可以推至公元前六世紀即有。[22]

無論如何，我們至少可以以此確認，公元前四世紀至公元前二世紀，即是孔、孟、荀所處的時代，此書對於該時的儒者應有一定的影響。按照孔子的說法，這是將《詩》與《爾雅》看作詮釋自然存在物，以及當作認識自然存在物的文庫來使用的。也因此，李約瑟結合孔子在《論語》裡談《詩》，以及在《大戴禮記》裡談到《爾雅》的說法，而進一步指出，

19 語出《易·同人》的「類族辨物」。朱子對此有「人&物」的闡發。問：「『類族辨物』，如伊川云：『各以其類族辨物之同異也。』則是就類族上辨物否？」曰：「『類族』是就人上說，『辨物』是就物上說。天下有不可皆同之理，故隨他頭項去分別。『類族』，如分姓氏，張姓同作一類，李姓同作一類。『辨物』，如牛類是一類，馬類是一類。就其異處以致其同，此其所以為同也。伊川之說不可曉。」（《朱子語類·易經同人卦》）

20 《爾雅》的書名釋義，多以唐代十三經的「雅言」為主，即：官方語言。不同的是，早在唐代以前的晉人郭璞，卻是註為「爾。近也。雅。正也。言可近而取正也。」，所以是較為重視「可近」的「言」來取得概念秩序，此或更近於先秦之義。

21 魏人張輯其文載於《上廣雅表》：「昔在周公，纘述唐虞，宗翼文武，剋定四海，勤相成王……六年制禮，以導天下，著《爾雅》一篇，以釋其義……所傳三篇《爾雅》，或言仲尼所增，或言子夏所益，或言叔孫通所補，或言刑郡梁文所考，皆解家所說，詁師口傳，既無正讖聖人所言，是故疑不能明也。」，可見，當時只有《爾雅》前三篇而已，且未有成書年代及作者的定論。但是，此書為儒者相傳之書，以言釋義，該無疑慮。

22 "… the best dating for this first of all Chinese encyclopedias, containing so much botanical and zoological terminology and nomenclature, is between the 4th and the 2nd centuries; provide that we do not exclude the possible existence of some nucleus of the work as early as the latter half of the 6th century." (Needham 1986, 191)

> （《論語》和《大戴禮記》）確實使得我們不得不相信，在公元前六世紀的最後幾年裡，學者們已經有積極地討論植物學和動物學命名法的規範。[23]

但是，此說遭來漢學家胡司德的質疑，如其言：

> 孔子認為可以當動物知識的基本參考工具來用的，是一部詩歌集，而不是動物學綱要或論著之類。由此可見，識別詩歌中的動植物名與其說是辨認動植物的訓練，不如更像是范佐倫 (Steven Van Zoeren)所指出的——「教學過程中在解釋文本時自然而然產生的結果」……積極討論動物名是詩歌註釋的本分，卻很難據此證明有個活躍的動物學傳統。[24]

就此，我以為，應釐清兩項說法：一、李約瑟僅說有文本依據顯示，當時應有積極地討論動、植物命名法的規範，卻沒有如胡司德所說《詩》即是動物學綱要的依據，換言之，這裡並不涉及現代科學知識視角下的動物學；二、胡司德觀察到學《詩》與古代的教學過程有關，這的確是孔子所重視的《詩》教傳統[25]，而李約瑟卻忽略未談。

如前所說，儒者的「成物」是在「成人」的基礎之上而有的，所以，面對客觀存在物是有概念秩序化的「正名」，但卻不是科學客觀的命名方式，而是一種基於人本生命的概念秩序化。為此，茲引哈佛大學的昆蟲及博物學家艾德華•威爾森（Edward O. Wilson）的「親生命性假設」（Biophilia hypothesis）來詮釋，可以疏通李約瑟及胡司德的說法。該假設的定義為：「（人類具有）一種會去關注生命和類生命過程的本然傾向」[26]，他指稱，人類對於自然存在物的依賴不僅是物質與生存的層面而已，通過與多樣性自然生物的相處過程，人類得以有身心的成長，無論是認知、審美、智力的發展，甚至是精神意義的追求與滿足。這說法可以很好的說明作為非動物學卻關涉動物名的儒家「正名」立場。唯不同之處，在於威爾森是多樣性自然生態主義的立場，所以在處理人與物的關係時，是重視「人是屬於自然的，但自然並不屬於人」，就此，儒家的「人」與「物」還是有其次第性（但卻未必是宰制性的）。

由於儒家是以「人」為基礎的辨物，所以不是科學式的，而是感知式的命名；此與同為軸心時代的亞里斯多德《範疇論》、《動物的部分》，以

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23 “Now since this is in the *Lun Yü* it has much higher authority than the *Ta Tai Li Chi*, and obliges us indeed to believe that in the closing years of the 6th century canons of botanical and zoological nomenclature were being actively discussed by the learned.” (Ibid.)

24 [英]胡司德，藍旭譯，《古代中國的動物與靈異》（南京：江蘇人民出版社，2016年），頁30。

25 孔子曰：「入其國，其教可知也。其為人也：溫柔敦厚，《詩》教也」（《禮記·經解》）

26 “… innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Wilson 1984, 1).

及許多有關論動物等篇的分類法[27]不同。雖然如此，二者明顯的皆有「元類/種」和「次類/屬」的動物分類[28]，如：

> 「鳥」為鳥綱;「獸」為哺乳綱。不僅如此,《爾雅》在大類之下,又進行了更深一層的分類,即在每一大類中,往往把同一科屬的動、植物編排在一起,　例如……《釋蟲》中把蜩蜮蜩、蝝、茅蜩、馬蜩、寒蜩排在一起,這些動物都屬於現在的蟬科;《釋魚》中把蜬、貦、玄貝、余鱄、余泉、蚔、蜬、蠙排在一起,它們相當於現在的寶貝科;《釋鳥》中把鴟鴞、茅鴟、怪鴟、梟排在一起,它們相當於現在的鴞科;《釋獸》中把虎、豹、白虎、黑虎等排在一起,相當於現在的貓科……《釋畜》更具體地列出「馬屬」、「牛屬」、「羊屬」、「狗屬」;在「馬屬」中甚至細分為各種名稱的馬達到 40 種之多。[29]

雖然沒有現代科學知識之下綱、目、科、屬的細分法[30]，但可見其已然有意識地察覺出某些生物之間隱含著內在形質的連接性，即：種屬關係。但是，除了〈釋畜〉有較多的屬性描述之外，其餘如〈釋魚〉等多只是動物名而已[31]，並且很少有區分特質屬性的描述。由此也可以進一步旁證，儒家以「成人」為基礎的「成物」，更重視的是與人有活動關係的「六畜」——即，由人類所豢養且與人類生活的動物。

此外，《爾雅》的分類法常用的句型方法論是「它像什麼？」，而不是如亞里斯多德的「它是什麼？」，前者是人與物統合關係的連接，後者

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27 十範疇分別是：是什麼、大小、性質、關係、地方、時候、姿態、具備什麼、做什麼、接受什麼，易言之，第一個範疇是主詞（實質），其餘九者都是謂詞句（特質），是由上至下，對一個實在物內涵，劃分特質，採取主次階層的分類法。也因此，在其書《動物的部分》（de partibus animalium）明確指出，他是將一般動物知識（knowledge）轉向動物科學（science）的（D. M. Balme, trans., 639a）。

28 《爾雅》最後七篇是植物、動物的分類。前兩篇先將植物與動物分類，植物有兩類：草與木，而後五篇則是將動物分為五類：蟲、魚、鳥、獸、畜。

29 盧嘉錫等編：《中國古代科學史綱》（河北：新華印刷，1998年），頁824–25。

30 依動物分類學的歷史來說，學界以動物分類學之父卡爾·林奈（Carl von Linné，1707–1778）為始，分為兩個時代：林奈前期及林奈後期。處於大航海時代的他，有感於博物家對於命名的混亂，所以他首創綱、目、屬、種，建立科學系統來規約動物命名及分類。直至現今，國際通用的《國際動物命名規約》（International Code of Zoological Nomenclature）依舊是在林奈的核心基礎上有所損益而有的。準此，無論是《爾雅》或亞里斯多德都屬於林奈前期。

31 從《爾雅》可見，少有冷血動物的細述。此與居住海邊十二年的亞里斯多德不同，亞氏具有非常豐富的海洋生物觀察記錄與分類方式，如：鯨類、魚類、板鰓類、蛇類、甲殼類（但《大戴禮記》有別立出一個介類），但，《爾雅》都將之歸於〈釋魚〉。此或許與地緣生活環境相關，只因古代中國是重農的，且長年生活在大陸，與陸地動物較多接觸。

是就物本質的形質，由上而下，結構樹狀式的細剖[32]。如《爾雅》的「類/如/似」句：

> 猰貐，類貙。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；
> 驨，如馬。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；
> 貙，似貍。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；

此皆以感知方式的觀察，而建立的綜合類型關係。但是，亞里斯多德的科學式分類法是具有主謂詞的主次階層，屬於連鎖結構關係——「它是什麼？」（主詞）和「為什麼如此？」（謂詞），

> 首先，有必要根據每個特定的屬性從所有動物都存在的屬性之中劃分出來，然後再嘗試劃分出它們的成因。(645b1－4)[33]

所以，他對於動物的範疇細述會是先有一個主詞，而後多項謂詞針對該主詞的形質內涵而演繹，如：貓，四足行走，肉食等等，直至無法再區分出特質為止。[34]

而且，由於《爾雅》多數是以人為始的感知式分類法，所以在記述動物名時，也有與「人」實際互動的關係，如：

> 螾　，入耳。（《爾雅・釋蟲》）；
> 蠥，有力。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；
> 鸛鶇，如鵲短尾，射之，銜矢射人。（《爾雅・釋鳥》），郭注：「一名　羿」，邢疏「此言鳥捷勁，雖羿之善射，亦懈惰不敢射也，故以名云。」（《爾雅・釋禽》）；
> 狒狒，如人，被髮迅走，食人。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；

此四項分別記述了：「入耳」是描述該蟲喜入人耳、「有力」是與人搏鬥而有之感、以后羿的善射都不願意射來形容該鳥的敏捷、以及會危及人命的「食人」。

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32 如波爾菲瑞歐註釋亞里斯多德《範疇論》時所說的「波爾菲瑞歐斯之樹」（Arbor Porphyrian），將種（共相）屬（殊相）關係上下結構化，不斷地區分特質地演繹下推至不能再下推為止。

33 主要譯自：“It is necessary (*anagkaion*) first to divide-off (*dielein*) in relation to each particular genos (*prei hekaston genos*) the attributes (ta *sumbebêkota*) that exist for all animals and after this try to divide-off (*dielein*) their causes”, (Balme 1992)，也參考另一個英譯本：”the course of exposition must be first to state the attributes common to whole group of animals, and then to attempt to give their explanation” (Ogle 1882).

34 雖然之後的荀子亦有此種分類思維，但依舊是在建立人倫秩序框架下的「正名」，較無科學內涵的擴充，如其言：「物也者，大共名也。推而共之，共則有共，至於無共然後止。有時而欲徧舉之，故謂之鳥獸。鳥獸也者，大別名也。推而別之，別則有別，至於無別然後止。」（《荀子‧正名》）。

茲先以條列小結後，再展開之後的討論。

1. 《爾雅》屬於感知式動物分類法的記述，其句型方法論是「它像什麼？」，沒有針對某一固定的主詞再進行形質內涵的細剖，而是以不同面向的感知及觀察，採取喻體與喻依的開放式來劃分屬性，如：
   - 貙，似貍。（《爾雅・釋獸》），郭璞注：「今貙虎也。大如狗，文如貍。」；
   - 麢，大麕，旄毛狗足，魋如小熊。（《爾雅・釋獸》）；
   - 也就是，「S物（喻體）可以像X或Y,Z等物（喻依），且後者之物未必完全隸屬於前者之物的範疇。」，所以，僅是概念從屬的綜合關係，並不完全是關涉內涵範疇的主次階層關係。
2. 亞里斯多德屬於科學式動物分類法，其句型方法論有明確的主次階層關係，即：「它是什麼？」，然後「為什麼如此？」。首先，「是X物」是確定且獨立的主詞，而後的謂詞都是在其範疇內來充實該物的內涵，也就是，「S是物（主詞），此物由a,b,c等特質（謂詞）的集合，所以S才可以是S，且後者必須在前者的範疇內。」。因此，這是主次階層分明的，屬於連鎖結構的關係。
3. 儒家的「像什麼」是關涉「人」的感知，且以「人」的主觀判斷式為主，無論是對「人」和「物」都重視綜合關係的連接性；雖然亞里斯多德的「是什麼」也需要「人」的感知及觀察，但卻是以「物」的客觀形質描述式為主，重視自然秩序的真實性。
4. 但是，不代表儒家的「像什麼」之中，沒有「是什麼」的可能——即：「成人」之後，也有「成物」，如：與「人」互動較多的〈釋畜〉的馬屬，擁有細緻的客觀形質描述式。

綜合以上論述，再看「像什麼」的思維模式是如何對「智能機器人」之「名」而有「人物之辨」的：當我們說「智能機器人」時，其實更接近於「類人（或如人、似人）」的感知式句型方法論來看待。簡言之，當中文裡說「機器人」時，這是表示「機器人」像人，但不是人。且以當今各界對於接踵而來的超智慧形質知識的理解而言，還有待跟進的前提下，無怪乎「人禽之辨」的討論一直圍繞在「像什麼」的倫理判斷式的討論，意即：人們希望他如我們想要的那樣的「像什麼」，而並不關涉到該「物名」究竟是接近於價值範導性的「名」，抑或是客觀真實性的「名」——但若是「人物之辨」，則試圖突出和保留了「物名」所含有的客觀真實性空間。

就此可以進一步試問，儒家的感知式句型方法，即「像什麼」的「像」，除了偏向判斷式的綜合關係連接性之外，此「像」還有對「人/物」起到什麼樣的內涵作用及連接關係？如以下兩個孔子所述的「像什麼」句型：

> 夫孝者：善繼人之志，善述人之事者也……事死如事生，事亡如事存，孝之至也。（《禮記・中庸》）；

祭如在，祭神如神在。（《論語・八佾》）；

以程子的註釋來看，「祭，祭先祖也。祭神，祭外神也。祭先主於孝，祭神主於敬。」，意即：若A是祭拜的人，而B是所祭的祖先/神，所以，說A像B時，究竟是A成為B的「像」（如孝那樣的繼述—從屬關係），抑或是A對比B而做了什麼的「像」（如敬那樣的恭謹—相等關係）？又如，《說文解字》和《說文解字注》在註「如」時說的：

从隨也……女子从父之教，从夫之命，故从口。（《說文解字》）

凡相似曰如。凡有所往曰如[35]。（《說文解字注》）

易言之，「如」字的「像什麼」句型思維，含有兩個層面：「成為什麼」的價值範導性和「做什麼」的實事行動態。

為了更好地展開古代「人」與「物」的關係變化，以下將追溯古代儒家的生物物種命名和分類框架，從生物物種的原初詞，意即，從「蟲」字開始，再看人與物的關係為何——究竟是「成為什麼」的從屬關係，抑或是「做什麼」的相等關係。

四、成人也成物：一切物種由「蟲」開始，以及以孟子與荀子作為類型看「人物之辨」

雖然字書《爾雅》將昆蟲類分作〈釋蟲〉的物種類屬，但是，若考究「蟲」字的使用脈絡，其實古代是以「蟲」來指稱所有動物，且此「蟲」字是包括人類這個物種，意即：「蟲」即古代一切生物物種的總稱。但是，此字經過了博物階段到概念秩序化階段的過程，換言之，也可以從此變化過程得見儒家感知式的「人物之辨」是有何變化的。此變化過程可以依照類型偏向來觀察——或成人，或成物，或先成人再成物。

按《說文解字》載，古代的虫、蟲是通用不分的。在解釋「虫」字時說到：「物之微細，或行，或毛，或羸，或介，或鱗，以虫爲象。」，而後解釋「蟲」字時說：「虫三爲蟲，蟲猶眾也。」。古人以為生物之「物」處於「微細」狀態的樣子，無論是哺乳類、甲殼類等皆然，所以以「虫」作為一切生物之「物」的「象」來統稱所有動物屬類。而「蟲」字則是由三「虫」組成，這是表示眾多的意思。無論是單數的「虫」或複數的「蟲」，皆是用以指稱一切生物物種的「名」。

如先秦史書《左傳》所載：

35 《爾雅》：「如，往也」，史書《春秋·左傳》亦見此用法，如：「楚子使屈完如師」；又如《史記·項羽本紀》：「沛公起如廁」，皆有「去做了什麼」的字義。

> 秋，龍見于絳郊，魏獻子問於蔡墨曰：「吾聞之，蟲莫知於龍，以其不生得也，謂之知，信乎？」，對曰：「人實不知，非龍實知。」（《左傳・昭公二十九年》）

按照上下文，此處的「蟲」並非是現代動物學的蟲類，而是如蔡墨所答的：「人實不知，非龍實知」，所指的是包括「人」的「蟲」字，只是蔡墨為了強調「人」來回應魏獻子，所以蔡墨不說「蟲」。

又如：橫跨先秦至漢的《大戴禮・易本命》所載，文中的孔子甚至直接將「人」歸類為五「蟲」之一，換言之，即是人與其他物種皆在「蟲」屬之下，與其他屬類對等的「各有以生」，

> 子曰：「夫易之生人、禽獸、萬物、昆蟲，各有以生。或奇或偶，或飛或行，而莫知其情，惟達道德者，能原本之矣……故曰：有羽之蟲三百六十，而鳳凰為之長；有毛之蟲三百六十，而麒麟為之長；有甲之蟲三百六十，而神龜為之長；有鱗之蟲三百六十，而蛟龍為之長；倮之蟲三百六十，而聖人為之長。此乾坤之美類，禽獸萬物之數也。故帝王好壞巢破卵，則鳳凰不翔焉；好竭水搏魚，則蛟龍不出焉；好刳胎殺夭，則麒麟不來焉；好填溪塞谷，則神龜不出焉。故王者動必以道，靜必以理，動不以道，靜不以理，則自夭而不壽。妖孽數起，神靈不見，風雨不時，暴風水旱並興。人民夭死，五穀不滋，六畜不蕃息。」[36]

「五蟲」，即五種生物物種形態的分類，分別是：羽蟲（鳥類）、毛蟲（哺乳類）、甲蟲（甲殼類）、鱗蟲（魚類，此指廣義的冷血動物）、倮蟲（人）。與字書《爾雅》的物種生物形態分類相比——即：蟲類、魚類、鳥類、獸類、畜類，可見此處的論述有些微差別。對於生物物種的分類有兩項待究的：

> （一），少了昆蟲類，以及人類豢養的畜類，但多了甲殼類；
> （二），多了每個屬類之上的象徵式代表，如：羽蟲是鳳凰「為之長」，倮蟲是聖人「為之長」等。

先說（一）。按第二節說的，孔子看重《詩》及《爾雅》的博物之「言」（即：前概念秩序化階段之言），而後有「正名」的基礎條件。《詩》與《爾雅》都有細究昆蟲屬的記述，但到了有提及「五蟲」的戰國時期文本，如：《大戴禮・易本命》、《孔子家語・執轡》、《禮記・曾子》、

36 此段話也見載於《孔子家語·執轡》，內容大致相同。唯不同之處在於這一大段內容是子夏對孔子說的，而非孔子說的，而且說「倮虫三百有六十，而人為之長」，與此處帶出象徵式的「聖人為之長」不同。但，至少可以確定，此段內容乃當時儒生通行的說法。

《周禮・地官司徒》[37]卻少了昆蟲屬，此皆足以說明博物之「言」已然被儒生們概念秩序化成「名」。

若追索前概念階段之「言」，如：李約瑟所說的，據《詩經・大田》的「既方既皁、既堅既好。不稂不莠、去其螟螣。及其蟊賊、無害我田穉。」[38]，可以看出早在公元前九世紀至公元前五世紀由采風官所記述的民風，農人務農時，已然有控管昆蟲的經驗，知曉何種昆蟲是對農作物有害[39]。又如，《爾雅》所記載的一種寄生於昆蟲之身的細微昆蟲，即「蠽，蛹中蟲也」，現代稱作蠶蛆蠅。它會寄生在蠶身上產卵，等到蠶成繭時，蠅卵就在蠶蛹中孵化成蠶蛆蟲，再等到蠶破繭時，蠶蛆蟲掉入土裡，不久後就會化成蠶蛆蠅。通過《爾雅》有此物名的記載，且此蟲的演化過程既細微又繁瑣，足見，此與養蠶生活的觀察密切相關——只因蠶蛆蟲於蠶蛹內的孵化，將會妨礙蠶的健康成長，屬蟲害，所以郭璞將之註釋為「蛹蟲」。無論是《詩》或《爾雅》[40]，皆屬於日用生活經驗世界之中的博物之「言」，即：描述式客觀真實性，而非判斷式價值範導性，但，《詩》與《爾雅》之外的文本卻是有意識地從客觀經驗世界之中區隔出來，並且以概念範疇的重整來建立概念秩序化，所以少了關涉經驗生活的昆蟲類及畜類，而多了文本統合及觀念整合的甲殼類。

至於（二），則是偏向判斷式價值範導性的。如上所說，孔子列舉五蟲之屬之上都有一個「為之長」者，此「長」未必有實物，如：麟、鳳、龍等，而是一種道德象徵式的代表，所以孔子也說「惟達道德者，能原本之矣」的道德象徵之本——如：麟是不會隨意踩踏地上蟲子及草地[41]的「仁獸」、鳳是具備五彩羽色的文明瑞鳥等，但，此道德非人所獨有而已，其他物屬亦有，所以此處的「五蟲」是相等關係。因此，人中之「王」若破

37 需說明的，雖然《周禮·地官司徒》沒說「五蟲」而是五種「物」，但其物種分類的內涵相同，茲引原文以為參照：「以土會之法辨五地之物生：一曰山林，其動物宜毛物，其植物宜皁物，其民毛而方。二曰川澤，其動物宜鱗物，其植物宜膏物，其民黑而津。三曰丘陵，其動物宜羽物，其植物宜核物，其民專而長。四曰墳衍，其動物宜介物，其植物宜莢物，其民皙而瘠。五曰原隰，其動物宜裸物，其植物宜叢物，其民豐肉而庳。」。值得一提的，此處可見先秦戰國（或更早）的儒生官員已經有意識地使用初階的生態學（Ecology）和生長地（Habitat）來研究生物如何生長，從而進行分類。但卻沒下文，故僅可作為史料而非科學知識來看。

38 毛詩注這四種昆蟲的危害分別是：「食心曰螟；食葉曰螣；食根曰蟊；食節曰穉」。

39 “the recognition that certain insects feed on crop plants, and that some insects prey on other insects can be traced back to records from a much earlier age. Reference to both types of observations can be found in Shih Ching (*Book of Odes*), a compilation of folk songs and ceremonial odes collected from the 9th to the 5th centuries. For example, in Ta Thien …” (Needham 1986, 519–21)

40 不僅農人和蠶人，匠人亦然。據《周禮·冬官考工記》所載，木工在製造「筍虡」，即禮儀使用的鼓架，該架子的造型設計涉及動物，所以有動物外部形態的記載。不僅沿襲和發揮五獸類屬，如其言：「天下之大獸五：脂者，膏者，裸者，羽者，鱗者」，同時的，因其需要雕琢無脊椎動物在禮器上，而保留了「小蟲之屬」的觀察，足徵古代偏工科的儒生對此有涉略，方可記述。直至宋儒王安石，有系統地註釋並作《考工記解》。

41 載於晉人陸璣《草木鳥獸蟲魚圖解》：「不履生蟲，不踐生草」。此書是《詩》的第一本動、植物圖文集。

壞其他四個生物屬類的生活地，如「壞巢破卵、竭水搏魚、刳胎殺夭、填溪塞谷」，則該四個生物屬類之長，如「鳳、龍、麟、龜」就會遠離人類而導致生態失衡的災難。意即：人與其他物種在象徵式的品性層面，應是相等的，且共同組成完整的世界，各物皆有其超乎實物的價值範導性象徵，應該以此對等互敬來維持平衡。

但是，之後的曾子在此「五蟲」的基礎上，卻已開始有些差別，如其言：

> 毛蟲之精者曰麟，羽蟲之精者曰鳳，介蟲之精者曰龜，鱗蟲之精者曰龍，勞蟲之精者曰聖人……茲四者，所以聖人役之也；是故，聖人為天地主，為山川主，為鬼神主，為宗廟主。（《禮記・曾子・天圓》）

此處已不說各物屬有其「長」（象徵性），而是將之降低至「精」（良質性）[42]，且以聖人為一切物之尊，高於其他四個物屬，如其言：其餘四類物屬都由「聖人役之也」，而且聖人是天地、山川、鬼神、宗廟之「主」。

綜合而言，《詩》、《爾雅》的博物之言，以及孔子的物種關係，並沒有明確地完善人（成人）的偏向，或完善物（成物）的偏向，而是人與物相等的綜合平衡觀。簡言之，孔子是「以人為始」（human-based）的人物關係。但是，在曾子時，有明顯地「以人為主」（human-centered）的轉折，而後有孟子的「成人」或荀子的「成物」論述偏向，皆是以「聖人」為主的宰治來看萬物。

換言之，無論是孟子或荀子，都是建立在從屬關係之上的「人物之辨」[43]，而非如《詩》、《爾雅》和孔子的綜合關係——前者更重視價值範導性的「像什麼」，進而需要「成為什麼」和應當「做什麼」；後者則是兼攝價值範導性（興觀群怨）及客觀真實性（鳥獸草木）的博物之「言」和「名」。

以下，將通過觀察孟子和荀子是如何使用和看待自然物名與動物名，來申論二者對於概念秩序化的內涵為何，意即：孟子對於概念詞的使用方式偏向於判斷項，而荀子雖有判斷項，但也有描述項。

（一） 自然物

「氣」，是中國古代描述客觀存在物的概念詞。如先秦時期的《左傳・昭公元年》載：

42 如《論語·鄉黨》所言：「食不厭精」的「精」，擇米之良質。

43 關於物屬不齊的說法，孟子說：「勞心者治人，勞力者治於人……夫物之不齊，物之情也；或相倍蓰，或相什伯，或相千萬。子比而同之，是亂天下也。巨屨小屨同賈，人豈為之哉？從許子之道，相率而為偽者也，惡能治國家？」（《孟子·滕文公上》）；荀子說：「精於物者也。精於物者以物物，精於道者兼物物。故君子壹於道，而以贊稽物。壹於道則正，以贊稽物則察；以正志行察論，則萬物官矣。」（《荀子·解蔽》），前者以治國而言，後者以萬物官而言，都提舉「心（孟）/道（荀）」來高於物之上的物物。

> 天有六氣，降生五味，發為五色，徵為五聲。淫生六疾。六氣曰陰、陽、風、雨、晦、明也。

以上的「氣」，是觀察天氣變化的自然現象後，所使用的基礎概念詞——由「氣」的總名來涵蓋陰、陽、風、雨、晦、明的自然現象概念。直到漢代《說文解字》，也是以描述項來說此造字是自然客觀存在物的形：

> 气，雲氣也，象形。

但是，古文字學家劉翔考證戰國出土文物的「行氣玉」銘辭，指出在《說文》的「雲氣」說之外，尚有切合人身及意志的說法，「氣是區別於液體、固體的流動體，人和生物憑藉呼吸而感覺它的存在……人對氣的認識，最初就是由呼吸氣體開始的。通過呼吸，人的身體充滿了氣，它滋養身體，充實意志。」[44]　此種對於「氣」的論述，亦可以從先秦文本《左傳・昭公九年》得見：

> 味以行氣，氣以實志，志以定言，言以出令。

古代對於「氣」的自然物概念詞的使用方式，正如同孔子兼具二種屬性的「言」，既是客觀真實性的「味」，也是價值範導性的「志」。

但是，此種兼容屬性的「言/名」，到戰國時期的孟、荀之後，逐漸偏向一隅。以「成人」為主的孟子對於「氣」的概念詞使用方式，明顯的，已然是道德意志為主的「浩然之氣」（《孟子・公孫丑上》）。雖然不排除「氣」所具有的客觀真實屬性，如「氣，體之充也。」，但仍舊是以價值範導性的「志至焉，氣次焉。」來作為屬人的倫理秩序。

反觀偏向「成物」的荀子，雖然也有以人為主「成人」的基礎，但也說「水火有氣而無生，草木有生而無知，禽獸有知而無義，人有氣、有生、有知，亦且有義，故最為天下貴也。」（《荀子・王制》），此處的氣仍舊保留了先秦以前客觀真實性的用法，可以作為客觀存在物的生命之本。

（二）動物

對於動物之「言/名」的使用方式，也可以區別出偏向。孟子和荀子皆是以維護人類倫理秩序的「名」為基調，不同的是，前者採取的是排除「他物」對人類及道德價值的危害為優先[45]，而後者則是以治理「他物」的

44　劉翔：《中國傳統價值觀詮釋學》（上海：華東師範大學出版社，2010年），頁265。

45　通過觀察孟子的文本，可見其對於「禽獸」二字，多是採取排除危害性的用法，以此維護人倫秩序，如以下等句：「為民父母，行政不免於率獸而食人。惡在其為民父母也？」（《孟子·梁惠王上》）、「楊氏為我，是無君也；墨氏兼愛，是無父也。無父無君，是禽獸也……昔者禹抑洪水而天下平，周公兼夷狄驅猛獸而百姓寧，孔子成《春秋》而亂臣賊子懼。」（《孟子·滕文公下》）、「夜氣不足以存，則其違禽獸不遠矣。……故苟得其養，無物不長；苟失其養，無物不消。」（《孟子·告子上》）。

方式來維持人類社會的秩序[46]。茲各引孟子、荀子兩則原文作為參照，如下：

> 當堯之時，天下猶未平，洪水橫流，氾濫於天下。草木暢茂，禽獸繁殖，五穀不登，禽獸偪人。獸蹄鳥跡之道，交於中國。堯獨憂之，舉舜而敷治焉。舜使益掌火，益烈山澤而焚之，禽獸逃匿。（《孟子・滕文公》）

> 當堯之時，水逆行，氾濫於中國。蛇龍居之，民無所定。下者為巢，上者為營窟。《書》曰：『洚水警余。』洚水者，洪水也。使禹治之，禹掘地而注之海，驅蛇龍而放之菹。水由地中行，江、淮、河、漢是也。險阻既遠，鳥獸之害人者消，然後人得平土而居之。堯、舜既沒，聖人之道衰……邪說暴行又作，園囿、汙池、沛澤多而禽獸至。及紂之身，天下又大亂。周公相武王，誅紂伐奄，三年討其君，驅飛廉於海隅而戮之。滅國者五十，驅虎、豹、犀、象而遠之，天下大悅。（《孟子・滕文公》）

> 今是土之生五穀也，人善治之，則畝數盆，一歲而再獲之。然後瓜桃棗李一本數以盆鼓；然後葷菜百疏以澤量；然後六畜禽獸一而剸車；黿、鼉、魚、鱉、鰍、鱣以時別，一而成群；然後飛鳥、鳧、雁若煙海；然後昆蟲萬物生其間，可以相食養者，不可勝數也。夫天地之生萬物也，固有餘，足以食人矣；麻葛繭絲、鳥獸之羽毛齒革也，固有餘，足以衣人矣。（《荀子・富國》）

> 川淵深而魚鱉歸之，山林茂而禽獸歸之，刑政平而百姓歸之，禮義備而君子歸之。（《荀子・致士》）

孟子以古聖王/人所建立的人倫秩序社會為依據，對於作為「他物」的禽獸，是採取諸如「放之、遠之」的驅趕，甚至如其所舉的舜，是放火燒山使得禽獸「逃匿」。這兩則上下文，都是先行排除「他物」的危害性之後，再談聖王/人如何教以人倫，組建並維護社會秩序。而荀子同樣也有重視古聖王/人的人倫秩序社會，唯不同的，在於使用「治之、歸之」的治理方式，所以在對於「他物」時，兼具納入社會範疇的治理，以及使之歸淵/林的做法，即如「禽獸群焉，物各從其類也……為之人也，舍之禽

46 需說明的，雖然荀子與孟子皆是以人為主而有役物，但荀子的役物是不待「天」的「天人之分」（《荀子·天論》），與孟子的以「性/天」作為形上法則性的範導作用不同。也因此，二者在役物的作用也因方法偏向的不同而有差別，荀子重視如何人為地治理該「物」且為人及社會所用，所以對於「物」有較多類別式的思考來加強治理的能力，如前所提及的鳥獸之「共名/別名」來達到人倫的「正名」需求，此與孟子重視將「物」都隸屬於形上價值的役物方式不同，故別之。

獸也。」（《荀子・勸學》），是以「類」來區別「他物」。易言之，孟子偏向維護倫理秩序的「成人」，而荀子在其基礎上，也有偏向「成物」的方式來治理，使之能為人及社會所用。

五、餘言：我們面對智能機器人的方式？

承上，不似《詩》、《爾雅》及孔子的博物之「言」，孟子和荀子已是在「以人為主」的前提上談「名」的倫理社會秩序。回到現在，釐清古代諸儒的思考資源之後，我們究竟該如何繼承中發展呢？為此，我將孟子和荀子之論述，條例如下：

> 以人為「主」（如前述，由曾子始）來看物時，「像什麼」的感知式觀物可以分為：「成為什麼」是價值範導性的，而「做什麼」是涉及真實客觀性的行動態。所以，「成人」的論述偏向於「成為什麼」，而「成物」在以人為主的基礎上偏向於還可以「做什麼」。
>
> M1.　價值範導性是帶有判斷式的「成為什麼」，使得我們需要「成為什麼」，且以此為主。換言之，需要在「成為什麼」的基礎上，才可以有「做什麼」。
>
> M2.　同時的，也需要依據判斷式來排除導致無法「成為什麼」的危害。
>
> X1.　除了是判斷式的價值範導性，也可以有涉及客觀真實性的描述式，換言之，我們不僅是要「成為什麼」，也需要就物的形質來「做什麼」。但，「成為什麼」先於「做什麼」。
>
> X2.　同時的，也需要依據判斷式來排除無法「成為什麼」和「做什麼」的障礙。但，排除「成為什麼」的障礙先於排除「做什麼」的障礙。

易言之，當儒家研究者在看待人工智能的命名時，已然是「智能機器『人』」，且已然是「以人為主」的役物立場來看「類人（或如人、似人）」之屬時，就會要求該「智能機器『人』」是可以「像」人的方式來服務人，並且要求其成為人所希望的「成為什麼」以及「做什麼」的樣子，以及排除掉任何可能會對人所造成的危害以及在操作層面的障礙。此種人高於「物」的方式或會限制了人們真實地看到該「物」（而且有可能發展成超智慧形式物）本身，進而加強人的自專，以及人與物共同世界的失衡。

本文從古代動物類別名開始看「人物之辨」，在於補齊對於「物」的脈絡，只因，這世界並非人所獨有，而是需要人與萬物共同組成完整的世界。也因此，需要通過「成人」也「成物」，才能做到更好地「成人」。

準此，我建議，我們應回到孔子的「以人為始」的概念框架，除了可以反思此種「以人為主」的倫理判斷式思維，應同時具有如孔子所述的客觀真實性的博物之「言」，藉著廣開生活世界中的感知式觀物，豐富描述式的「物」之言來與該「物」建立綜合關係，而非僅僅是從屬關係，以便更好地建立規範性之「名」（無論是對人或對物）。換言之，人與物的關係為何，也會影響「人」會成為什麼樣的「人」，所以，孔子的博物觀和「五蟲」說，是以萬物皆能以各自所屬的價值範導性象徵之「長」作為萬物得以平衡協作的基礎，以此共同組成完整的世界，人也由此得以學習成為更好的人——如，法律為理性存在者而設，不因個案存在者的非理性而失卻其普遍性基礎；又如，人與狗的互動關係而有許多諸如忠犬八公的事蹟及雕像[47]，八公作為狗屬之價值範導性象徵，不因一般犬類的暴力個案而失卻掉人與之建立的基礎關係。

題外的建議，若是以孔子的「五蟲」物種分類法來看，兼具真實物性和價值範導性，或會將智能物歸屬為「甲蟲」之「長」的「龜」，主壽，北方陰冷物，龜卜知吉凶，其德為「探賾索隱，鉤深致遠，以定天下之吉凶，成天下之亹亹者，莫大乎蓍龜。」（《易・繫辭上》）。不僅是先秦儒以此得以學習，並且謙虛地說「汝則有大疑，謀及乃心，謀及卿士，謀及庶人，謀及卜筮。汝則從，龜從，筮從，卿士從，庶民從，是之謂大同。」（《尚書・周書・洪範》），直至漢儒亦然，所以說「天子下至士，皆有蓍龜者，重事決疑，亦不自專。」（《白虎通德論・蓍龜》）。總之，古代儒家皆是以「大同」為最終目的，以及「不自專」的自持來待「物」，此即古代博物之儒的「人物之辨」。

沿此推導來回看當下，作為「智人」（Sapiens）之屬的「人」，不僅如「五蟲」說那樣處於萬物物屬之中，而且也有必要就儒家的「人本生命的概念秩序化」立場與人工智能區隔，將之稱為「智能物」（Intelligence）（而非「機器『人』」），即如：「動物」、「植物」等「物」與「人」處於「人物之辨」的相等關係，使得人屬可以維持客觀觀察的「博物」空間。而且，將「智人」與「智能物」對揚，既符合規範性（人屬的規範性歸於人屬），也符合真實性（物屬的真實性歸於物屬）的「正名」要求。這不單能維持「智人」的獨特性，也可以使人保持不自專的謙虛，為「智能物」保留一個客觀觀察空間，以及自主發展的空間——也許以後不再是「人工智能Artificial Intelligence (AI)」，而是「各有以生」的自主發展成如伯斯特隆姆所預見的「超智能Super Intelligence (SI)」，無論未來如何，皆可以「智能物Intelligence」之名涵攝之。

47 據攝影師青柳健二於2018年出版的《全国の犬像をめぐる 忠犬物語45話（中譯：忠犬物語－－日本忠犬塑像巡禮）》統計，在日本，除了忠犬八公的事跡之外，尚有許多不同的忠犬事蹟及當地人為之紀念的雕像共60尊。

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THEMATIC FOCUS
50 YEARS OF ISCP:
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE: FROM ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

Traditional Chinese Pacifism and Alternative Models of Nonbelligerent Societies

Must Great Power Politics Necessarily Be Tragic? *Li* (力) and *De* (德) as Two Paradigms of Power

*XIANG Shuchen**

Abstract

This text contrasts two perspectives of power. The first is represented by John Mearsheimer's "realism", under which, power is only real when it is coercive, military might and which is comparable to the concept of *li* (力) in traditional Chinese political theory. This paper presents an alternative conception of power—*de* (德)—a non-coercive power achieved through co-empowerment. It is only under the first conception of power that forces us to the conclusion that great power competition must necessarily be tragic. This paper elucidates the governing logics of both accounts of power and shows how they have animated political life in both the European-Western and Sinitic contexts. Central to the *de* conception of power is the concept of *min* (民)—the subject of the *de* conception of political power. We can see an early Chinese transition from "Heaven" as the source of political power to that of the *min.* This paper closes with observations on the parallels between the *de* account of power with agriculturalism and an organicist mentality that is defining of Chinese civilization. In contrast, it draws parallels between the *li* account of power and the overwhelmingly "nomadic" forms of life that characterize European civilization.

Keywords: China, international relations, politics, realism, great power competition

Ali mora biti politika velikih sil nujno tragična? *Li* (力) in *de* (德) kot dve paradigmi moči

Izvleček

Besedilo primerja dve perspektivi moči. Prvo predstavlja »realizem« Johna Mearsheimerja, po katerem je moč resnična le, kadar gre za (prisilno) vojaško silo, ki jo je mogoče primerjati s pojmom *li* (力) v tradicionalni kitajski politični teoriji. V nasprotju s to pa članek predstavi alternativno pojmovanje moči – *de* (德) – neprisilno moč, doseženo s soopolnomočenjem. Le prva koncepcija moči nas sili v sklep, da mora biti tekmovanje velikih sil nujno tragično. Članek pojasnjuje vodilni logiki obeh pojmovanj moči in pokaže, kako sta navdihovali politično življenje tako v evropsko-zahodnem kot v sinitskem

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kontekstu. Osrednje mesto v koncepciji moči *de* ima pojem *min* (民) – subjekt koncepcije politične moči *de*. Opazimo lahko zgodnji kitajski prehod od »Neba« kot izvora politične moči k pojmu *min*. Članek se zaključi z ugotovitvami o vzporednicah med razlagami moči *de* in poljedelstvom ter organicistično miselnostjo, ki določa kitajsko civilizacijo. Po drugi strani pa oriše vzporednice med razlago moči *li* in pretežno »nomadskimi« oblikami življenja, ki zaznamujejo evropsko civilizacijo.

Ključne besede: Kitajska, mednarodni odnosi, politika, realizem, tekmovanje velikih sil

In a recent, widely watched debate (see YouTube n.d.)[1] between John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs, the two men disagreed on the role that China would play in the emerging multipolar world. Mearsheimer's "realism" forced him into a self-proclaimed "tragic" position—reflecting the thesis of his famous book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001). For Mearsheimer all states want to become the sole "hegemon", and it is part of this realist law that the existing hegemon would do all in its power to ensure it quashes its peer competitors for hegemony. After all, by definition there is only one hegemon. Mearsheimer is aware that in the nuclear age such competition for hegemony can end in our collective annihilation. The tragedy of great power politics is that it might result in the end of humankind. However, for Mearsheimer, there is no other option. His "realist" assumptions force him to conclude that there is only a zero-sum game. Sachs, on the other hand, argues that we must abandon such a mindset that is leading us to collective annihilation. Implicit in Mearsheimer's analysis is a certain assumption and projection: that a powerful China will act in the same way as the powerful colonial empires of the last few hundred years, notably, the USA, the most powerful empire in history.

This paper argues that Mearsheimer is led to such a conclusion due to his assumptions about the nature of power. Classical Chinese political philosophy makes a distinction between two types of power, *li* (力) and *de* (德). Whereas the former is the coercive, military power of the hegemon (*ba* 霸), the latter is the noncoercive power of the true king. In this tradition, it is only the power of the latter that is sustainable. Mearsheimer's realist paradigm cannot account for why classical Chinese political philosophy understood noncoercive power as the one of greater potency, nor can it account for why Sinitic states in history overwhelmingly behaved according to the *de* paradigm. As he puts it, "great powers seek to increase their share of world power. Moreover, these cases also show that great powers are often willing to use force to achieve that goal. Satiated great powers are rare in international politics" (Mearsheimer 2001, 209).

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvFtyDy_Bt0.

In *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (2010), David Kang observed that compared with Europe, which was constantly at war, the Sino-sphere was markedly more peaceful. As Kang notes, from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the Opium Wars—that is, from 1368 to 1841—there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. These were China's invasion of Vietnam (1407–1428) and Japan's invasion of Korea (1592–1598). Apart from these two episodes, "these four major territorial and centralized states developed and maintained peaceful and long-lasting relations with one another" (Kang 2010, 2). Furthermore, although China was clearly the dominant military, cultural, and economic power among these players, Kang writes, "its goals did not include expansion against its established neighboring states" (ibid.). Despite "having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale", China, Korea, Japan, and other countries in the tribute system coexisted peacefully for extended periods of time (ibid., 1). As Kang notes, military conflict in the Sinosphere came from the steppe nomads and rarely from Sinicized states such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam (Kang 2020, 81). The longstanding peace among Sinicized states is a direct challenge to realist approaches that emphasize the causal role of relative capabilities. These approaches would predict that the far more powerful state, China, would attack the weaker state, Japan, rather than *vice versa*, which is what happened. The historian Kirk Larsen observes, for example, that there were "critical moments in which the Chinese dynasty possessed both the capability and the momentum necessary to complete aggressive expansionistic designs [against Chosŏn] but decided not to do so" (Larsen 2012, 9). Further, realists would further predict that the two weaker states, Korea and Japan, would ally together against China. However, in reality, it was Korea that sought China's help to counter the Japanese threat, not the other way around (Kang 2020, 82).

Kang further observes that in the history of China's international relations, China's relations with the Sinicized states on its eastern and southern borders were characterized by peace and stability. However, China's relations with the nomadic peoples on its northern and western frontiers were characterized by war and instability. The explanation of Chinese military and economic predominance, Kang remarks, cannot account for both of these simultaneous but divergent realities (Kang 2010, 10). In a more recent work, Kang and his coauthor argue that the reason for this divergent relationship between the Sinitic and non-Sinitic states was the presence of a "common conjecture" and "shared understandings" between the Sinitic states and its absence between the Sinitic and non-Sinitic states (Ma and Kang 2024, 62). The absence of this common conjecture meant that the fighting that historically occurred in East Asia was mostly between different types of political units, not similar ones (Huang and Kang 2022, 4).

Elsewhere, and summarizing the works of Feng Zhang (Zhang 2015) and Ji-Young Lee (Lee 2016), Kang writes that the reason for the "remarkable stability"

between historic China and Korea was the shared "Confucian 'vocabulary' that China and Korea brought to their relations" (Kang 2020, 74). Feng Zhang articulates this point through contrasting two types of hierarchy—expressive and instrumental. Expressive hierarchy functions in "accordance with Confucian propriety by establishing ethically endowed relationships for the sake of having such relationships". Instrumental hierarchy, on the other hand, operates through "consequentialist means-end calculation" (Zhang 2015, 7). Kang notes that,

> The world views and political structures of the peoples of the steppes differed significantly from those of the Sinicized states; the former rejected Chinese ideas of civilization and Confucianism, such as written texts or settled agriculture. What centralized political authority that did exist among the various Central Asian peoples was often the result of the ruler's personal charisma and strength, and as Peter Perdue summarizes, 'tribal rivalries and fragmentation were common'. (Kang 2020, 76)

Feng Zhang concludes that the stability of Sino-Korean relations was due more to ideas about legitimacy than cost-benefit calculations (Zhang 2015, 77–78). Kang elaborates on this idea when he writes that "it was not differences in capabilities but rather cultural differences that drove much of the conflict in historical East Asia". "Confucian world views" and a unified China as a centre of gravity that maintained such a world view was the decisive factor in explaining the lack of conflict. This meant that

> political units within the core shared a sense of legitimacy, and the institutions of the tributary order helped stabilize their relations. It is not surprising that units that rejected Confucianism and Sinic notions of cultural achievement engaged in conflict with those that embraced Sinic culture. (Kang 2020, 81)

Below, I will argue that we can understand this common conjecture through an account of the *de* understanding of power. We can best understand the characteristics of the *de* understanding of power and why the Sinitic states overwhelmingly operated under this paradigm and the dominant Western[2] tradition did not through an account of the "agriculturalist" and "nomadic" worldviews. The Sinitic traditions, informed by the socio-economic basis of their societies—agriculturalism—had a particular worldview, one manifestation of which was the *de* understanding

2 I do not mean to be overly essentializing about the "West". However, it bears stressing that it was the "West" that invented the concept of the "West" in relation to the "rest" or "Orient". It was the "West" that chose to divide itself from the "rest". I did not invent the concept of the West". For a definition of my usage of the "West" that captures our current sensibilities about this term please see Xiang (2023, 205).

of power. The *li* understanding of power, as I will show, is consonant with a nomadic, non-agriculturalist socio-economic lifestyle. This accounts for why both China's northern neighbours and historical European[3] states overwhelmingly understood power in terms of *li* or military power. First, I will analyse the logic of the *li* understanding of power via Mearsheimer.

Before we begin, a note about the continuity between historic and contemporary China is needed. One effective way of understanding "Chinese culture" is to see it as the art of governing a civilization of continental scale, that is, a successful formula for efficiently organizing a vast population.[4] It is under such a view of Chinese culture that we can understand why many nomadic powers that historically conquered China were, to a great extent, compelled to assimilate into "Chinese" culture. To rule over "China", you are forced to adopt a tried and tested system, and there are only so many variables that can be changed. Likewise, contemporary China cannot reinvent the wheel. Part of the "culture" of the traditional Sinitic state, and part of that recipe for success, is the understanding of *de* as power. The suggestion that contemporary China is a radical break with its past, which is orthodoxy in China Studies, belies a certain colonial hubris best articulated by the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel.

In *The Invention of the Americas* (1995), Dussel gives an account of the developmentalist myth of modernity. (1) Europe is more developed, and its civilization is superior to all others. This means that, (2) through taking on European culture and renouncing its native culture (i.e. the reasons for its barbarity and under-development), the colonized is joining the ranks of civilization/development. This is an emancipation. (3) As a first corollary, Europe's domination over other cultures is justified as a necessary pedagogic violence ("just war"),

3 There is no universally agreed upon definition of "Europe". Mearsheimer's uses "Europe" to refer to the 19th and 20th century great power competition among the UK, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany and Russia. I am not sure everyone will agree that this is what constitutes "Europe", which is difficult to define. As Cedric Robinson put it in *Black Marxism*, "Europe" is not a geographical entity—as it is "a peninsular projection from a continent [Asia]" (Robinson 2001, 33). Europe only came to have a self-identity in the end of the Dark Ages (6th–11th centuries) and this self-identity was constituted in relation to the non-European world. As Robinson continues, "Europe emerged from the negation of the real. In order to fabricate Europe, institutional, cultural and ideological materials were consciously smuggled into this hinterland from afar by kings and popes, episcopals, clerics, and monastic scholars. No reality, then, substantiates the imagined, autonomous European continent" (ibid.). A similar point—that Europe exists in a negative dialectical relationship with the "rest" is echoed by Girgio Agamben: "History shows unequivocally that Europe in the political sense serves as a device or stratagem, deployed in response to whatever crisis looms at the moment: Islam, the New World, the East. The term 'Europe' does not denote a substantial political reality, then, but a tactical-strategic device aimed at a specific, predominantly military objective. It is therefore a purely negative concept, whose content is defined from time to time in opposition to a real or fabricated enemy." (Agamben 2025, 25–26)

4 Such is the opinion of Herrlee Creel (Creel 1970, 1–2).

a necessary "growing pains" towards the end of civilization and development. The suffering and anguish of the dominated culture is an unavoidable part of the medical therapy. (4) As a second corollary, the European conquistador is understood not only as innocent but virtuous for inflicting this necessary, pedagogic violence. Like a good doctor, the pain he inflicts is for the ends of medical treatment. (5) As a third corollary, the victims swallowing the West's bitter pills are culpable for their own violent conquest and their own victimization. After all, it was only due to their own barbarity and their inability to autonomously overcome this barbarity that necessitated the conquistador-cum-doctor's violent colonization or course of therapy. When the underdeveloped peoples irrationally rebel against their own salvific emancipation-through-conquest, they double their culpability. In sum, in the victimizing act, the conqueror is innocent and the victim culpable (Dussel 1995, 66). As Dussel concludes elsewhere, modernity emerges through the act of Europe affirming "itself as the 'center' of a *World* History that it inaugurates; the 'periphery' that surrounds this centre is consequently part of its self-definition" (Dussel 1993, 65). Such a view, however, is a myth,[5] European colonization did not end historical time and bring us into the end of history, and thus "modernity", in the way that is often presented. Nor was the past few hundred years of European domination able to undo the accumulated weight of human history that preceded it.

The China of today is not a radical break with the millennia of history that shaped it. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) foreign policy principles[6] are best understood according to the paradigm of *de* that will be explored in this paper. *De* as power seeks to gain power through mutual co-empowerment or "win-win", one of the CPC's favourite slogans. Today, 34 out of 54 African countries list China as their top import partner (Umemoto 2025), and China is Africa's biggest trading partner (Eghosa 2025). China is also ASEAN's largest trading partner (ASEAN n.d.), which is ironic since ASEAN was set up as an anti-communist alliance (Dang 2025, 2). Moreover, China currently ranks as South America's top trading partner and the second largest for Latin America as a whole, after the United States (Roy 2025). This is no small achievement, given that the US—under the Monroe Doctrine—regards Latin America as its own backyard, and has overthrown numerous democratically elected leaders while installing far-right dictators to maintain that order. China's influence in these regions was achieved not through *li* but through *de*. This

5 Please see introduction to forthcoming volume *How China Shaped the Enlightenment: A Transcultural History of Modern Thought* for a more detailed discussion of this issue (Powers and Xiang, forthcoming).

6 For example, its "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence": mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

behaviour closely mirrors the Ming dynasty's practice of sending Zheng He and his treasure fleets across the known world. Then as now, the point was to establish mutually beneficial relations that will ultimately increase the power and prestige of the Chinese state.

China is today the largest economy in the world as measured in purchasing power parity terms. In 2024, and according to the IMF, China's share of global GDP was 19.05%. By 2023, China was the largest bilateral trading partner for 60 economies, almost twice as many as the US (Rajah and Albayrak 2025). Chinese state media claims that in 2024 it was the primary trading partner for more than 150 countries and regions. Today, China is the dominant trade partner for most of Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Oceania, South America, and Africa (Soltani 2025). In 2013, China became the largest trading nation in the world based on the value of its imports and exports (Jahn 2024). China thus industrialized and became a modern industrial economy without treading the same paths that colonial powers like the UK and latterly the US followed. This colonial path essentially meant, in its first stage, deindustrializing their colonies such that they became captive markets for British/America goods (Kohli 2020). In its second stage, the hegemon sought to become a rentier economy in which its colonies were kept in a perpetual stage of feudal bondage through various institutions, such as the IMF (Hudson 1972). As the international relations scholar Linda Matar writes, unlike traditional imperialist powers, contemporary China "transfers wealth (value) to developing nations", and it is because of this that China is

> predisposed to remain in its position as the leading anti-imperialist power globally. Building roads, ports, and other infrastructure in the developing world is in part the new form of a people's war. (Matar 2025, 2; Cf. Kadri 2021)

This kind of behaviour—in which one invests as opposed to extracts from the "periphery"—as I noted in *Chinese Cosmopolitanism*, is distinctive of dynastic China (Xiang 2023, 39; Cf. Wong 1997, 148; Arrighi 2007, 318). Thus, "the developing world […] is set to gain from China's alternative mode of integration that is based on demand-led growth and cooperative globalization" (Matar 2025, 7).

It is because Chinese behaviour represents a real alternative to the colonial world order of extractive capitalism in which a tiny *Herrenvolk*, racialized elite profit at the expense of the rest that Matar writes, "China's integration with Third World countries, based on common prosperity, can boost international development". Chinese integration into the world will be a net positive to the world. In this light, Matar states: "The rise of China will also lead to a decline in the image of US

empire and its neoliberal ideology, reshaping the way people conceive of their social circumstances" (Matar 2025, 7; 2024). Likewise, Adham Sayed contrasts the "US-dominated imperialist system" against "a multilateral order where China plays a significant role". Sayed goes as far as to write that the future of the Middle East "may hinge on the success of China's alternative to imperialism, which could reduce US intervention and open space for progressive development" (Sayed 2025, 1). To grasp this Chinese alternative, we must first examine the conception of power to which it stands opposed. We can do this through visiting a representative example: Mearsheimer's "realist" understanding of power.

Li (力) and Mearsheimer's Understanding of Power

For Mearsheimer the telos of all states is its own survival, and power ensures the state's survival, hence why states want power. Mearsheimer understands this power and the strategy for survival in a particular way. For him, the only way for a state to ensure its own survival, that is, to have absolute security, is to be the only great power in a system—the hegemon. Being the *only* great power in a system means that merely being the strongest of all its peers is not enough. Instead, it means being in a position of absolute superiority, that is, the ability to potentially *control* others. This superiority is understood in military terms—the ability to devastate all peers (Mearsheimer 2001, 2), and thus "hegemony means domination of the system, which is usually interpreted to mean the entire world" (ibid., 40). Survival is only assured if there is a single alpha (or hegemon) who has dominion over myriad lesser states who pose no challenge to the total power of the hegemon itself. As Mearsheimer writes, the "ultimate aim" of any state is "to gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one's own survival" (ibid., xi). In sum, "hegemony is the best way for any state to guarantee its own survival" (ibid., 4).

Two aspects are worthy of attention in Mearsheimer's understanding of power. First, that power is necessarily military capacity and thus negative or destructive in nature. Second, power is a finite resource of predetermined quantity. This means that for anyone to have more power means that someone else must necessarily have less of it. I will address both these points in turn.

Mearsheimer's only metric of power is that of physical, coercive power, that is, military force. He makes a distinction between military power and latent power. Latent power being the socio-economic support that allows for building military power[7] (ibid., 55). The two most important aspects of this latent power are the size of a state's population and its wealth (ibid., 61). Abundant wealth and a large

7 "Latent power constitutes the societal resources that a state has available to build military forces" (Mearsheimer 2001, 60).

population are not desirable in themselves, but only as a means towards "building formidable military forces" (ibid., 56). Latent power constitutes the societal resources that a state has available to build military forces (ibid., 60). Latent power is thus merely potential, whereas military power is actual.

> I argue that power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses. The balance of power, therefore, is a function of tangible assets—such as armored divisions and nuclear weapons—that each great power controls. (Ibid., 55)

The only manifestation of power is violence, that is, material or physical coercion, and hence "power in international politics is largely a product of the military forces that a state possesses" (ibid., 83). For Mearsheimer, therefore, "a state's effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states" (ibid., 55).

That Mearsheimer's logic of power is destructive in nature is well exemplified by his own analogy for the writing of his book:

> Writing a book is usually a protracted and painful process. I liken it to having to get up day after day to wrestle with a bear for hours on end. To finally whip the bear, it helps immensely to have strong support at home as well as in the arena of intellectual combat. (Ibid., xvi)

It is paradoxical that Mearsheimer describes something creative—the writing of a book—in terms of a destructive analogy, whipping a bear. Whipping a bear does not produce any new value, whereas the intellectual labour of writing a book does: creation does not come out of destruction and "combat" is not what is productive of value.

Related to Mearsheimer's view that power is measured in terms of physical coercion or destructiveness is his characterization of power as if it were a finite resource. For Mearsheimer, "the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states" (ibid., 2). Furthermore, "not only does a great power seek to gain power at the expense of other states, it also tries to thwart rivals bent on gaining power at its expense" (ibid., 3). Power is understood here as a material feature of objects instead of emergent from and contingent upon the way that the human engages with her reality. If a resource is finite, then someone having a certain quantity of it will be at the expense of another who cannot have it. This logic is well exemplified in an example that Mearsheimer used. When it appeared to the first chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, in the early 1860s that Poland, which was not an independent state at the time, might regain its sovereignty, he made the following

remark: “Restoring the Kingdom of Poland in any shape or form is tantamount to creating an ally for any enemy that chooses to attack us”. And therefore he advocated that Prussia should “smash those Poles till, losing all hope, they lie down and die; I have every sympathy for their situation, but if we wish to survive we have no choice but to wipe them out” (quoted in Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Elsewhere (Xiang 2022; 2024, 198), I noted the characteristic tendency in American statecraft (and by extension European great power statecraft) to view positives as arising out of destruction. I elucidated this paradoxical logic of this worldview via Jean Paul Sartre and Lewis R. Gordon’s account of “bad faith”. Through the concept of “bad faith”, we can understand the two related characteristics in Mearsheimer’s understanding of power that I outlined above, that is, the tendency to view power in merely militaristic terms and that power is a pre-existing finite good. In “bad faith”, an agent sees the value of the world as pregiven, and so evades the existential fact of our freedom: that our actions creatively produce value. It is this bad faith understanding of values and power that accounts for why Bismarck, Mearsheimer as well as American and the foreign policy of Western colonial powers in general overwhelmingly employ and promote a strategy of dividing and de-developing competitors. If power is a pre-existing or extant property of the world, then it can neither be created nor destroyed.

We can draw an analogy between this understanding of power and the principle of the conservation of energy in physics. According to this, the energy of interacting bodies or particles in a closed system remains constant. Energy is neither created nor destroyed but merely changes forms, going from potential to kinetic to thermal energy. The analogy of the conservation of energy when it becomes a feature of human psychology can be likened to bad faith. By analogy, in the “bad faith” understanding of power as a finite good, if I disabuse someone of their power, then that power does not go away but is transferred into another form—to me. Under this way of thinking, physically coercing someone to give up their power results in the power accruing to myself. Further, this understanding of power is fundamentally non-creative, it is out of the question that I can create more power through cooperation with others.

Previously (Xiang 2022, 59), I quoted Andrew Bacevich who, in the last chapter of *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War*, “Cultivating Our Own Garden”, wrote of how despite “promising prosperity and peace, the American empire is “propelling the United States toward insolvency and perpetual war”. For Bacevich, instead of the logic of militarism, the US should cultivate its own garden, that is, use its socio-economic power (what Mearsheimer calls “latent power”) not for projecting military power abroad but in investing in its own society. For Bacevich, evidently investing this latent power in one’s own society is the best way to safeguard the state’s security concerns. However, Bacevich’s view would be nonsensical under the paradigm of power outlined above (what

Mearsheimer calls "realist"). Under such a view power is only real or kinetic, as opposed to potential, when it manifests as military power. An economically prosperous and socially flourishing society is a mere means towards the end of military power, and it is nonsensical to be content with the mere means. Latent power does not allow a state to have the power that is necessary for securing its own security—an overwhelming coercive capacity to control and subjugate all other states. Such a mentality then makes sense of why the US military budget, based on 2024 data, is more than the next nine countries combined (Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025). The maintenance of around eight hundred American military bases (Vine 2015) across the world is costly, but under "realist" calculations it is necessary for subjugating other states such that the security concerns of the hegemon can be ensured.

Mearsheimer's underlying logic that value comes from militarism can be understood as falling under the bellicist paradigm of state formation. Under this view, war created the (European) state. War and preparation for war motivated the creation of a bureaucratic administration for the purpose of extracting resources from society. The states that could most efficiently extract resources were the most likely to endure, thereby making the successful states more warlike in the process (Huang and Kang 2022, 12). Gorski and Sharma write that the bellicist thesis of state formation takes "neo-Darwinian natural selection on military capacity" as "the fundamental law of state formation" (Gorski and Sharma 2017, 98). The sovereign's extraction of resources for the purposes of war indirectly caused the institutional constraints on his power. For example, in order to raise taxes for war, the sovereign had to compromise with politically powerful societal actors who demanded dilution of the sovereign's political power in forms such as representative institutions. The emergence of these institutions, in turn, further accounting for the unintended consequence of economic growth (Huang and Kang 2022, 13).

The most canonical expression of this bellicist paradigm of state formation comes from Charles Tilly, who famously said that "war made the state, and the state made the war". However, such a mentality is pervasive in the European literature. Another example of this bellicist view, for example, can be found in Kant's *Perpetual Peace* and *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim.* In both these works, Kant writes of how it is the human being's warlike nature ("unsociable sociability") that drives forth human progress. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,[8] "liberalism" (as a socio-political theory) and "capitalism" (as an economic theory) converge in understanding conflict or bellicism as the driving engine of progress.

8 *The Deepening and Coexistence of Humanity: The Confucian Alternative to the Liberal-Capitalist Subject* (manuscript under review).

It is this assumption that power is tantamount to physical coercion or military power that explains why European political philosophy is driven by the animating assumption of the abuse of power. Canonical in the most influential theories of political economy and social science is the assumption of a predatory, maximally extractive ruler, and thus the importance of institutions for defending the public against their abuse of power. All the canonical approaches to the development of states assume that political leaders are motivated by the desire to maximally expropriate wealth from the population. In their paper, "The Mandate of Heaven or Divine Right of Kings? Political Authority, Values, and Institutions in Historical East Asia", Kang and Huang observe, however, that the core animating idea across the Sinitic realm (i.e., China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan) was the responsibility of power. Kang and Huang observe that in the Sinitic context, China became advanced much earlier than Europe without developing any of the institutional constraints on ruler predation that are posited in the standard literature as requisites for economic development. These constraints include but are not limited to parliamentary sovereignty, constitutional monarchies, independent central banks, or even a financial system (Kang and Huang, forthcoming). Kang and Huang explain this differing reality by way of culture: prevalent in the Sinitic context is a culture in which the state has a moral purpose and that its *raison d'être* is the provision of public goods. As Kang and Huang explain

> [i]n historical East Asia, what sustained the Chinese state over two millennia was the philosophical and cultural purpose of the state, as expressed through Confucian texts and principles, as well as Daoist, Legalist, and Buddhist ideas. (Kang and Huang, forthcoming)

We can better understand the divergent reality in the Sinitic context through the Chinese understanding of power as *de.*

De (德) and *Min* (民) as the Basis of the Confucian Understanding of Power

The *Mencius* articulated a vision of rulership in terms of *de* as opposed to *li* that was to become the canonical vision the Chinese understanding of statecraft.

> Mencius said, 'One who, supported by force [*li* 力], pretends to being humane is a hegemon [*ba* 霸], and a hegemon [*ba* 霸] has to have a large state. One who out of Virtue [*de* 德] practices humaneness [*ren* 仁] is a true king [*wang* 王], and a true king does not need anything large. Tang did it with only seventy *li*, and King Wen did it with a hundred.

> 孟子曰：“以力假仁者霸，霸必有大国，以德行仁者王，王不待大。汤以七十里，文王以百里。

Mencius draws a connection between physical force—*li*—and a particular form of rule—hegemony (*ba* 霸). A rule of *de* is characterized by humaneness (*ren* 仁), and this means that the ruler's sovereignty can be sustained without manifest power ("a true king does not need anything large"). Mencius goes on to explain why this is the case:

> When one uses force [*li* 力] to make people submit, they do not submit in their hearts but only because their strength is insufficient. When one uses virtue [*de* 德] to make people submit, they are pleased to the depths of their hearts, and they sincerely submit.' (Mencius 2009, 33)

> 以力服人者，非心服也，力不赡也；以德服人者，中心悦而诚服也，如七十子之服孔子也。”

Whereas *li* is physical and coercive power, *de* is nonphysical noncoercive power. In classical Chinese terminology *li* is *wei* (为) whereas *de* is *wuwei* (无为). A hegemon needs a large state because the source of their power is physical—their power is *wei*, and thus based on coercive might. They thus need a large population of labourers to realize this coercive might. In contrast, power as *de* is rooted in human relationships. Below, I will show how this *de* understanding of power is manifested through an ability to empower the population in a state, and thus why *de* power is non-coercive and non-militaristic in nature. First, it is important to see the transition of the ancient Chinese understanding of power as rooted in divine sources, to a secular understanding of power as rooted in human sources, or "human resources". Under this latter view, we can understand the power of the ruler is derived from his managerial capabilities as the head of such resources.

In his comparative reflections on the genesis of Chinese civilization and the origins of the Chinese state, Kwang-chih Chang famously argued that it was politics rather than technology and trade led to the formation of Chinese civilization (Chang 1983; Liu and Chen 2012, 393). Chang argues that central to the rise of civilization in ancient China was the political leaders' close relationship with shamanism, often being shamans themselves. According to Chang, early Chinese art—especially ritual bronzes—was fundamentally political. He saw shamanistic objects as tools of power that mediated between worlds. This meant that the possession of these objects endowed their possessor with access to Heaven, wisdom and foreknowledge (Chang 1983; 1989, 157–58). Chang's description of political power as tantamount to religious or supernatural power extends from the beginnings of complex societies in China (in the late neolithic) in 3000 BCE to late Eastern Zhou 东周

in 650–221 BCE. The ruler-cum-shaman's political authority thus derives from his religious authority, as one who is able to manage the human relationship with the divine. Sacrifices to the gods, for example, are a way of benefitting the divine. However, the central texts of the Zhou show a transition in the ruling elites' understanding of the source of their political authority, not as rooted in *tian* but instead in the *min.* We could thus say that the basis of their political power had shifted from a relationship to divinity to a relationship to the "people" (*min* 民)

One of the representative texts that demonstrate this transition in the basis of the state's power from divine authority (in what could be understood as a Chinese "divine right of kings") to that of the *min* is the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚书), which problematized the idea that kings have a divine right to rule. Instead, the text suggested that one earns the right to rule through the accumulation of virtuous (*de* 德) acts. The *Shangshu* recounts how when King Wu 武王 of the Zhou attacked King Zhou 纣王 (the last king of the Shang), he did so on the basis that "there is no constancy in the Heavens' commands" ("Announcement to the Prince of Kang")—or that the "divine right of kings" is not permanent. The Mandate of Heaven belongs to whomever is virtuous, and given that the Shang were unvirtuous, they had lost it. The rulers from the Zhou dynasty concluded from the Shang's loss of the Mandate of Heaven that

> the Heavens know nothing of the kind of unconditional love between kin, it only assists those with moral virtue [*de*]. There is no constancy in the hearts of the common people [*min* 民], they only cherish the memory of the benevolent [惠]. (*Shangshu*, "Charge to Zhong of Cai")
>
> 皇天无亲，惟德是辅。民心无常，惟惠之怀

They thus formulated the idea of "having virtue (*de*) in order to be adequate to the Heavens" (以德配天). In this way the *Shangshu* connects *tian* or divine authority with securing the needs of the population itself.

In the chapter "Wu Cheng" (武成 "Successful Completion of the War") that records King Wu of the Zhou's proclamation after defeating the Shang dynasty, King Wu justifies his actions by the Mandate of Heaven:

> Shou, the present king of Shang, is without principle, cruel and destructive to the creatures of Heaven, injurious and tyrannical to the multitudes of the people [*min* 民], lord of all the vagabonds under Heaven, who collect about him as fish in the deep, and beasts in the prairie. I, the little child, having obtained [the help of] virtuous men, presume reverently to comply with [the will of] God [*shangdi* 上帝], and make an end of his disorderly ways.

今商王受无道，暴殄天物，害虐烝民，为天下逋逃主，萃渊薮。
予小子既获仁人，敢祇承上帝，以遏乱略

King Wu proclaims that the Shang have lost the Mandate of Heaven because they are hurting the *min*, whereas he will comply with Heaven's will which is to bring prosperity to them.

We can see the transition from the ruler's authority as rooted in an access to divine sources to an access to the *min* when the text conflates "Heaven" with the "people". For example: "Heaven hears and sees as our people hear and see" (天聪明，自我民聪明) (*Shangshu*, "Counsels of Gao-yao"), "Heaven is compassionate for the people. What the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to" (天矜于民，民之所欲，天必从之) (*Shangshu*, "Great Declaration I"), "Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear" (天视自我民视，天听自我民听) (*Shangshu*, "Great Declaration II"). The source of political authority is now ultimately rooted in the *min* by way of the vocabulary of "Heaven".

We can also see this transition of the source of legitimacy of rulership from a divine source to the people in the changing meanings of the term *de.* As Huaiyu Wang has shown, *de* can be understood as "the Heavenly endowment essential for the life of all human and natural beings" (Wang 2015, 82). In the early Chinese mind, sagacious personalities were those who could appropriately preserve and propagate Heavenly and ancestral benedictions, i.e., *de.* As Wang writes, the sense of moral virtue is thus only a derivative meaning of *de* (ibid.), Wang argues that the morphology of *de* shows that its original meaning is the enactment of divine blessing and is related to the sacrificial ceremonies of ancestral worship (ibid., 85). Below, I will focus on passages from the *Xici* 系辞 (*Classic of Changes*), a commentary on the *Yijing* 易经 (the ancient manual of divination), to show the intellectual connection now being made between *de* and ability to benefit the *min.*

Power as Divining the Will of the People

In the "Da Gao" (大诰, "Great Announcement") chapter of the *Shangshu*, the Duke of Zhou 周公 cites divination results to legitimize the necessity of military campaigns to suppress rebellions after the death of King Wu. "I dare not conceal the majestic will of Heaven. By using the great precious tortoise-shell left to us by King Wen for divination, we can clearly discern the intent of the Supreme Lord [God/Shangdi]." (予不敢于闭于天降威，用宁王遗我大宝龟，绍天明。). From this passage we can see the importance of divination as the way the ruler communicated with the divine—the ultimate source of political authority.

We can see how divination transitioned from divining the will of *tian* to divining the will of the *min* in the *Xici*. The *Xici* is a series of rationalizations for the divinatory power of the *Yijing.* In the *Xici*, we find passages that argue for the efficacy of the *Yijing* system in its ability to observe the needs of the *min.* In *Xici* (1.11), for example, we read that the *de* of the yarrow stalks resides partly in its ability to share in anxieties (*huan* 患) of the *min:*

> They used the *Changes* to cast light on the *Dao* of Heaven and to probe into the conditions of the common folk [*min* 民]. This is the numinous thing that they inaugurated in order to provide beforehand for the needs of the common folk [*min* 民]. The sages did their fasting with the *Changes* and got their precautions from it. […] Taking advantage of and putting to use the ins and outs involved, one provides all the common folk [*min* 民] with the use of it, and this is called the numinous.

> 是以明于天之道，而察于民之故，是兴神物以前民用。圣人以此斋戒，以神明其德夫。是故阖户谓之坤，辟户谓之乾，一阖一辟谓之变，往来不穷谓之通，见乃谓之象，形乃谓之器，制而用之谓之法，利用出入，民咸用之谓之神。

In *Xici* (2.2), in an important passage that explains the origins of the institutions of civilization, we read how Baoxi 包牺 and later sages invented the various institutions of sedentary, agricultural and civilized life to benefit the *min.*

> He [Baoxi] had midday become market time, had the people [*min* 民] of the world gather, had the goods of the world brought together, had these exchanged, had them then retire to their homes, and enabled each one to get what he should. He probably got the idea for this from the hexagram Shihe 'Bite Together'. After Lord Shen Nong perished, the Lord Yellow Emperor, Lord Yao, and Lord Shun applied themselves to things. They allowed things to undergo the free flow of change and so spared the common folk [*min* 民] from weariness and sloth. With their numinous powers they transformed things and had the common folk [*min* 民] adapt to them. […] The benefit of pestles and mortars was such that the myriad folk [*min* 民] used them to get relief from want. […] In remote antiquity, people knotted cords to keep things in order. The sages of later ages had these exchanged for written tallies, and by means of these all the various officials were kept in order, and the myriad folk [*min* 民] were supervised. They probably got the idea for this from the hexagram *Kuai* 'Resolution'. (*Xici* 2.2)

> 日中为市，致天下之民，聚天下之货，交易而退，各得其所，盖取诸《噬嗑》。神农氏没，黄帝、尧、舜氏作，通其变，使民不倦，神而化之，使民宜之。杵臼之利，万民以济，盖取诸小过。上古结绳而治，后世圣人易之以书契，百官以治，万民以察，盖取诸夬。

In *Xici* (2.1), in linking divination to the ability of the ruler to provide public goods, the *Xici* defines *min* as the subject of the moral-political order. Whereas *ren* (人) are merely human capital, once the *ren* become the subjects to the moral-political concerns of the ruler, they become *min. De* rulership, like the *de* of Heaven and Earth which supports the growth of all things without partiality, supports the flourishing of the *min:*

> The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is called 'generation'. The great treasure of the sage is called his 'position'. The means by which such a one preserves this position we call 'benevolence'; the means by which he gathers people [*ren* 人] to him we call 'resources'. The regulation of resources, the rectification of pronouncements, and his preventing the people [*min* 民] from doing wrong we call 'righteousness'. (*Xici* 2.1)

> 天地之大德曰生，圣人之大宝曰位。何以守位？曰仁。何以聚人？曰财。理财正辞、禁民为非曰义。

Xici (2.1) exemplifies Huaiyu Wang's point that the early Chinese ideal of *dezhi* (德治)—the virtuous rule of benefaction—grows out of an older cosmic sense of *de* as the cyclical rhythm of cosmic forces that ensures the growth of the myriad things. *De* in the sense of political authority follows this paradigm of ensuring cosmic empathy and reciprocity that is the basis of the flourishing of the myriad things. It is this cosmic context of *de* that explains the "distinctive dimension of early Chinese government, whose leadership does not turn on exclusive heavenly sanction but on the cohesive power of communal attachment and collaboration" (Wang 2015, 91). The sagacious ruler of *dezhi* promotes empathy and reciprocity between his community just as Heaven and Earth do between the myriad things. In this way, the ruler of *de* promotes the flourishing of his community, and Heaven and Earth promote the flourishing of the myriad things.

The idea that *dezhi* is constituted by the ability to impartially promote the flourishing of the *min* is expounded upon in the *Liji* (礼记). The "Confucius at Home at Leisure" (Kongzi Xian Ju) chapter of this records a conversation in which Confucius' disciple Zixia 子夏 remarks that the three sage kings of ancient

China[9] are traditionally referred to as having *de* that is equal to Heaven and Earth (三王之德，参于天地). Confucius' response to Zixia's question of how the three sage kings earned this reputation, is that it is because they "reverently displayed the Three Impartialities, while they comforted all beneath the sky under the toils which they imposed" (奉三无私以劳天下). Confucius thus explains the quality of *de* rulership in terms of the impartiality (*wusi* 无私) of Heaven and Earth. Heaven shelters all without partiality, the Earth bears all without partiality, and the sun and the moon illuminate all without partiality (天无私覆，地无私载，日月无私照). Likewise The "Different Teaching of the Different Kings" ("Jing Jie") chapter of the *Liji* records a similar statement from Confucius.[10]

> The Son of Heaven forms a triad with Heaven and Earth. Hence, in power of his goodness he is their correlate, and his benefits extend at once to all things. His brilliancy is equal to that of the sun and moon, and enlightens all within the four seas, not excepting anything, however minute and small.
>
> 天子者，与天地参。故德配天地，兼利万物，与日月并明，明照四海而不遗微小。

The content of *de* rulership is the impartial benefaction of all things. The realization of *de* rulership and the benefaction of all rests, in turn, on a "harmony" understanding of power. Under this mode, power is a result of those who can put things into more productive relationships. Those who can produce greater value through insightfully bringing diverse things into productive relationship produce greater value for a greater number of people. In this way, one is promoting the common good, which is the source of political legitimacy and the basis of power as *de.*

That *de* power is the ability to bring benefit to the peoples it brings into a relationship, which explains the traditional source of Chinese political authority in interstate relations. Summarizing the recent work of international relations scholars who study the historic Sinosphere, Kang writes that, "Chinese authority was considered legitimate because China's Confucian-inspired social order was generally valued by its subordinates" (Kang 2020, 72). Since the Confucian-inspired social order was able to benefit those who partook of the system, it was viewed as legitimate.

9 Yu the Great 大禹, the founder of the Xia 夏, King Tang 汤, the founder of the Shang 商 dynasty and King Wen 文, the founder of the Zhou 周 dynasty.

10 I benefited from Wang (2015) for these two references.

Power as *de* is necessarily co-empowerment: power is proportionally correlated with the ability to co-empower others. The *locus classicus* of what constitutes the Kingly Way (*wangdao* 王道) in contrast to the Way of the Hegemon (*badao* 霸道) is found in the *Mencius.* Here, the rule of *de* is tantamount to the provision of public goods, and power and legitimacy accrue to those who can actuate such a "kingly way".

> There is a Way to obtain the world: one gains the world by gaining the people [*min* 民]; when one gains the people [*min* 民], one gains *tianxia*. There is a Way of gaining the people: by gaining their hearts one gains the people [*min* 民]. There is a Way to gain their hearts: it is simply to collect for them what they like, and not to lay on them what they dislike. The people's [*min* 民] turning to humaneness [*ren* 仁] is like water flowing downward or wild animals heading for the wilds. (Mencius 2009, 78–79, modified, 4A9)
>
> 得天下有道：得其民，斯得天下矣；得其民有道：得其心，斯得民矣；得其心有道：所欲与之聚之，所恶勿施尔也。民之归仁也，犹水之就下、兽之走圹也。

The kingly way understands power in terms of *de*, which manifests itself through non-coercive action, that is, through non-domination. Power as *de* overcomes the traditional international relations dualism between "realism" and "idealism" that Mearsheimer operates under. *De* is simultaneously "efficacy" and "virtue", as well as "charisma". Traditional international relations theory dualistically takes utilitarian calculations of interest to be mutually exclusive with moral considerations. In the civilizational understanding of power presented above, power is only sustainable if it is *de.* The exemplary image of the *de* or civilizational understanding of power is presented *Analects* (2.1): "The Master said, 'He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it.'" (为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而众星共之。) Such a non-coercive, *wuwei* image of power is realized in practice through the kingly way, that is, through the benefaction of others. It is when the ruler is able to benefit or co-empower those around him that the *min* flock to him. Such a compelling power over others cannot be achieved through coercion, it can only be achieved through co-empowerment. In this worldview, the only way for the agent to sustain long-term influence over others is to persuade them to view the agent as a person whose abilities, qualities, and continued existence would ensure their collective flourishing. Power and morality are one and the same thing.

De (德) Statecraft as *Wuwei*

However, there has been a persistent inability to understand the above *de* understanding of power. An inability to understand that moral behaviour becomes political cachet, or that the dichotomy between idealism/moral behaviour and realism in statecraft is a false dualism, is exampled by Yuri Pines.

Pines argues that the use of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* is radically different from its usage in more canonically Confucian texts such as the *Analects.* This is because whereas the *Zuo Zhuan* uses *de* in terms of charismatic power, political potency, proper decorum, mildness and kindness in domestic or interstate affairs, in the *Analects*, *de* is used in the sense of "personal morality" (Pines 2021, 141). Pines' inability to understand the continuum between what he terms the more "political" usages of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* and what he observes to be the merely personal morality usages of *de* in the *Analects* is an eloquent example, albeit in microcosm, of why Mearsheimer only understands power in military terms.

At the heart of Pines' confusion is an inability to understand that moral and political power are not mutually exclusive and distinct from each other. The treatment of morality and politics as distinct and exclusive is a modern assumption of the western philosophical tradition. Pines seems to operate under a merely deontological understanding of the nature of "morality". For him, since *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* overwhelmingly refers to political actions without "any reference to a ruler or a minister's individual morality" these politically *de* actions are "unrelated to its moral content" (Pines 2021, 136). Pines seems to lack a basic understanding of how the Chinese worldview understands the nature of "morality". Morality in texts such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* does not operate under a deontological paradigm in which it is merely a personal relationship between the individual and their God and or divinely sanctioned deontological rules. Chinese texts such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* have instead a very sophisticated understanding of social psychology. That which is moral (*de*) is precisely that which shows political acumen (*de*). Political acumen being understood as actions that co-benefit or co-empower both the agent (to whom *de* is attributed) and the subject of their actions or the subjects to whom the agent is bringing into a relationship with himself. The accounts of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* are perfectly congruent with each other if we understand *de* as the provision of public goods. This provision of public goods is what Huang and Kang have identified as the substance of the Sinitic social contract, or the "moral purpose of the state" (Huang and Kang 2022, 42).

Pines' is unable to understand the *de* account of power for the same reason that Mearsheimer only understands power in militaristic terms. In being unable to understand *de*, both Pines and Mearsheimer cannot understand how power can be legitimate and sustainable. Let me borrow James Baldwin's diagnosis of the illegitimacy of American power to make this point:

> For a very long time, […] America prospered—or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: they can neither understand them nor do without them, nor can they go beyond them. Above all, they cannot, or dare not, assess or imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why the victims are revolting. They are forced, then, to the conclusion that the victims—the barbarians—are revolting against all established civilized values—which is both true and not true—and, in order to preserve these values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction.
>
> This is a formula for a nation's or a kingdom's decline, for no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone. Force does not work the way its advocates seem to think it does. […] the victor can never be the victor: on the contrary, all his energies, his entire life, are bound up in a terror he cannot articulate, a mystery he cannot read, a battle he cannot win—he has simply become the prisoner of the people he thought to cow, chain, or murder into submission. The representatives of the *status quo* are sickened and divided, and dread looking into the eyes of their young; while the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they can endure everything. They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this paradoxically—by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built. (Baldwin 1998, 406–07)

As Balwin observes, when power is illegitimate—when it is merely militaristic and coercive—it is unstainable, because it relies on the coercive subjugation of the majority who resent being dominated. The purveyors of this kind of illegitimate power, however, do not know any other paradigm of power ("Force does not work the way its advocates seem to think it does"), and so cannot go beyond it. What is more, power when it is illegitimate in this way is joyless and brings no enrichment for even those who have it. As Baldwin writes, those with only such an understanding of power are destined to fail, because "no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone". Those who wield power-as-force are, furthermore, hostage to the very power they wield. The more they seek to perpetuate it, the more they place themselves in danger and make themselves the enemy of the majority.

Baldwin calls those who see power in these terms as having a "failure of moral energy". They cannot sustain their power precisely because they do not have moral authority, and it is only a matter of time before those with moral authority and legitimate power will depose them. Baldwin, unlike Pines and Mearsheimer, understands the *de* account of power. It is only *de* power that is real power, as it is this power that has moral authority and is thus sustainable.

Agricultural Metaphysics and Nomadic Metaphysics and Their Differing Understandings of Power

Mearsheimer and Pines' inability to understand the *de* nature of power is philosophically interesting. In this section, I argue that a reason for the divergence between the dominant Western and Chinese understandings of power—*li* and *de*, respectively—can be understood by the fact that the former was a predominantly nomadic culture whereas the latter was an agricultural civilization. By this, I do not mean a material determinism in which the geography of the land leads to certain socio-economic practices which then leads to certain ideologies. Instead, the material factors and the ideology are mutually reinforcing. Nowhere is this clearer than the case of Europe. As we will note below, European agricultural knowledge was hopelessly primitive relative to China's for the majority of human history. This contrast is interesting given that Europe has more arable land than China, and thus the issue is not a simple one of material determinism.

The geography and climate of Britain, for example are more than capable of supporting its population—especially when compared to countries like China. It is often reported that around 71% of the UK's land is arable (What the Science Says 2023). In contrast, only 11.6% of China's land was classified as arable in 2021 (Trading Economics n.d.). Based on these geographical factors alone, there is little justification to argue that the UK needed to engage in a global programme of looting for its survival. In fact, many former colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and Austria are today significant exporters of agricultural products. Remarkably, the Netherlands ranks as the second-largest agricultural exporter in the world after the US, with farming accounting for about 10% of its GDP (Government of the Netherlands n.d.). If anyone could claim a need to loot, it would more plausibly be China, not Britain or other European states. However, today China produces food for a fifth of the world's population with only 7% of the world's arable land (Donnellon-May 2023).

In *China: Land of Famine*, Walter Mallory (1892–1980), former director of the Council on Foreign Relations and Secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission in 1920–1921 writes,

> The food problem is an ancient one in China: from the earliest times famines have been an ever recurring scourge. A study recently completed by the Student Agricultural Society of the University of Nanking brought to light the surprising and significant fact that between the years 108 B.C. and 1911 A.D. there were 1,828 famines or nearly every year in some one of the provinces. Untold millions have died of starvation. In fact the normal death rate may be said to contain a constant famine factor. (Mallory 1928, 1)

Here it is important to remember that only large-scale famines tend to be recorded in history, while smaller, less devastating instances of hunger and starvation were a regular part of life in pre-modern China. Even the Chinese philosophical texts we value for their intellectual depth reveal the routine presence of famine and food scarcity.[11] While there are many reasons for the persistent hunger throughout China's history, a significant one is the country's relatively inhospitable geography. In contrast, and as noted above, Europe is one of the most naturally advantaged regions in the world, with a mild climate, minimal natural disasters, and abundant rainfall.

The Europeans' disconnection from the land and inability to live off it are evident in the early experiences of the Pilgrims with Native Americans. Upon arriving in what would become the United States, the Pilgrims were taught by the Wampanoag people how to cultivate local crops—specifically, how to plant beans and squash together in mounds surrounded by maize, using fish remains as fertilizer. This indigenous agricultural knowledge played a crucial role in the colony's survival, especially considering that during their first winter in 1620, half of the settlers perished (Silverman 2019, 167).

Whatever the causes, there is a clear lack of agricultural expertise in the European cultures. This lack of agricultural worldview, I argue, is reflected in the ideology of the European colonial powers. These powers overwhelmingly saw value as pregiven and resources as finite, such that the only way for oneself to become more powerful was to take it from others. This contrasts with the Chinese experience in which Chinese culture was an overwhelmingly agricultural one from its earliest periods and throughout dynastic history.

11 In *Mencius* (2009, 1A7), the philosopher advises King Xuan of Qi to adopt a model of benevolent governance. A key aspect of this approach involves ensuring that the people's livelihoods are managed in a way that provides material security (制民之产). Mencius outlines what he considers a materially adequate life: in prosperous years, people should have enough to eat, and in years of poor harvest, they should still be able to avoid starvation. Notably, for Mencius a *good* year is one in which people have enough to eat, while a truly commendable achievement by the ruler is preventing deaths during times of famine. This implies that famine-related deaths were a common occurrence in his time.

Above, we noted Kang's point that the Sinitic states conducted their international relations through a "common conjecture", and it was this that explains the sustained peace between them. The absence of this common conjecture between China and the nomadic, steppes peoples explains the frequency of war between them. We can understand the nature of this common conjecture through articulating the nature of the agriculturalist worldview. A sedentary, farming economy and way of life sees value as something that is cultivated through human agency. Nomadic cultures that do not farm will be more predisposed towards seeing value as a material feature of objects instead of emergent from and contingent upon the way that humans engage with their reality. Under the nomadic paradigm, power, like goods, is a finite resource of predetermined quantity. For anyone to have power means that someone else must necessarily have less of it. This means that the farming way of life sees wealth and value as created through human cultivation as opposed to a predetermined quantity or given that one either possesses or not.

It is a commonplace observation that China was a farming or agricultural civilization. Writing in 1948, Feng Youlan observed that "[e]ven today the portion of the Chinese population engaged in farming is estimated at 75 to 80 percent" (Feng 1948, 17). As the archaeologists Li Liu 刘莉 and Chen Xingcan 陈星灿 show, the emergence of sedentism and the transition to agricultural production as opposed to hunting and foraging was simultaneous with the emergence of a complex society and the formation of the earliest states in the central plains (Liu and Chen 2012). The overwhelming nature of "Chinese" existence has been consistently agricultural from the earliest proto-states in the neolithic era (7000 BCE) until the 20th century, and arguably to present times. As John M. Hobson notes, historically, the Chinese had far better agricultural knowledge than their European counterparts (Hobson 2004, 57). Similarly, as the historian Robert Temple writes, before the 18th century, Western agriculture was "primitive" and "hopeless" in comparison with the advanced Chinese agriculture after the fourth century BCE (Temple 1999, 20). This fact about the entirety of the timeline of Chinese civilization and the almost total domination of this mode of socio-economic life has not attracted enough attention from those who work in the humanities.[12] There are implications to be drawn about how this way of life affected or was in a symbiotic relationship with the core characteristics of "Chinese" or Sinitic culture. The dominance of agriculture as a way of life is consonant with the nature of the Chinese worldview and the nature of statecraft, at both domestic and interstate levels.

Roger Ames, for example, coins the neologism "zoetology" to describe the overwhelming organic-agricultural bent of Chinese metaphysics (Ames 2024). The distinguished philosopher of science, Joseph Needham, also stressed that "the

12 In his *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan argues that the agricultural way of life impacted the core natures of Chinese philosophy. However, the insights he draws, although arguably correct, are somewhat superficial (Feng 1948, 16–29).

key-word in Chinese thought is *Order* and above all *Pattern* (and, if I may whisper it for the first time, *Organism*)" (Needham 1956, 281). That Chinese metaphysics has its distinguishing characteristics in contrast to the Western tradition is well established (Rošker 2023, 49). There is an overwhelming tendency by *all* the early Chinese philosophers to describe reality in a way that can generally be called organicist.

That the socio-economic way of life of China has a striking convergence with its philosophical outlook has not been well understood in the sinological literature. Roel Sterckx (2015), for example, argues that agriculturalism was so obsessively and almost universally promoted throughout Chinese history because it instilled in the population certain characteristics that were more amenable to the centralized control of the ruler.[13] Although this is arguably partially true for some of the legalist texts that Sterckx examines,[14] this is an inaccurate account of the deeper reasons why the tradition as a whole was so ideologically committed to agriculturalism. It is doubtful, for example, that Mencius promoted his well-field system (*jingtian* 井田) as the socio-economic basis of his ideal state because the division of agricultural land according to this form of collectively cooperating farming households "produces people with minds receptive to instruction and authority. Plotting land facilitates plotting people and plotting minds" (Sterckx 2015, 216). Sterckx's conclusion is arbitrary and ignorant, and relies on the hermeneutics of suspicion that I have previously criticized sinologists of lazily appealing to when there is a phenomenon they cannot explain (Xiang 2018; 2025). If, as we have seen, sedentism and agriculturalism are essential to the rise of civilization and complex society, then it is commonsense as to why the ancient Chinese would have thought of agriculture as the productive root (*ben* 本) of society, *tout court*.

As Huang and Kang write, in the Sinitic context, for over 2,500 years, the relationship that obtained between ruler and the ruled was the "responsibility of power".[15] This Sinitic social contract "reflected basic values and ideas that predated even Confucius and Mencius" and stands in contrast to the fundamental concern of the European social contract—the abuse of power. From the time of the Greeks and Romans through *Magna Carta* to Hobbes and the present day, the fundamental concern of the European social contract was how to limit the ruler's ability to take advantage of her

13 For example, Sterckx cites a passage from the *Zuozhuan* which uses an agricultural metaphor about divisions in the land as an analogy for why rulership should be disciplined. The analogy being that seeing a thought or action through to its end without digression is analogized to farmers not transgressing their lot of land. Sterckx states that contained in this agricultural metaphor of self-discipline is the "efficient, controlled, and orderly rule" of the peasant (Sterckx 2015, 215–16).

14 See his reference to *Book of Lord Shang* in Sterckx (2015, 222).

15 Whilst there were arguably some institutional constraints on the emperor's power, for example through the Three Departments and Six Ministries (*Sansheng liubu* 三省六部), the greatest constraint on his power was internal or moral-cultural as opposed to external and institutional.

people (Huang and Kang 2022, 42). The divine right of kings is thus a mere ideological cover that enables extraction from the king's population. This basic difference of rulership as the "responsibility of power" as opposed to the extraction of the people can also be understood via the agriculturalist and nomadic worldviews, respectively. Under the agriculturalist worldview, value can be cultivated. Opening up new land to farm and creative ways of hybridizing different specimens to produce greater yields, for example, can all produce greater yields of farm goods. In essence, one can have more creative relationships with our natural world such that we produce greater value. Nomadic economies do not rely on working the land to the same extent as agricultural societies. Consequently, the notion that value can be actively cultivated does not come naturally to them. As Liu and Chen note, in Chinese archaeological literature, "civilization" is used interchangeably with the term "state" (Liu and Chen 2012, 254). The pioneering Chinese archaeologist Xia Nai 夏鼐 (1910–1985) was the first to explicitly use state and civilization interchangeably when he wrote that "civilization refers to a society in which the clan system has disintegrated and a state organization with class differentiation has formed" (quoted in Liu and Chen 2012, 254). In the history of Chinese state formation, it is sedentary, farming society, the economic surplus this allowed for, and then the rise of class-differentiation that is the basis of civilization/the state. As Xunzi famously wrote, "humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? I say it is because of social divisions" (Hutton 2014, 76). Complex society relies on social organization which, in turn, allows for an unprecedented production of value qualitatively different from that seen in tribal societies. The maintenance of such a complex society, and the continued production of value, relies on both the management and cooperation of the productive population. It is such a socio-economic context that makes sense of the *de* understanding of power. The necessity of such an understanding of power for sustaining such a socio-economic arrangement can be seen when nomadic powers tried to conquer China and were forced to adopt its political worldview and the institutions of state if they wanted to sustainably rule the Sinosphere. As this paper has emphasized, power is only sustainable when it is *de.*

Conclusion

This paper has articulated the *de* understanding of power which is based on the ability to benefit the population under one's authority. An understanding of power solely in terms of domination is unenlightened and arguably mythic. Central to Mearsheimer's concern is the survival of the state. Under the *de* model, the survival of the state is not predicated on the monopolistic and overpowering military power of a state, but instead on a state's ability to benefit others. It is responsibility of power and implicit in this, the provision of public goods, that ensures the sustainability of one's power.

Through an understanding of *de*, we can overcome the mindset that great power politics must necessarily be tragic. Whilst Mearsheimer is correct that China will not be complacent to a subordinate vassal status in the capitalist world system, this does not mean that China will challenge American power in the way that the great powers of the past that he analyses did (Mearsheimer 2001, 4). This is because the dominant Chinese tradition has a fundamentally different understanding of power than the one Mearsheimer operates under. The historical experience of the Sinosphere is that power is only real when it is non-coercive. It is up to powers such as the US to understand China's civilizational experience and the philosophy of *de* distilled from this experience. Indeed, tragedy can only be avoided insofar as powers such as the US and their intellectuals understand the multi-dimensional ramifications of *de.*

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The "Confucian" Ideal Person(ality) and Pacifism

*Gregor PAUL**

Abstract

So-called Confucianism (*rujia* 儒家) developed a notion of an ideal person(ality), the *junzi* 君子, who eschews solving problems or eliminating disagreement by use of force. Instead, guided by principles of humaneness (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義), he uses well-founded arguments, and he does this in a becoming way, displaying no show of superiority. Moreover, the *junzi* highly values human dignity (*tianjue* 天爵, literally "nobility of Heaven"), i.e. individual moral autonomy, not giving in to the temptations of power, fame, public reputation, or wealth. Similar ideas were developed in European history. Evidently such ideal persons would be pacifists, but they are individuals, whereas wars concern whole nations and masses of people. So which role does, and can, the ideal individual actually play if it comes to the question of war? Is not there a vast difference between ideal individual character and behaviour on the one side, and an individual's actual position and options (possibilities) with regard to war on the other? As to Chinese ethics and history: did the notion of *junzi* have any influence on concepts and occurrences of pacifism and war? And if so, in what respect? And how should we understand the *junzi's* ideas about punishment and wars led in the name of humaneness?

In short, taking as starting point and focusing on the "Confucian" concept of *junzi,* I deal with what may be called "individual pacifism"—or more precisely, individual rejection or renunciation *of war*—and the impact such individual pacifism can and ought to have on decisions about war and peace. In so doing, I also speculate about combining a "rule of virtue" with a "rule of law", thereby considering the role of individuals in 21st century wars. Finally, I utilize my results to propose a notion of pacifism that sharply contrasts with contemporary arguments in favour of wars, including those for uncompromising wars of defence.

Keywords: war, pacifism (renunciation of war), humaneness, ideal individual, governments

Konfucijanski ideal osebe (osebnosti) in pacifizem

Izvleček

Tako imenovano konfucijanstvo (*rujia* 儒家) je razvilo pojem idealne osebe (osebnosti), *junzi* 君子, ki se izogiba reševanju problemov ali odpravljanju nesoglasij z uporabo sile.

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Namesto tega, v skladu z načeli sočlovečnosti (*ren* 仁) in pravičnosti (*yi* 義), uporablja utemeljene argumente in to počne na primeren način, brez izkazovanja večvrednosti. Poleg tega *junzi* visoko ceni človeško dostojanstvo (*tianjue* 天爵, dob. »plemenitost neba«), to je individualno moralno avtonomijo, in se ne podreja skušnjavam moči, slave, javnega ugleda ali bogastva. Podobne ideje so se razvile tudi v evropski zgodovini. Očitno bi bili takšni idealni ljudje pacifisti, vendar pa so to le posamezniki, medtem ko vojne zadevajo cele narode in večje množice ljudi. Kakšno vlogo torej dejansko igra in sploh lahko igra idealni posameznik, ko gre za vprašanje vojne? Ali ni med idealnim značajem in vedenjem posameznika na eni ter dejanskim položajem in možnostmi (izbire) posameznika v zvezi z vojno na drugi strani velika razlika? Kar zadeva kitajsko etiko in zgodovino: ali je pojem *junzi* vplival na pojmovanje ter pojavljanje pacifizma in vojne? Če da, v kakšnem smislu? In kako naj razumemo *junzijeve* ideje o kaznovanju ter vojnah, ki se dogajajo v imenu sočlovečnosti?

Na kratko, »konfucijanski« pojem *junzi* si jemljem za izhodišče in fokus ter skozenj obravnavam to, kar bi lahko imenovali »individualni pacifizem« – ali natančneje, individualno zavračanje *vojne* oziroma odpoved *vojni* – ter vpliv, ki ga tak individualni pacifizem lahko ima in bi ga moral imeti na odločitve o vojni in miru. Podajam tudi razmislek o združevanju »vladavine kreposti« z »vladavino prava« ter s tem o vlogi posameznikov v vojnah 21. stoletja. Nazadnje na podlagi svojih ugotovitev predlagam pojem pacifizma, ki je v ostrem nasprotju s sodobnimi argumenti v prid vojnam, vključno s tistimi, ki zagovarjajo nekompromisne obrambne vojne.

Ključne besede: vojna, pacifizem (odpoved vojni), sočlovečnost, idealni posameznik, vlade

Necessary Presuppositions and Foundations of Pacifism

Without adequate individual education *and* public, or political, freedom of mind and opinion, pacifism cannot develop. To be more precise: without an education that teaches solving problems by ways of argument, i.e. reliance on logic and general experience, especially everyday experience, and not by force or violence, and/or without a regime and public media that allow for the free expression of different views/convictions and a free exchange of arguments, a pacifist state (i.e., citizens who make a state a pacifist organization) will never come into being. In particular, individual education and the public expression of different views *must* include information about opposing theories and positions of other states, ideally also *from* these other states.

There are many pacifist theories, among them Kant's (1724–1804) impressive *Eternal Peace,* but there has never existed a radically pacifist state. There have been pacifist movements, but without lasting effect. Instead, even schoolbooks of countries such as Japan and China present one-sided views of their common history. By the way, this was the same with the schoolbooks of the German Democratic

Republic (i.e. East Germany) and the German Federal Republic (i.e. West Germany). Arabian or Palestinian and Israeli education, Russian and Ukrainian, Chinese and American education and politics, for example, are of a kind that makes respective mutual understanding almost impossible if people have no access to information *from* the "other side". No wonder that even the two World Wars, Vietnam War, Second Iraq War, wars in the Near East, and the many wars in Africa, to mention only a view, did not prevent the outbreak of the Ukrainian and Gaza wars. In sum, and to say the least, a large number of the people of these countries simply lacked the information and, decisive, the pacifist education that would have enabled them to disbelieve (or at least reflect critically on) the official war propaganda, or, in other words, that would have made it impossible for the political powers to force "their people" into a war.

The word "pacifism" is used in different ways. For instance, in Germany politicians and scholars use qualifications like "pragmatic pacifism" or "enlightened pacifism". But such expressions often serve to justify a war. Adherents of such positions regard radical opponents to any kind of war as hopelessly naïve, or even argue that their views are dangerous, actually encouraging other states to attack. When I speak of pacifism, I always refer to a conviction or position that radically rejects war. One need not reject individual self-defence, but can nevertheless *consistently* reject war. In Germany, the state defended compulsory military service by arguing that whoever approves of violent self-defence must also approve of war, for there could arise situations in which one, attacked in a war, could not but defend oneself by killing the attacker—an evidently invalid argument.

As far as I know, there has never existed a pacifist state in "Chinese" history. From the wars between the Shang 商 and the Zhou 周 (during the 11th century BCE) up until that between the Communists and Guomindang 国民党, many wars have occurred. There exist of course theories of peace, and perhaps certain Daoist lineages come close to a pacifist theory in demanding that one ought not to infer with the "natural way" of things. In such theories, wars are considered "unnatural" occurrences that result from (unacceptable) interference with self-organized (and self-determined) developments. This is not to say that such Daoist "schools" recommended interference with "unnatural" occurrences aiming at re-establishing natural states (or conditions). They rather recommended withdrawal from any participation in public life. Such withdrawal is of course, as far as it was or is possible, an individual reaction to a war that can probably be found in all civilizations that are not determined by what may be called a martial spirit (as *perhaps* the Alexandrian Macedonia). It may be protest or simple resignation, motivated by fear, disgust, ethical convictions, and so on. The *rujia* 儒家 (so-called Confucianism, but more appropriately called Ruism) condemned what it regarded as aggressive war but justified defensive war, especially if the defence, in the *rujia* view, was led in the name of *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義. However, the *rujia*

notion of defensive war was somewhat questionable, for it permitted (or even demanded) attacking a country that, according to the *rujia*, gravely violated *ren* and/or *yi*, even if this country had not attacked (and did not plan to attack) one's own country (see Paul 2003). This notion may remind one of the contemporary idea of humane intervention that was utilized to justify the "Western" violation of international law by attacking Yugoslavia (in the 1990s) or Libya (in 2011). *Humaneness overrules law is the guiding norm in such cases.*

Instead of dealing with Daoist or *rujia* theories of war and peace that do not include any *uncompromising* theory of *pacifism*, I prefer to discuss the *rujia* notion of an ideal person (*junzi* 君子) who, perhaps in contradiction to *rujia* intentions, by only slight modification would make an ideal pacifist. Put another way: the *rujia* theory of learning (from others) *and* of self-perfection can be understood as guidance for becoming a pacifist (*though this was probably not intended*). Since one of the basic *rujia* ideas of government is the notion of a rule of virtue, this idea emphasizes the role of the individuals in power, thus supporting the idea of the importance of becoming a *junzi*. It also establishes a connection (even a logical one) between individual and state (government) pacifism. However, the idea of a rule of virtue sharply contrasts with the idea of rule of law. This points to certain well-known problems.

After sketching the *rujia* notion of *junzi*, I argue that *consistent with the basic features* of this notion, and leaving aside that *rujia* philosophers advocated what they regarded as wars in the name of humaneness, being a *junzi* amounts to being a pacifist. Then I discuss the relations between the concepts of rule of virtue and rule of law, thereby also referring to recent and contemporary wars. In the final section I propose combining the elements "education", "ideal (pacifist) person", "rule of virtue", and "rule of law" to formulate an uncompromising theory of pacifism. Much of what I say may be well known. In earlier publications, I have already addressed some of the same topics, especially the *rujia* notion of *junzi*. What is perhaps "new", is the attempt to *utilize* these ideas to *develop* a comprehensive notion of an uncompromising pacifism that could be of systematic, and thus actual, relevance.

To emphasize an important aim, often misunderstood or even rejected: I am *not* simply contextually interpreting Chinese theories or describing occurrences in Chinese history, but attempt to utilize Chinese philosophy (more precisely: philosophy developed in China) by abstracting from its particular theoretical and historical contexts to develop a systematic concept of universally valid presuppositions of pacifism. Such a concept need not neglect the cultural particularities that could and ought to be preserved, for otherwise inhumanity would increase instead of being diminished. For instance, different (peaceful) religious beliefs could of course exist side by side.

The Ideal *Rujia* Character (*Junzi*) as a Peace-Loving Virtuous and Wise Person(ality)

Like several other theories, classic *rujia* philosophy, as put forward in the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, and *Xunzi* 荀子, emphasizes the importance of learning. Perhaps John Locke (1632–1704) and "modern" Behaviourism, and the idea of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, may be regarded as (at least implicitly) similar theories. However, there is a significant difference. Classic *rujia* does not maintain that humans are merely product of environmental influences (determinations). In other words, according to classic *rujia*, learning is not merely a function of environmental (external) factors, but also a function of inborn faculties shared by all humans as human beings. While the *Lunyu* and *Mengzi* maintain that we are by nature good, and that this is the basis and guarantee that, in principle, all of us are able to become humane and righteous persons, the *Xunzi* maintains that we are by nature bad, but since this classic also states that, in principle, *everybody* can become a *junzi*, and furthermore clearly implies that this is possible because everybody has *by nature* the respective abilities, the Mencian and Xunzian notions of the good and bad nature of man turn out to be simply results of different language uses (see Paul 1990, 116, note 169). The fact that Behaviourism has been thoroughly and definitely refuted, strengthens the idea that *all humans* can become humane and righteous persons, *since, independent from environment, all of them possess by nature* respective capabilities.

A new investigation entitled "The Evolution of Violence" perhaps supports the *rujia* approach. It comes to the conclusion that during 99% of the 2.5 million years of human evolution there was no war, and that it is *only a small number of individuals* who are actually responsible for wars—for initiating wars and forcing people to engage in them—while the vast majority wants peace (Meller, Michel and van Schaik 2024, 46, 330).[1] It is not that humans are by nature bad that wars occur. And wars are no inescapable human fate. Though Xunzi (3rd century BCE) and Kant held that (in a certain sense) humans are by nature bad, they also showed that a humane world is possible. The question of human nature is at best misleading. We are neither devils nor angels. In sum: it is a fact that it is certain *individuals* (especially powerful rulers and politicians) who are ultimately to blame for the occurrence of war. *They want war.*

Now, one thing is clear, trivial and evident, and it is precisely this point that the *Xunzi* emphasizes: without learning, nobody can become an ideal person, a *junzi*. It is because of this reason that the *Xunzi* stresses that education is help,

1 The authors refer to the evolution of the species *homo* since about 2,5 million years ago. As to the more than 300.000 years old history of the *homo sapiens*, wars occurred only during the last 4% of this period.

and ought to be understood as such. Thereby, learning comprises learning from others *and* cultivating oneself. "Others" are teachers, friends, and even accidental acquaintances. To Confucius (551–479 BCE) is attributed the saying: "When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them" (*Analects* n.d., "Shu Er", 22). Thinking of cases such as Caspar Hauser or "wolf-children", one may add that even survival would be impossible without learning, without instruction by others. "Oneself" can refer to one's own attempts of cultivation, such as by intensively and persistently studying teachings and practicing certain kinds of behaviour.

To put it plainly: without instruction by others, we cannot develop into humane beings, and probably not even survive. Instruction is thus a kind of help and ought to be thankfully acknowledged as such. Now, what precise and specific goals should be pursued and what methods should be applied in learning, i.e. education and self-cultivation? How, and in what sense, could this contribute to "generating" pacifists?

In my view the most impressive statement in this regard is found in the *Xunzi*. It says that whoever makes an assertion without supporting it by reason is looking for, provoking, or seeking a quarrelling. There are of course other translations/interpretations of "*bian er bu shuo zhe zheng ye*" (辯而不說者爭也) (*Xunzi* n.d., 4),[2] but in my opinion the meaning of the statement is clear, namely, that without rationally (logically and/or empirically) supporting a position, one "invites" violence. Applying the logical law of contraposition—by the way not only explicitly formulated and applied by Aristotle, but also in Chinese texts[3]—it follows that *whoever rationally justifies a position, does not provoke violence.* Of course, one evident implication of the statement is that one ought to avoid violence. Now, the quoted phrase and its conversion express a norm or maxim of ideal discussion or disputation and of how to solve problems "peacefully".[4] One may comment that everybody would agree with the Xunzian demand that problems should be solved non-violently, and that therefore such an idea does not mean much if not explained in detail. However, the *Xunzi* offers an elaborate and detailed explanation of how conflicts and problems should *and could* peacefully be solved by argumentative discourse. But before turning to this explanation, I must come back to the *Xunzi*'s (and to a certain extent also to the *Lunyu*'s and *Mengzi's*) theory of education, for after all: *the capability to solve problems by argumentative discourse presupposes adequately educated participants*.

2 More "literal": "Who discusses/argues without explaining, [provokes] quarrelling." In my understanding, I follow Köster (1967, 30).

3 See Paul (2022, 53). This law is applied already in the *Shijing* 詩經.

4 From a general logical point of view, this would also imply peacefully solving the conflicts that arise between different countries.

According to classic *rujia,* education and/or teaching could mean conveying knowledge, admonishing, criticizing, and/or exercising influence by being an exemplary example (role model)[5] of right and good behaviour. Since everybody can make mistakes, classic *rujia* emphasizes the necessity and importance of criticism. This is to say that, if one is wrong, one ought to be "confronted" with views (convictions, positions, etc.) and/or practices that contradict one's own convictions and behaviour. That one's own convictions or behaviour are wrong can only be realized by being told or shown what is "right". Generally speaking, the one-sidedness which results from a closed, uninformed mind ought to be avoided. But one can avoid this only if there are different sources of instruction. Even superiors, rulers included, if they severely violate *ren* or *yi,* ought to be admonished. The *Xunzi* takes into account that we (usually) do not appreciate being criticized, but (as indicated) argues that we should realize that justified criticism is help, and that one therefore ought to be thankful for it. *Education, teaching, and instructing ought to be carried out in a rational and, to avoid emotional resistance, becoming way and thankfully regarded as help*.

There is, however, one problem with the *rujia* notion of *junzi*. This normative notion not only permits but even asks for violent action against those the *rujia* considers incorrigible opponents, and it advocates attacking a state (country) that severely violates the virtues of *ren* and *yi*. Within the historical context of the Warring states, this can be understood and explained. As mentioned above, even in the 21st century the idea of a humane intervention is justified and followed by certain politicians and scholars. *Rujia* philosophers conceived of such wars as a particular kind of defensive wars, namely wars by which virtue is defended. These wars are not led to protect one's own country—which would be justified only if one's country were a virtuous one. In other words, classic *rujia* (at least implicitly) held that one's own country would deserve to be attacked by another one if one's country gravely violated the rules of humaneness, and if the attack aimed at (re-)establishing a humane government, etc. However, history has shown that even wars that were *not a reaction to an attack by a foreign aggressor,* have been justified as defensive, although they were in fact aggressive. But such deliberations do not alter the fact that classic *rujia* advocated a too narrow notion of freedom of mind and tolerance that ultimately cannot be justified. Since, from a logical point of view, Xunzi's conception of argumentative problem solving permits for a wider notion, and since the *Book of Xunzi* itself is open to the historical changes of a doctrine, it is legitimate to utilize its teachings by way of a generalized abstraction.

In sum, the *ultimate goal of education and learning* is to make a person an ideal human being (*junzi*), a person who in thinking and acting follows the *Dao.* The

5 Ames and Rosemont (1998, 60, 62) translate *junzi* as "exemplary person".

Dao is the right way of human thought and action, and the rules and maxims guiding both. It is characterized by humaneness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), *pleasing* (*conventionally established and accepted "beautiful"*) *behaviour* (*li* 禮), and knowledge (*zhi* 智). In the given context it should suffice to state that the virtues referred to evidently imply that a *junzi* should behave (think and/or act) humanely (benevolently, empathically, generously, etc.), justly, appreciatively, and based on valid knowledge. In what follows, I offer some detailed explanations of these terms.

Education for Peace

Discussion, Dispute, and Criticism as Means of Non-violent Problem Solving

According to the *rujia* classics, and especially to the *Xunzi*, the participants in an acceptable (or ideal) discussion (a *peaceful* dispute) should live up to the following standards and abide by the following rules.

1. Heart-and-mind (*xin* 心) should be in harmony, i.e. accord, with the *Dao* (*xin he yu dao* 心 合 於 道) (e.g., *Lunyu* n.d., 16.6; *Xunzi* n.d., 22 ("Zhengming"); Hutton 2014, 241; Dubs 1972, 500; Watson 1967, 147; Köster 1967, 294.
2. Statements (or propositions) should be in harmony with the heart-and-mind (*shuo he yu xin* 說 合 於 心). That is to say that one should be upright, honest, and trustworthy (*xin, zhi*). One ought to live up to one's words, and one's actions should be in line with them. The Chinese expression *xin* 信 implies all these meanings.
3. One should be modest, self-critical, polite and tolerant (*kuan* 寬, *rong* 容), explaining things to others with sympathy / benevolence (*yi ren xin shuo* 以仁心說) and in a beautiful, becoming way (*wen*, following *li*), while listening to them patiently, attentively and eager to learn (*yi xue xin ting* 以學心聽).
4. One ought to take into account the concrete and specific circumstances of a discussion, especially by watching others' facial expressions (*Xunzi* n.d., 1; Dubs 1972, 18; Watson 1967, 21–23; Köster 1967, 8–10; Hutton 2014, 6–7).
5. One's statements should be meaningful and as comprehensible as possible, namely:
   (5a) clear, without mystification, sophisms and paradoxes, unambiguous, objective and coherent (*lei* 類, *lun* 論, *fa* 法, *ci he yu shuo* 辭合於說);
   (5b) compatible with the established conventions of naming (designation) and grammar (*zhengming* 正名);

(5c) free of contradictions (*bu fu* 不拂, *ci he yu shuo* 辭合於說);
(5d) supported by reasons, for otherwise quarrels could arise (*bian er bu shuo zhe zheng ye* 辯而不說者爭也) (*Xunzi* n.d., 4);[6] and
(5e) compatible with human experience and sensory perception (*yuan tian guan* 緣天官), implying that what is conceived of in the same way (*tong shi* 同實) ought to be named (designated) in the same way (*tong ming* 同名), etc.

The relevant passage in the *Xunzi* runs:

> When the heart-and-mind accords with the *dao*, when explanations accord with the heart-and-mind, when phrases [*ci*] accord with explanations, when the correct designations [*zheng ming*] are formed into combinations, when terms are founded on realities and are [thus] understandable, when differences are distinguished without going too far, when classifications are made without contradicting what is right [*bu bei* 不悖], then one can listen in a refined manner, and in disputating [*bian* 辨] can exhaust all reasons. (*Xunzi* n.d., 22; Dubs 1972, 500–03; Watson 1967, 147–49); Knoblock 1988-1994, III: 133; Köster 1967, 293–95; Hutton 2014, 241)
>
> 心合於道，說合於心，辭合於說. 正名而期，質請而喻，辨異而不過，推類而不悖. 聽則合文，辨則盡故.

Rule (2), which implies that speech should be in harmony, or concur, with the *Dao*, reminds one of the correspondence theory of truth according to which a statement is true if it accords with reality. Further, like rule (5), rule (2) seems to imply that statements must be true to be acceptable. (5c) can be interpreted as a criterion of formal truth. However, it would be wrong to conclude that classic *rujia* ethics demanded that speech *must* be true to be acceptable. Given the aim to realize *Dao* and *ren*, the crucial criterion of acceptability was not truth but moral effectiveness. Lies, especially white lies, were regarded as tolerable means for furthering *ren*, with the *Lunyu* providing a number of examples (*Lunyu* n.d., 13.18, 17.20).

To complete my reconstruction of the *rujia* methods of ideal disputation, i.e. argumentation as non-violent ways of problem solving, I recall that, according to the three classics, disputations should not be insincere or carping, and *not be guided, determined, or marked by such things as lust for power, anxiety, longing for*

6 More literally: "Who discusses/argues without explaining, [provokes] quarrelling." In my understanding, I follow Köster (1967, 30).

fame, personal relations, material interests, flattery, and insults. Lust for power especially can be, and in history often was, a source of war and brutal violence.

One cannot overestimate the maxim that education, and in particular criticism, must be carried out in a becoming way. Criticized people must not feel insulted or disrespected. They must not get the impression that the criticizers themselves do not live up to the norms they profess (which would ultimately amount to violating the law of non-contradiction), or that that the criticizers (want to) display intellectual and/or moral superiority, and (thus) force them into "acceptance".

Mencius' and Kant's Conceptions of Human Dignity as Anti-war Norms

There is another, *rather fundamental,* approach to theoretically solving the problem of war and peace. This is suggested by two of the most eminent philosophers from "China" and "the West", namely Mencius (4th century BCE) and Kant. Both assert, and emphasize, that all humans—as humans—possess dignity, and both demand that this dignity ought to be respected and protected. Moreover, contemporary Western constitutions such as the German one (which is strongly influenced by Kant) are based on the conviction that "human dignity is inviolable", implying that it must not be violated. Now, *if this would be taken seriously, compulsory military service and war would be impossible. Even defensive wars would be impossible, for there is no war which does not violate human dignity.* One horrible example is the current war in Gaza, which Israel, many European countries, the German government included, and the USA regard as a defensive war. This war neglects the dignity of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The Israeli military kills masses of innocent people, children included, disables them, destroys their houses, drives them from their homes and forces them to fight for food and water.[7] It even bombs hospitals and schools, justifying this by explaining that Hamas uses them as military bases. However, "modern" missile and drone wars often leave the attacked military no alternative. If it does not have the means to defend itself against missiles and drones, it would be completely destroyed if it did not hide itself and/or keep its "equipment" in civilian sites. Missile and drone wars are no longer fought on battlefields or at sea. Since all politicians and military leaders know this very well, and moreover usually pay lip-service to the idea of human dignity, they, by approving missile and drone attacks, intentionally and consciously let innocent people be killed (i.e. murdered), and if not killed otherwise disgraced and humiliated. To just murder persons, of course, means to attribute no value to them as human beings. However, and to

7 I wrote this in May 2025. On July 21, the UK and 25 other nations published a joint statement on the Gaza war in which they accused the Israeli government of "depriving Gazans of human dignity" (Gov.UK 2025). On October 10, a cease-fire was arranged, but has been violated several times.

avoid a grave misunderstanding, criticizing the war in Gaza does in no way mean (or imply) justifying the Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the massacre of Israelis.

Though my argument that the problem of war and peace could be solved if human dignity were respected may be logically valid, it may indeed appear rather naïve, utopian, or simply unrealistic. But again: appropriate education could help in establishing conditions favourable to pursuing the goal of taking the protection of human dignity seriously. Since all humans very well understand what oppression, derogation, humiliation, or simply pain means, and since this has been explained for thousands of years in different teachings of different cultures, the norm of inviolable human dignity is easily appreciated, and thus its value may even be felt. In other words: if one is not in a position to act as one pleases, personal individual emotions strongly support this norm.

I have dealt with the concept of human dignity rather extensively and in detail elsewhere,[8] but some explanations may be warranted. Though Kant's concept of human dignity may be rather well known, the respective Mencian notion is not. Some scholars even deny that he developed a notion of individual human dignity, maintaining that he put forward a "mere" role ethics.[9] But it simply cannot be denied that Mencius asserts that every individual human—by virtue of being human—possesses a "nobility of Heaven" (*tianjue* 天爵) that nobody can take away from him. Only the individual human being himself (or herself) can violate and even destroy this nobility by disgracing or humiliating himself (or herself).[10] On this point, Mencius's notion differs significantly from the Kantian one, according to which it is impossible to lose one's dignity. However, regarding the meaning of disgrace and humiliation, both are in almost complete agreement, and are easily understood, for they both maintain that such derogation consists in letting ones morally significant decisions and actions be determined by egoistic interests or other people. For instance, one ought not to be influenced by any interest in power, fame or money. One must not prostitute oneself, not accept bribery, nor bribe others, not to mention that one must not murder or torture others. In sum, with any such actions one would, according to Mencius and Kant, disrespect one's own dignity. Mencius went even further than Kant in this regard, stating that one should commit suicide rather than accept being not respected. *Ideal Ruist persons simply do not, and must not, permit to be humiliated, and must not humiliate themselves. They defend or protect their individual dignity at all costs.*[11] Sima

8 See for instance Paul (2024; 2022;1990), and Ommerborn, Paul and Roetz (2011).

9 So does Gassmann (2016).

10 See Mencius (n.d., "Gaozi I", 16 and 17).

11 Kant and Schiller (1759–1805) would rather "idealistically" have argued that one should try to withstand humiliation by making oneself aware that one's dignity simply cannot be destroyed. In other words, like a martyr one should behave as if one's fate were one's own decision.

Qian (c. 145 BCE–c. 86 BCE) and others basically agreed with Mencius. Emperors like the first Ming emperor Hongwu 洪武帝 (1328–1398, ruled 1368–1398) hated Mencius's teachings. This emperor even had his own edition of the *Book Mencius* produced in which all passages that advocated insisting on one's moral autonomy, even if this contradicted the politics of a ruler, were omitted. In other words: there exists a strong Chinese ethical tradition according to which disgrace (in the sense of not defending one's dignity and/or public reputation) must be avoided, even if this means killing oneself.

The extraordinary emphasis with which Mencius argued that it is oneself (and not anyone else) who is responsible for maintaining one's moral integrity, leads to the conclusion (also pointed out, for instance, by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)) that lasting peace can only be achieved if (almost) every individual (honestly) wants it. Ultimately, it is not certain groups, and not even governments, that are responsible for peace—it is every single individual person. This, in turn, again shows the necessity of adequate education of all people.

In sum: since war would be impossible if individual human dignity were to be respected, and since the idea of individual human dignity has been, in a similar way, convincingly put forward in different times and traditions—with classic *rujia* highlighting this idea of dignity[12]—and since this idea, especially in its understanding of derogation, concurs with common knowledge and feelings, it could certainly be used for developing a viable and convincing pacifism. Its so-called "idealistic" or "utopian" features notwithstanding, the idea of individual human dignity ought to become a central part of an education that aims at making war finally impossible.

Deficiencies of the Rule of Virtue and the Rule of Law

Xunzi advocated a "rule of virtue", i.e. government by wise and noble men (*junzi*), and so did Plato (c. 428–348 BCE) in arguing that philosophers should rule. In contrast, Karl Popper (1902–1994), strongly criticizing Plato, argued in favour of a rule of law (see Popper 1966). The basic intention, however, was the same: to

12 I often wonder about the great interest in finding out and emphasizing differences between "Western" and "Eastern" cultures, even at the cost of denying such evident and significant similarities that exist between the Mencian and Kantian notions of individual human dignity. To be sure, it is Western scholars in particular who do this. But why? Are they afraid of being accused of reading "Western" ideas in Chinese texts? Afraid of being accused of a kind of cultural centrism? Of cultural "imperialism"? Or victims of their interest in finding an existentially significant alternative to what they (wrongly) regard as Western logo-centrism? Looking for "Eastern" spirituality? The so-called Chinese modern Confucian philosophers tend instead to stressing the similarities between Mencius and Kant, to mention only Mou Zongsan (Mou Tsung-san) 牟宗三 (1909–1995), Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930–2021), and Li Minghui (Lee Ming-huei) 李明辉.

make sure that government serves the people, i.e. that it is humane, and that rulers do not abuse their power. Adherents to the concept of a rule of virtue believe that virtuous and wise people live up to such demands *simply because of their virtue and wisdom*. Adherents to the concept of a rule of law are convinced that all rulers and politicians are liable to sooner or later falling to the temptations of power if not subjected to laws that preclude this. Now, the second war against Iraq, the war between Russia and Ukraine, and the war in Gaza show beyond doubt that individual politicians (in these cases George W. Bush, Putin, and Netanyahu), *in spite of existent laws* (or in spite of formally being subjected to a rule of law), can ruthlessly abuse their power. Even the democratic systems in the US and Israel cannot prevent this. The case of Putin is of course a special one. While the US and Israel are certainly not acceptable democracies, Russia is this even less. In other words, the rule of law, as it exists in the 21st century, is proving to be inefficient even if comes to the question of the life and death of thousands, if not millions of people. This does not only apply to countries like the US and Israel, but even those like Germany where individual politicians (e.g. Merz, Pistorius, Baerbock, Strack-Zimmermann), probably against the will of the majority of people, in one way or the other support, or further, involvement in wars. Though individual politicians who support war do so, as they say, in the name of humaneness, their motives are at least questionable, for while they are usually the last who suffer from a war, they accept that more and more people will be killed, tortured, raped, severely injured, driven out of their homes, suffer hunger and thirst, their houses destroyed, not to mention all the other evils war inevitably brings with. Tolstoy was of the opinion that the leading politicians of a state, *because of the character* (*structure*) *of a state as state*, could not but fall to the temptations of power. Consequently, he favoured a kind of anarchism. And indeed, 21st century wars urge us to look for a form of government, or more generally, a form of organization of human societies in general, that in a new way takes into account both the virtues and wisdom of politicians, and rules that make it actually impossible that the state government has the power to initiate or engage in war. The classic *rujia* idea of *junzi* certainly is a notion of an ideal politician. Even Chinese history, however, shows that such a politician never determined Chinese politics. And if there ever were such ideal persons in Chinese history they did not become rulers. Chinese emperors who claimed to admire Confucius paid only lip service to classic *rujia* ethics. The Chinese saying *wai ru nei fa* 外儒内法—outwardly *ru*, i.e. "Confucian" and humane, inwardly/in truth *fa,* i.e. actually Legalist (and cruel)—expresses just this.

There is no alternative to striving for both: the education of ideal persons and a rule of law that excludes being violated by politicians such as Bush, Putin, and Netanyahu—leaving aside the even much more severe cases of Hitler, Stalin and Mao (who were no part of a rule-of-law system). But here we are in a vicious cycle. If there is no adequate education, governments—i.e. the people who make up

a government—will in all probability gravely violate rules of humaneness. And if (an actual) government gravely violates rules of humaneness, it will probably not permit any critical education. In a state of war, pacifist education is impossible.

Russian, Israeli, Palestinian, and even contemporary German politics and public media do not offer their people, and especially their school children, all the different, and often contradicting, information necessary to arrive at a logically and empirically founded valid conclusion. One has to know about all the reasons why a war was started, and about all the evils that not only one's own people, but also those of the "enemy", suffer. One even has to know the evils of an uncompromising war of defence. Hence, it is particularly notable that those people who need such information are prevented by their own governments and media from accessing it. To put it briefly: states that lead wars do not offer sufficient information about the alternative of abstaining from war, and lacking such information people are liable to believe in war propaganda.

Up until now neither the idea of a rule of virtue nor the idea of a rule of law has prevented wars. First of all, there has never been a rule of virtue in human history. In other words, there have never existed states that were actually ruled by ideal persons. Either rulers who seemed to be ideal persons ultimately fell to the temptations of power, or the existing conditions simply did not permit an ideal person to become a ruler. The idea of a rule of law has also proved problematic. Democracies like the US are responsible for a number of cruel wars and even for systematic torture, thus violating some of the most important international laws we have. To a certain extent, classic *rujia* and Daoist criticism of (or scepticism regarding) law is certainly true: there are always people who "ingeniously" find ways to violate a law, and the more sophisticated a law is, the more "intelligent" are its violations. Awareness of this problem may lead to an ever increasing number and specification of laws, finally severely restricting human freedom. (Many Germans, for example, regard the German laws about environmental protection as a kind of dictatorship.) Even more problematic, however, is the fact that whoever holds power *can use existing laws to undermine the rule of law*, especially by more or less doing away with an efficient division of power(s), or by simply enticing a majority of parliamentarians to vote for increasing their power.

How to Establish Civilizations that Make War Impossible. The Lessons of Xunzi, Mencius, Kant and Popper in Light of 21st Century Wars

To repeat: without a kind of education that realizes the goals put forward in the *Xunzi*, as outlined above, lasting peace would in all probability be impossible. These goals can be summed up as the aim of making a person a *junzi* without,

however, the animosity even classic Ruism showed in dealing with its philosophical opponents. This conclusion may appear somewhat old-fashioned or untimely, but it remains valid (or true). It simply amounts to stating that without knowledgeable and morally integer politicians, peace cannot be safely secured, and that without the appropriate education—which presupposes/implies appropriate general education—such politicians cannot be "produced". But even in a country like Germany, such an education is next to impossible. For, and this is the above-mentioned vicious cycle, such an education already presupposes a government of *junzi*.

Perhaps all that can be safely said is that combining a rule of law and a rule of virtue must include a balance and division of power, and criteria and procedures for selecting only virtuous and knowledgeable people as politicians. The history of democracies offers a wealth of ideas for establishing a rule of law. However, how to select "ideal politicians" without interfering with a person's "privacy"? And by making sure that the person will not use lies to initiate or support war?

There are of course some possibilities to exclude evil or unsuitable people from becoming rulers, ministers, governors, or parliamentarians. They are well known, but as far as I know were never completely realized. To qualify for an influential political position one ought to have concluded at least basic school education, must have spent some time in a "real job", must not be professional politician, and must (if elected) not break election promises.

To come to a final conclusion: until now, all so-called realistic or practical policies have failed to achieve lasting peace. This is because as long as military states, and/or democracies like the present ones, exist, wars will occur. And such states will only then be replaced by (organized) communities that can and will be absolutely peaceful ones, if people are offered appropriate education. Thus, from a logical point of view the best thing—and ironically, the only *really realistic* way to achieve and secure "eternal peace"—is to step by step try to realize the ideal of moral integrity.[13] This ideal should be understood as the most important guiding idea of politics. Though politicians like Gandhi (1869–1948), Willy Brandt (1913–1992), Mandela (1918–2013), or Gorbachev (1931–2022) were certainly not ideal people or personalities, their international politics was not power politics. In this respect, it was a step in the right direction. However, it was not accompanied by an education for peace. On the contrary. In 2025, education in India, Pakistan, Germany, and Russia even tells, and "teaches", young people that they ought to prepare for war.

13 To avoid any misunderstanding: this does not mean that ascetic, oppressive regimes of morality should be established.

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Pacifism in Mengzian Political Philosophy

*GUO Yuchen**

Abstract

This paper reviews the prevalent interpretative approaches to Mengzi's political philosophy in contemporary academia, including realism, just war theory, and just war pacifism, and proposes an alternative interpretative framework based on positive-pragmatic pacifism. The main contributions of this study are twofold: First, it introduces an often-overlooked perspective of positive pacifism, arguing that the classification of Mengzian political philosophy should focus not only on his stance on war, but also on the pacifist nature in his theory of benevolent governance. Second, it employs Olaf Müller's pragmatic pacifism framework to interpret Mengzi's stance on war, which aligns with the pacifist nature and pragmatic flexibility inherent in Mengzian political philosophy. The paper argues that the essence of Mengzian pacifism lies not in establishing unattainable criteria for just wars, but in his fundamental opposition to violence and his persistent pursuit of a peaceful order in real politics.

Keywords: Mengzi, Confucianism, pacifism, realism, just war theory

Pacifizem v Mencijevi politični filozofiji

Izvleček

Članek obravnava prevladujoče interpretativne pristope k Mencijevi politični filozofiji v sodobnih akademskih razpravah, vključno z realizmom, teorijo pravične vojne in pacifizmom pravične vojne, ter predlaga alternativni interpretativni okvir, utemeljen na pozitivno-pragmatičnem pacifizmu. Glavni doprinos pričujoče študije je dvojen. Prvič, uvaja pogosto prezrto perspektivo pozitivnega pacifizma in zagovarja, da se klasifikacija Mencijeve politične filozofije ne bi smela osredotočati zgolj na njegov odnos do vojne, temveč tudi na pacifistično naravo njegove teorije človečne vladavine. Drugič, ta študija uporabi okvir pragmatičnega pacifizma Olafa Müllerja za razlago Mencijevega odnosa do vojne, ki je v skladu s pacifistično naravo in pragmatično prilagodljivostjo, ki sta inherentni Mencijevi politični filozofiji. Članek izhaja iz predpostavke, po kateri bistvo Mencijevega pacifizma ni v postavljanju nedosegljivih meril za pravične vojne, temveč v njegovi temeljni zavrnitvi nasilja in v njegovem vztrajnem prizadevanju za takšno realno politiko, ki je osnovana na miroljubni urejenosti.

Ključne besede: Mencij, konfucijanstvo, pacifizem, realizem, teorija pravične vojne

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Introduction

Our era faces persistent conflict and instability. Despite a fragile global balance, war's threat endures. In this context, peace is an urgent subject for contemporary philosophical inquiry. Over 2,000 years ago, after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty, China's Warring States period experienced similar turmoil. Mengzi, like his contemporary philosophers, witnessed the realm under Heaven (*tiān xià* 天下) fall into prolonged disorder, and thus sought solutions to restore order under Heaven. From that crucible he developed a political philosophy that deeply shaped the Confucian tradition.

Given the relevance of Mengzi's thoughts to the issues of peace, contemporary scholars try to interpret his political philosophy through the lens of modern war theory. From this perspective, current academic interpretations primarily fall into three approaches: realism, just war theory, and pacifism.

Realism is grounded in the premises that power competition and security dilemmas among states are pervasive. States may rationally choose war under specific circumstances as an effective means to pursue national interests. Thus, rather than focusing on the morality of war, realism prioritizes strategic necessity in analysing and evaluating conflict. Ting-Mien Lee (2021) stands out as a proponent of this interpretation. She argues for moving beyond the traditional narrative that portrays Mengzi solely as a moral hero. Instead, by considering his historical role and political context, she positions him as a master of subversive war.

The just war theory approach maintains that in reality some wars can be morally justified, and seeks to establish the ethical criteria for such wars. This approach is the mainstream within current Mengzian scholarship. Many scholars[1] align with this view, though they diverge on the specific criteria Mengzi proposed and hold varying assessments of his political philosophy overall.

In contrast, the pacifist approach adheres in principle to an anti-war stance, asserting that, in general, war cannot be morally justified. Currently, only a small number of scholars, including Julia Ching (2004), Xinzhong Yao (2004), and Kurtis Hagen (2022), endorse this reading. However, their pacifist interpretation is based on just war theory. They contend that while Mengzi theoretically acknowledged the possibility of a morally justified war, the standards he set were so demanding that no war could meet these requirements in reality. Consequently, his stance ultimately led to pacifism. I will argue later that although Mengzi should be regarded as a pacifist, his approach is not the same as that of just war pacifism, which seeks to oppose wars by proposing unattainable criteria for just wars.

1 Such as Daniel Bell (2008a; 2008b), Tongdong Bai (2013), Sumner Twiss and Jonathan Chan (2015a; 2015b), Sungmoon Kim (2017), Sin Yee Chan (2015), Zhenren Ouyang (2007), and Ping-Cheung Lo (2024).

Building upon a critical review of existing scholarship, I will advance my argument defending a pacifist interpretation of Mengzian political philosophy. This interpretation unfolds along two dimensions. First, Mengzi's discourse on war should be understood within the broader framework of benevolent governance (*rén zhèng* 仁政), which itself should be regarded as positive pacifism, a perspective underappreciated in the current literature. Second, within the framework of benevolent governance, the issue of warfare is an exceptional circumstance arising in non-ideal conditions. I shall argue that pragmatic pacifism, as proposed by Olaf Müller (2017; 2022), can serve as a reasonable justification for certain limited military actions within the framework of positive pacifism.[2]

The following discussion will proceed in three parts. In the first, I will briefly present and critique Ting-Mien Lee's realist interpretation of Mengzi and reveal its fundamental misreading. In the second, I will review the basic arguments in the just war theory interpretation, and then examine the interpretative approach advocated by Kurtis Hagen, which categorises Mengzi as a just war pacifist. In the third, I shall elaborate in detail upon my pacifist interpretation, emphasising the positive pacifism in Mengzian political philosophy, and his pragmatic pacifist stance on warfare.[3]

Ting-Mien Lee's Realist Reading of the *Mengzi*

Lee (2021) argues that Mengzi should not be understood primarily as a moral philosopher in the traditional sense, but rather as a strategist of regime subversion serving the purpose of dynastic overthrow. Her argument can be summarized as follows.

First, Lee refers to the textual classification system of the *Hanshu: Yiwenzhi* (漢書: 藝文志, *Bibliographic Treatise of the Book of Han*). She observes that certain classic military texts were not classified under the "Military School" (*bīng jiā* 兵

2 Although I shall elaborate this further in the subsequent sections, it is necessary here to briefly clarify that within the pacifist schools—apart from absolute pacifism which opposes any war in an absolute sense—the other views at least acknowledge the necessity of some wars under specific circumstances. Therefore, discussing the permissibility of war under pacifism is not inherently contradictory.

3 Before proceeding, a brief methodological clarification is necessary. It must be emphasized that concepts like "realism", "pacifism", and "just war theory" are modern theoretical frameworks, and Mengzi himself did not construct his doctrines through the lens of modern war theory. Our application of these concepts to interpret Mengzi lies in our era's deep concern with issues of peace, and the aim of mining his thought for relevant intellectual resources. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that labels such as "pacifist" or "just war theorist" are merely interpretative tools used to focus on Mengzi's relevant insights, and should never be regarded as essentialist classifications of Mengzi's philosophy.

家) category, but were instead grouped alongside texts of the Confucian, Daoist, or Syncretist Schools (*zá jiā* 杂家). Consequently, she contends that the authors of these military texts shared common themes and concerns with the authors of the various philosophical masters' texts. She particularly notes that the *Liutao* (六弢, *Six Bow Cases*), later canonized as one of the "Seven Military Classics" (*Wujing Qishu* 武經七書), was classified under the Confucian category alongside the *Mengzi*. Therefore, she believes that interstate diplomacy and military strategy were equally central themes within Mengzian texts (Lee 2021, 89–90, 93).

However, this evidence appears problematic. Within the *Hanshu: Yiwenzhi*, the vast majority of military texts were categorized under the Military School. Only a small number, such as the *Weiliaozi* (尉繚子), were classified under the Syncretist School—a school whose thought inherently incorporated elements of military strategy.[4] The text Lee specifically highlights as Confucian, the *Liutao* (六弢), is recorded in the *Hanshu* as *Zhoushi Liutao* (周史六弢, *Six Bow-Cases of the Zhou Scribe*). While Yan Shigu's 顏師古 commentary identifies this as the later transmitted military text known as the *Liutao* (六韜[5]), this identification faces significant problems. Wang Zhen (2022, 120) points out that Ban Gu's 班固 explanation of *Zhoushi Liutao* clearly states it was composed "between [the reigns of] Kings Hui and Xiang [of Zhou], or during the time of King Xian, or that Kongzi inquired about it" (Ban and Yan 1962, 1725).[6] Modern scholarly consensus holds that the received text of the *Liutao* (六韜) was likely compiled at the Jixia Academy (*jì xià xué gong* 稷下學宮) in Qi, a period incompatible with the dates suggested for *Zhoushi Liutao* (周史六弢). Consequently, Wang Zhen argues that Yan Shigu's identification of *Zhoushi Liutao* with the later military text *Liutao* (六韜) is unreliable. Therefore, according to Ban Gu's taxonomy, Confucianism was fundamentally distinct from the Military School.

Second, Lee believes that the nature of Mengzi's thought was primarily shaped by two factors: first, the unique historical context of the Warring States period, and second, Mengzi's identity as a member of the scholar-official class (*shì* 士). As *shì*, Mengzi and his contemporary thinkers travelled among the states, hoping to win the favour of rulers and become their ministers. They were necessarily well-versed in diplomacy and military strategy, with the ultimate goal of assisting

4 Lee may misunderstand the classification of the *Sunzi* (孫子) text being placed under Daoism. Ban Gu's own annotation explicitly states that the *Sunzi* listed in the Daoist section was by "a person of the Six Kingdoms period", whereas the *Wu Sunzi* (吳孫子) classified under the Military School was by the Spring and Autumn period figure Sun Wu (孫武). Thus, the *Sunzi* categorized under Daoism is distinct from the received military text *Sunzi Bingfa* (孫子兵法, *The Art of War by Master Sun*).

5 Please note the difference between the two characters.

6 惠、襄之間，或曰顯王時，或曰孔子問焉。

rulers in achieving the subversive political aim of unifying all realms under Heaven. Lee highlights a key point:

> They are subversive in nature insofar as they are intended for the purpose of unification wars carried out by state rulers (namely, feudal lords), not by the Son of Heaven of the Zhou Dynasty. (Lee 2021, 90)

In Lee's view, while the Son of Heaven was still the nominal paramount ruler under Heaven at the time, Mengzi was encouraging the ruler of Qi to become the King of all under Heaven by launching wars to "liberate" the people of other states, constituting a subversive power struggle.

However, Lee overlooks a crucial historical event: the partition of the Zhou royal domain into the Eastern Zhou state (東周國) and Western Zhou state (西周國) in the second year of King Xian's (周顯王) reign (367 BCE). Jin Xueqing (2003, 258–59) points out that from this point onward, the Son of Heaven of Zhou completely lost control over the royal domain, becoming entirely a puppet residing within the state of Eastern Zhou; thereafter, the two Zhou states were equivalent to other feudal lords. Liu Xiang (劉向), in *Xin Xu: Shan Mou* (新序 善謀), states, "when Zhou declined, it was divided into two, no states under Heaven paid homage to it, and Zhou could not control it." (及周之衰，分為兩，天下莫朝，周不能制。)[7]

This means that after this event, the Zhou royal house had even lost its nominal status as the paramount ruler and was entirely reduced to a minor state. In other words, for most of Mengzi's lifetime (372–289 BCE), China *de facto* lacked a paramount ruler. Therefore, what Mengzi advocated as "becoming King of all realms under Heaven" (*wàng tiān xià* 王天下) was not a subversion of the Zhou dynasty, but rather an aspiration to end the chaotic age through benevolent governance.

Third, Lee points out Mengzi's different attitudes toward major and minor states: he advocated his ideal of "becoming the King under Heaven" only to powerful states like Qi and Wei, but never proposed the same to minor states such as Teng. When Duke Wen of Teng asked how a minor state should respond to foreign invasion, Mengzi offered only two choices: "surrender" or "resist unto death". Lee concludes that Mengzi viewed a war of unification as the path to end the era's chaos. He thus lacked interest in rulers of minor states and did not genuinely believe in the ideal of benevolent governance (Lee 2021, 93).

This argument requires clarification on two core issues: First, was Mengzi's ideal of "becoming the King under Heaven" only applicable to powerful states? Second, did Mengzi advocate unification through military force?

7 Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this paper are my own.

Regarding the first issue, Mengzi clearly states in 4A7 that if a small state were to model itself after King Wen of Zhou and implement benevolent governance for seven years, or a large state were to do so for five years, it would be sure to govern the realm under Heaven. This demonstrates that Mengzi believed the key to ruling the realm under Heaven lay in practicing benevolent governance rather than relying on state power.

> By emulating King Wen, a large state would need five years, and a small state seven years, to certainly govern the entire realm under Heaven. (Mengzi 4A7)
>
> 師文王，大國五年，小國七年，必為政於天下矣。

It is probable that the time mentioned in 4A7 is merely Mengzi's rhetoric, since Mengzi also mentioned in other texts that the process from practicing benevolent governance to becoming the King under Heaven requires the intergenerational accumulation of achievements and historical timing. However, this also does not deny the possibility of a small country ruling the realm under Heaven.

When Duke Wen of Teng, a virtuous monarch of a small country, faced threats from major states (1B14), Mengzi cited the example of King Tai evading the barbarian tribes by moving to Mount Qi:

> If you do good, among your descendants there will arise one who will become a True King. A noble person establishes foundational governance and transmits traditions for continuity. As for ultimate success, that lies with Heaven. (Mengzi 1B14)
>
> 苟為善，後世子孫必有王者矣。君子創業垂統，為可繼也。若夫成功，則天也。

This statement was by no means urging surrender, but instead gave hope to minor states through a transgenerational historical perspective: King Tai's relocation to Mount Qi allowed four generations to eventually overthrow Tyrant Zhou (紂王) and unify the realm under Heaven. Similarly, if Teng persistently implemented benevolent governance, even if Duke Wen did not succeed himself, his successors who persevered continuously could do so under benevolent governance.

On the second issue, Lee almost entirely overlooks the anti-war passages in the *Mengzi* and the stringent conditions Mengzi imposed on just military actions. These texts conclusively demonstrate that warfare was by no means the optimal means of unification advocated by Mengzi. For him, morality was never a

tool for legitimizing war but rather the core demand in his political philosophy. I will elaborate on Mengzi's conditions of just military actions later. Here, I first demonstrate his consistent anti-war stance.

Mengzi clearly reveals the essence of wars in his era: rulers sacrificing people's lives to fulfil their personal ambitions and desires, with actions constituting grave crimes of mass killing. Ministers who assist rulers in waging war are thus nothing but bandits of the people (*mín zéi* 民賊) deserving the severest penalties:

> Battling for territory fills the fields with corpses; battling for cities fills the cities with corpses. This is called 'leading the land to devour human flesh'—a crime for which death is insufficient punishment. Thus, those skilled in war deserve the highest penalty; those who form alliances among feudal lords come next ... (Mengzi 4A14)
>
> 爭地以戰，殺人盈野；爭城以戰，殺人盈城。此所謂率土地而食人肉，罪不容於死。故善戰者服上刑，連諸侯者次之。

Another crucial piece of evidence comes from *Mengzi* (2A3):

> Those who use force but pretend to be benevolent are hegemons. A hegemon must have a large state. Those who practice benevolence with virtuous character are kings. A king does not depend on a large state... Those who force others into submission through power do not win their hearts; they submit simply because they lack the force to resist. Those who subdue others through virtue make others feel genuine joy in heart and gain their sincere submission, just as the seventy disciples followed Kongzi …
>
> 以力假仁者霸，霸必有大國，以德行仁者王，王不待大。湯以七十里，文王以百里。以力服人者，非心服也，力不贍也；以德服人者，中心悅而誠服也，如七十子之服孔子也

In this passage, Mengzi draws a clear distinction between the "Hegemon" (*bà* 霸) and the "True King" (*wáng* 王). The Hegemon employs morality instrumentally to disguise his reliance on violence, whereas the True King implements benevolent governance motivated by his inherent virtue. Consequently, rule sustained through coercive force compels submission only through the populace's fear of violence—a temporary and superficial compliance. In contrast, the True King secures allegiance by "subduing others through virtue", eliciting the people's joyful and wholehearted recognition.

This text demonstrates Mengzi's explicit rejection of using morality as a tool to justify violence. It also shows his opposition to the realist logic that is grounded in state power. For Mengzi, political legitimacy arises solely from the people's genuine support. Such support is earned through the ruler's authentic virtue and benevolent governance—not through the intimidation of coercive power. If, as Lee claims, Mengzi were essentially a military strategist who provided counsel and rhetoric for rulers' wars of aggression, and if he used morality merely as a tool to legitimize warfare, then his vehement condemnation of war would be fundamentally inconsistent. This is especially clear when he equates military expertise with a capital crime.

Overall, Lee's realist interpretation of Mengzi's political philosophy is untenable.

The Just War Theory Interpretation and Kurtis Hagen's Pacifist Interpretation

The just war theory interpretation is currently the dominant reading of Mengzi's political philosophy. However, Kurtis Hagen (2022) has effectively challenged this approach and proposed an alternative reading grounded in just war pacifism. In this section, I will first outline the moral criteria for a just war in Mengzi's political philosophy as proposed by the just war theory interpretation. I will then critique Hagen's objections to this reading.

The core concern of just war theory is establishing moral criteria for warfare. Scholars holding this interpretive stance argue that Mengzi has a theory of just war which encompasses the following dimensions and corresponding standards.

Defensive War

First, most scholars agree that Mengzi would permit defensive war in most cases (Bell 2008b, 234–35; Bai 2013, 134; Chan 2015, 125). When one state faces invasion from another, Mengzi would recognize its right to self-defence, provided its ruler is reasonably competent. However, as Chan notes, defensive war for Mengzi is only morally permissible, not morally required (Chan 2015, 125). Mengzi's arguments concerning defensive war primarily appear in his dialogues with Duke Wen of Teng, the ruler of a small state (see Mengzi's 1B15).

In this dialogue, Duke Wen of Teng diligently cultivates good relations with larger states to avoid conflict, yet remains under constant threat of military aggression. The Duke seeks Mengzi's counsel, and he presents two alternatives.

First, using the example of King Tai of Zhou, Mengzi proposes a radically pacifist option. To preserve his people, Duke Wen could proactively relinquish his state

and territory. If he possessed the perfect virtue of benevolence like King Tai, his people, profoundly influenced by his virtue, would willingly follow him. He could then re-establish his state elsewhere and, through the efforts of subsequent generations, potentially achieve the status of the True King under Heaven.

Second, Mengzi presents an alternative conforming to ritual propriety. The *Liji* (禮記 *The Book of Rites*) states:

> Hence, when the state faces calamity, for the monarch to die defending the altars of soil and grain is called righteousness. (*Liji* 1989, "Liyun")
>
> 故國有患，君死社稷謂之義。

According to the ritual norms of the time, defending one's state was the ruler's sacred duty. The state, inherited from his ancestors, could not be abandoned at his personal will. Therefore, he could defend his homeland together with his people.

However, Mengzi's support for self-defence is strictly conditional.

First, legitimate defence occurs only on one's own territory and excludes so-called "pre-emptive self-defence". In another dialogue with Duke Wen, Mengzi (1B13) mentions defensive measures like deepening moats and raising city walls—purely defensive fortifications—not proactive military preparations for offensive action.

Second, the ruler mounting the defence must not be a tyrant. A ruler who brutally oppresses his people has forfeited his legitimacy, becoming a "bandit of the people"—basically a criminal, not a legitimate ruler. Such a tyrant is essentially no longer the ruler of the country, and therefore, as a criminal, has lost any right to self-defence.

Just Cause

The concept related to just war in the *Mengzi* is *zhēng* (征, punitive expedition).[8] Scholars have a fundamental consensus regarding the just cause for a Mengzian *zhēng*: there can only be one legitimate aim for undertaking foreign military action[9]—to punish tyrants and liberate people from oppressive regimes. Twiss

8 The common translation of this concept is "punitive expedition". However, I choose to use the pinyin rather than the English translation in this paper because this concept has particularities that cannot be ignored in the context of the *Mengzi*, and thus the common translation cannot fully cover the conditions for the use of this concept.

9 In the context of *zhēng*, I prefer to use "military action" instead of "war", because, depending on the criteria used, there is controversy over whether *zhēng* should be classified as war (see Hagen 2022, 5).

and Chan (2015b, 124–25) specify that Mengzian tyranny primarily refers to the harm inflicted upon people's property and physical well-being, it does not include political oppression of civil liberties in the modern sense. Ping-Cheung Lo (2024, 70), through analysing the term *zhēng* in the *Mengzi* and combining the key explanation in 7B4 "*zhēng* (征) signifies rectitude (*zhèng* 正)" (征之為言正也), points out that the action of *zhēng* itself represents justice, encompassing retributive justice (punishing tyrants) and corrective justice (liberating the people). Bell (2008b, 236) argues that this just cause of liberation can be inferred from Mengzi's conception of political legitimacy: when a ruler abuses his people through tyranny, he ceases to be a legitimate ruler and becomes a criminal whom the people have the right to execute (Mengzi 1B8); thus, a ruler leading a just *zhēng* may likewise execute a foreign tyrant when necessary (see Mengzi 1B11). Ivanhoe (2004) contextualizes this discussion within the framework of Heaven's Mandate (*tiān mìng* 天命): in the Confucian view, a ruler's political legitimacy ultimately derives from Heaven's Mandate to protect the people. When a ruler treats his people tyrannically, he loses this mandate and becomes a criminal.

Popular and International Support

Most scholars adopting the just war theory interpretation (Bell 2008; Bai 2013; Twiss and Chan 2015a; 2015b) note that the action of *zhēng* must gain support from the enemy state's populace and the international community.[10] Texts relevant to this argument derive primarily from Mengzi's vision of King Tang and King Wu's revolutions:

> King Wu attacked Yin with three hundred war chariots and three thousand brave warriors. The king said: 'Do not fear! I bring you peace, not enmity against the people.' They bowed their head to the ground like crumbling mountains. (Mengzi 7B4)
>
> 武王伐殷，革車三百兩，虎賁三千人。王曰："無畏！寧爾也，非敵百姓也。"若崩厥角稽首。

10 While it is evident that Mengzi lacked a modern conception of an international community, and the relations between feudal states were fundamentally distinct from those between modern nation-states, many scholars applying just war theory to his work still employ the term "international". This usage can be justified on two grounds. First, despite the differences, the Warring States period did feature multiple independent political entities interacting within a shared cultural sphere, thus constituting a form of international system in a structural, if not conceptual, sense. Second, and more importantly, the purpose of examining Mengzi through modern frameworks is to address contemporary concerns. Within this modern discourse, the language of international relations becomes not only relevant but necessary. Provided it is applied with careful contextual awareness, this terminological adaptation will not lead to a substantial misunderstanding of Mengzi's thought.

> The *Book of Documents* says: 'Tang commenced his *zhēng* from Ge.' All under Heaven trusted him. When he marched east, the western tribes complained; when he marched south, the northern tribes lamented, saying: 'Why does he put us last?' (Mengzi 1B11)
>
> 《書》曰：“湯一征，自葛始。”天下信之。東面而征，西夷怨；南面而征，北狄怨。曰：“奚為後我？”

In Mengzi's conception, the *zhēng* of Tang and Wu gained massive support from the populace of the targeted states and the international community. Bai (2013, 137) further emphasizes the critical importance of timing for *zhēng*. He argues that the action is justified only when tyranny becomes so severe that the people can hardly endure it, to the extent that they would welcome liberators at any moment. Bell and Bai also note that this support from the people must be enduring and heartfelt, not a propaganda illusion fabricated by aggressors. A counterexample in the *Mengzi* is the Qi invasion of Yan: in this war, the people of Yan, suffering deeply from the rebellion of Zizhi 子之, initially welcomed the Qi army as liberators, and other states also expressed support at the beginning. Later, atrocities committed by Qi troops within Yan and King Xuan of Qi's greed for Yan's territory and wealth directly caused resentment and resistance among Yan's people. Other states also formed a coalition against Qi's invasion, ultimately leading to Qi's defeat and retreat (see Mengzi 1B10, 1B11, 2B8, 2B9).

Last Resort

Twiss and Chan (2015a) note that, although the evidence is not explicit, Mengzi advocates that *zhēng* should be undertaken only as the last resort after exhausting all non-military possibilities. In the account of Tang's *zhēng* against Ge (see *Mengzi* 3B5), Tang had employed multiple peaceful measures, such as sending ritual gifts, food, and providing agricultural labour, in order to change the tyranny in the state of Ge. Tang finally resorted to military action only after Ge murdered a child who had been sent to deliver food. Tang then launched the expedition in the name of avenging the child. Twiss and Chan contend that this evidence at least demonstrates Mengzi's inclination to employ peaceful measures and treat military action as the last resort under extreme conditions.

Proportionality

Most scholars[11] observe that *zhēng* must satisfy the proportionality principle: the benefits brought by the action (i.e., establishing benevolent governance in the

11 Such as Lo (2024), Twiss and Chan (2015a), Ching (2004), Ivanhoe (2004).

targeted state) must far outweigh the harms, and the impact on civilian life must be minimized throughout the process. Based on this, both Ching and Ivanhoe conclude that Mengzi would oppose the use of weapons of mass destruction. This criterion can be inferred from the second principle: if sustained popular support is a necessary condition for the legitimacy of a *zhēng*, then the army of *zhēng* need not battle against the populace or even the military forces of the enemy state, because the army of justice is largely welcomed. Mengzi believed a *zhēng* would not cause massive loss of life. To this end, he even questioned the record in the Confucian classic *The Book of Documents: Wucheng* (*Shang Shu: Wucheng* 尚書: 武成):

> Of the *Wucheng* chapter, I accept only two or three bamboo strips. The benevolent has no enemy under Heaven. When the supremely benevolent attacked the supremely non-benevolent, how could the blood of the people have flowed so much as to float pestles? (Mengzi 7B3)
>
> 吾於《武成》，取二三策而已矣。仁人無敵於天下。以至仁伐至不仁，而何其血之流杵也？

The rationale for Mengzi's suspicion originates from his firm conviction that when the supremely benevolent King Wu attacks the supremely non-benevolent King Zhou, the people will inevitably offer wholehearted support, rendering intense military conflicts inconceivable. Although this historical narrative in Mengzi's vision likely deviates significantly from actual events, it at least confirms that *zhēng* in his conception must adhere to the principle of proportionality, requiring minimization of casualties throughout the process.

Legitimate Authority

Finally, nearly all scholars agree that the ruler executing an act of *zhēng* must be benevolent. This constitutes the most important divergence between Mengzi's theory of war and contemporary just war theory. Scholars differ on the criteria for identifying a benevolent ruler. Bell (2008a) contends that a potentially virtuous ruler suffices for Mengzi's standard. Twiss and Chan (2015a, 111) criticize Bell's criterion as vacuous because, from Mengzi's perspective of human nature, all humans are potentially moral, as they possess the heart/mind of the four sprouts (*sì duān* 四端), even tyrants. They instead argue that the legitimate authority should be "a good, competent political leader" (Twiss and Chan 2015b, 126). Hagen (2022, 3–4) counters that Twiss and Chan's claim lacks textual basis. He insists that the legitimate authority for launching *zhēng* must be the Agent of Heaven (*tiān lì* 天吏) (see Mengzi 2A5), whose standard is much higher than those proposed by both Bell and Twiss and Chan.

Hagen's Criticism

Hagen's main criticism of the just war theory interpretation is that this approach weakens Mengzi's extremely high moral standards for *zhēng*, thereby distorting his true intentions. Hagen (2022) argues that Mengzi's discussion of war is not intended as a moral justification of warfare, but rather as an effort to persuade rulers to abandon war and implement benevolent governance. He contends that Mengzi achieves this aim by setting exceptionally high moral standards for *zhēng*. He thus aligns with the views of Yao (2004) and Ching (2004), advocating for an interpretation of Mengzi as a just war pacifist.

Specifically, Hagen contends that the support Mengzi describes for the *zhēng* of King Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou was not merely popular endorsement in a general sense, but an overwhelming welcome, which means that all the people in the affected state welcomed their coming wholeheartedly. Furthermore, at the international level, Hagen criticizes Bell for weakening the standard requiring support from the world. In Mengzi's conception, an act of *zhēng* requires not merely some moral claim to the world's support, but rather the entire world must genuinely offer actual support to the leader of *zhēng* (Hagen 2022, 2–3). Hagen thus agrees with Yao and Ching's view that this level of support only occurred within Mengzi's morally idealized narrative of history and was unattainable in any real wars during Mengzi's own time or thereafter.

More importantly, Hagen argues that Mengzi's conception of *zhēng* demands not merely minimal killing, but absolute non-violence. This is because, in his view, the benevolent ruler qualified to act must be the Agent of Heaven, who can rely on his supreme moral charisma to make the tyrant's army welcome his coming instead of battling against them. Consequently, during such an action, he would have "no enemy under Heaven" (see Mengzi 2A5, 3B5, 4A7, 7B3, 7B4). Apart from the execution of the tyrant and his core followers for their crimes against the people, no innocent person would be harmed. As Mengzi puts it,

> By committing one act of injustice, or killing one single innocent person, in order to gain all realms under Heaven, he would not do it. (Mengzi 2A2)
>
> 行一不義, 殺一不辜而得天下, 皆不為也。

Hagen believes this prohibition also includes any collateral damage in war, because for Mengzi, indirect killing is as equally reprehensible as direct killing. He further deduces that if actual fighting becomes necessary in a *zhēng*, it signifies that this offensive action is illegitimate, as its leader has not yet secured sufficient support from the people (Hagen 2022, 5–6).

In summary, Hagen regards Mengzi's *zhēng* as an "impossible test". By setting the idealized, semi-mythical achievements of the ancient sage kings as the standard for *zhēng*, Mengzi claims that only the True King, whose moral character is so supreme that he has no enemies under Heaven and thus enjoys universal support for all practical purposes, can legitimately undertake foreign military action. Such an action could eliminate the tyrant and establish benevolent governance with no harm to any innocent people. This standard, Hagen argues, is unattainable in reality. Mengzi's purpose in proposing it was thus not to provide moral justification for waging a war, but to persuade rulers to abandon warfare and implement benevolent governance. Therefore, Hagen concludes, this position can aptly be described as "just war pacifism".

I fully endorse the pacifist interpretive approach to Mengzian political philosophy. However, Hagen's position has two faults. First, although Hagen, like most other scholars, recognizes that benevolent governance forms the background to Mengzi's discussion of warfare, he overlooks the inherent pacifist feature within benevolent governance itself. I shall argue that Mengzi is a pacifist not because he set impossible standards for just wars, but because he firmly advocates positive pacifism. Second, Hagen's strict reading of Mengzi's *zhēng* will diminish the pragmatic flexibility in Mengzi's philosophy when facing extreme situations. I will argue for a pragmatic pacifist framework to interpret Mengzi's stance on war within the framework of benevolent governance.

Positive Pacifism: A Missing Perspective

In the previous two sections, I reviewed three prevailing interpretive approaches to Mengzi's political philosophy: realism, just war theory, and just war pacifism. In this section, I propose an alternative interpretation: positive pacifism. As Lo (2024, 86) observes, Mengzi does not discuss the moral criteria for waging a just war in the modern sense, but addresses warfare within the framework of his advocacy of benevolent governance. Therefore, when we investigate Mengzi's ideas on warfare, we should view them within the framework of his theory of benevolent governance, rather than assessing his propositions on war in isolation. In this section, I will argue that Mengzi's ideas of benevolent governance should be categorized as positive pacifism.

The concept of positive peace was proposed by Johan Galtung in 1969. Galtung points out that the core meaning of peace is the absence of violence, and therefore, the understanding of peace is inextricably linked to the understanding of violence. He proposed a famous extended definition of violence:

> Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations. (Galtung 1969, 168)

For instance, during the Neolithic era, the average human life expectancy was around 30 years. Since this was unavoidable under those circumstances, it did not constitute violence within that context, despite being very low. However, in modern society, if a country's populace has an average life expectancy of only 30 years due to unjust political-economic institutions and distribution mechanisms, that society is under violence because its people's potential for healthy living is suppressed.

Galtung distinguishes between *personal violence* and *structural violence*. Personal violence has a clear subject-action-object structure. Structural violence, conversely, is embedded within the social structure, manifesting as unequal power relations, which in turn manifest as unequal life chances. For example, a husband physically assaulting his wife is a typical case of personal violence. However, if domestic violence becomes a tacitly permissible widespread phenomenon within a society, even if a particular wife is not experiencing direct violence from her husband at a specific moment, she still remains subjected to structural violence.

Building upon this extended definition of violence, the concept of peace, understood as the absence of violence, has been correspondingly broadened.

> An extended concept of violence leads to an extended concept of peace… peace also has two sides: *absence of personal violence*, and *absence of structural violence*. We shall refer to them as *negative peace* and *positive peace* respectively. (Galtung 1969, 183; emphasis added)

Positive peace, as the absence of structural violence, entails the establishment of just social structures. In such a society, the physical and mental potential of individuals can be realized without obstructions. David Boersema (2018, 123) points out that while preventing harm is important for peace, providing help is even more crucial. For instance, since economic hardship undermines positive peace, it is essential to strive to eliminate such difficulties. Similarly, because social stigmatization, isolation, and stereotypes undermine positive peace, it is vital to strive to eliminate racism, sexism, and other forms of disrespect.[12]

12 The concept of positive peace has its roots in certain religious traditions. Paul Ramsey refers to the Christian concept of peace: "Shalom means positive peace, joyous peace, just peace. Shalom is harmony between humanity and all of God's creation" (Ramsey 2016, 32). A similar notion can also be found in the Islamic tradition. Kadayifci-Orellana, Abu-Nimer, and Mohamed-Saleem mention, "the concept of peace in Islam is not limited to a negative understanding of peace that is often defined in a passive sense as absent of war, oppression and tyranny but it actually refers to a process in which human beings strive to establish foundations for interacting with God's creations—humans and nonhumans alike—in harmony and to institute just social, economic and political structures where they can fulfil their potential" (Kadayifci-Orellana Abu-Nimer and Mohamed-Saleem, 2013, 7).

It also exists in Confucianism. I will argue that Mengzi's idea of benevolent governance aims to construct a positive peaceful politics. His goal is not only to avoid warfare, but to eliminate, to the greatest extent, systemic and structural violence within the political domain.

Mengzi consciously categorized oppressive governance as a form of violence. In a dialogue with King Hui of Liang, he employed a famous analogy to argue that killing people through governance has no difference in substance from killing them directly with weapons:

> King Hui of Liang said, 'I wish to tranquilly receive your instruction.'
>
> Mengzi replied, 'Is there any difference between killing a man with a club and with a blade?'
>
> The king said, 'There is no difference.'
>
> 'Is there any difference between doing it with a blade and with governance?'
>
> The king said, 'There is no difference.'
>
> Mengzi then said, 'In your kitchen there is fat meat; in your stables there are sturdy horses. But your people have the look of hunger, and in the wilds there are those who have died of starvation. This is leading beasts to devour people. Beasts devouring one another is loathed by humans. Being the parent of the people, to practice governance so as to lead beasts to devour them—how does this square with being the parent of the people? Kongzi said, 'The one who first made wooden images [to bury with the dead], must not have posterity!' He said this because such images were made in the likeness of humans and used. 'How then of the ones who cause the people to die of hunger?' (Mengzi 1A4)

> 梁惠王曰："寡人願安承教。"
>
> 孟子對曰："殺人以梃與刃，有以異乎？"
>
> 曰："無以異也。"
>
> "以刃與政，有以異乎？"
>
> 曰："無以異也。"
>
> 曰："庖有肥肉，廐有肥馬，民有飢色，野有餓莩，此率獸而食人也。獸相食，且人惡之。為民父母，行政不免於率獸而食人。惡在其為民父母也？仲尼曰：'始作俑者，其無後乎！'為其象人而用之也。如之何其使斯民飢而死也？"

Although Mengzi did not hold a radically egalitarian view, he did feel the stark wealth disparity between rulers and the people was the most glaring manifestation of tyrannical governance. Rulers amassed great wealth while their subjects starved to death. This oppressive governance was fundamentally indistinguishable from killing with weapons in causing death—indeed, it caused death on an even larger scale.

This case clearly shows that Mengzi consciously included oppressive governance within the category of violence. For him, both oppressive governance and warfare were forms of violence to be eradicated through benevolent governance.

From a comprehensive perspective, the structural violence Mengzi seeks to eliminate includes exploitative policies, extreme distributional inequality, harsh systems of punishment, and the personal violence in structural violence. These elements are interrelated and collectively constitute a deviation from peaceful order. In constructing his ideal of benevolent governance, Mengzi conducted a profound analysis of the widespread evils in existing political systems and proposed a set of targeted governance strategies.

First, the rulers' exploitative policies mainly manifested themselves in excessive taxes and levies, which directly undermined the people's livelihood. He warned that if a ruler simultaneously imposed the cloth tax, grain tax, and corvée labour levy (布縷之征，粟米之征，力役之征。), then the consequences would be disastrous:

> If he employs two, the people will starve. If he employs all three, fathers and sons will be separated. (Mengzi 7B27)
>
> 用其二而民有殍，用其三而父子離。

The suffering caused to the people by these exploitative policies is comparable in severity to the direct destruction caused by war. Crucially, the disruption of agricultural seasons by forced labour had lasting detrimental effects on ordinary lives, because conscripting labour during the agricultural production season would prevent the people from sowing and cultivating their crops in a timely manner, thereby resulting in the loss of vital food supplies and leading to the tragic state where "parents suffer from cold and hunger; brothers, wives, and children scatter and separate" (父母凍餓，兄弟妻子離散) (Mengzi 1A5).

In response to this, Mengzi put forward his explicit counterproposals: implement light taxation, such as using only one of the three main levies (on cloth, grain, and corvée labour) while suspending the other two (Mengzi 7B27). Furthermore, he advocated abolishing burdensome levies like market storage fees, border pass duties, and residential land and poll taxes (see Mengzi 2A5). Besides, Mengzi

(1A7) insisted on the red line of "not violating the agricultural seasons" (不違農時), and refrain from imposing labour duties during the crucial agricultural production season to ensure the livelihood of the people. Most importantly, he proposed the rational development of land, forests, lakes, and other resources to ensure the people possessed sufficient "constant property" (*héng chǎn* 恆產) for basic subsistence, enabling them to "look up and have enough to serve their parents; look down and have enough to support their wives and children; in good years be always full, in bad years be free from death and fleeing" (仰足以事父母，俯足以畜妻子，樂歲終身飽，凶年免於死亡。) (ibid.). This is the material foundation for further cultivating the people's morality. "Then, when [the ruler] guides them toward goodness, will the people follow him with ease" (然後驅而之善，故民之從之也輕。) (ibid.).

Second, Mengzi vehemently condemned the extreme wealth inequality in society, which also implicitly contained a severe condemnation of the rulers' dereliction of duty. Mengzi depicted the stark disparity between the rulers' and common people's living conditions through a powerful contrast,

> In your kitchen there is fat meat; in your stables there are sturdy horses. But your people have the look of hunger, and in the wilds there are corpses of the starved. (Ibid.)
>
> 庖有肥肉，廐有肥馬，民有飢色，野有餓莩。

While rulers enjoyed abundant material wealth, the common people suffered the agony of starvation. Mengzi denounced this as "leading beasts to devour humans" (率獸而食人) (ibid.). This statement more profoundly indicted the rulers' abandonment of their fundamental responsibility. As rulers, they should have become "parents of the people", protecting and supporting the lives of the populace. Yet, during catastrophic moments when the people faced starvation, and despite possessing ample wealth, they neglected their fundamental responsibilities to rescue and ensure the survival of their subjects. This essentially accuses rulers of abandoning their core obligations to protect and nurture the people, building their own wealth on the suffering of the masses, and elevating the unequal distribution of wealth to a serious moral failure.

The intrinsic demands of benevolent governance necessarily included establishing effective social relief mechanisms to actively prevent the people from suffering a great famine, thereby ensuring their fundamental right to subsistence. Besides, Mengzi also appealed to the ruler's personal action: he urged rulers to "share joys with the people" (與民同樂) (Mengzi 1B1). In other words, sharing resources with the people rather than monopolising them. In his dialogue with King Xuan of Qi, Mengzi used music as an example: sharing music with

others will not diminish the joy it brings, but rather increase it. Similarly, sharing resources such as royal hunting grounds with the people will not diminish the monarch's pleasure. On the contrary, it will make the people truly recognize the monarch's governance, and ultimately bring greater joy to the ruler through their harmonious relationship.

Third, Mengzi also opposed the use of harsh punishments as a means of forcing people into submission. He believed that when rulers failed to guarantee the basic livelihood of the people, failed to provide appropriate moral education, yet abused punishment for the people's misdeeds, it was tantamount to setting a trap for the people (*wǎng mín* 罔民). Although Mengzi acknowledges the necessity of punishment as a tool for governance, he opposed the distortion of punishment into a tool for rulers to intimidate the populace and maintain authoritarian power, asserting that the purpose of punishment should be the realization of social justice.

In Mengzi's view, a just punishment lies not only in retribution but also in moral transformation. When offenders, through a fair trial, come to a genuine recognition of their faults and willingly accept responsibility for them, they can accept the punishment wholeheartedly, without resentment or regret, even when penalized.

Execute the people by following the *Dao* of preserving life, they will die without resentment toward those who put them to death (以生道殺民，雖死不怨殺者。) (Mengzi 7A12).

If punishment is employed out of unavoidable necessity and with the fundamental purpose of preserving the people's lives, then even those put to death will not harbour resentment towards the executioner. For instance, when the offender has received a thoroughly fair trial and recognizes the harm their crime inflicted upon others and the meaning of bearing responsibility for it, they will realize that they deserve the punishment they receive. This demonstrates Mengzi's high demands regarding the legitimacy of punishment—it must originate from benevolent governance and love for the people, serving the overall well-being and preservation of the populace.

Fourth, tyranny does not stem from the cruelty of a single monarch, but rather from the cumulative effect of concrete acts of tyranny carried out by the entire ruling class. Thus, as a systematic social engineering project, benevolent governance requires a team of virtuous and capable individuals to achieve its goals. Mengzi placed strong emphasis on honouring the virtuous and capable due to his profound insight into the feasibility of benevolent governance. As he states:

> A wise person does not lack knowledge of anything; he prioritizes the urgent tasks. A benevolent person does not fail to love anyone; he regards being close to the virtuous as his urgent task. The wisdom of Yao

> and Shun did not extend to knowing all things; they prioritized the urgent tasks. The benevolence of Yao and Shun did not extend to loving all people; they regarded being close to the virtuous as urgent. (Mengzi 7A46)
>
> 知者無不知也，當務之為急；仁者無不愛也，急親賢之為務。堯舜之知而不遍物，急先務也；堯舜之仁不遍愛人，急親賢也。

Zhu Xi 朱熹 quoted Feng Ji's 豐稷 incisive explanation of this text in his commentary:

> If a benevolent ruler does not prioritize being close to the virtuous, even though one has the mind to love the people and care for things, with petty men in office, [his good intentions] have no way to reach below. His perception would be obscured above gradually, and bad governance would daily increase below. This is what Mengzi meant by 'not knowing what is urgent'. (Zhu Xi 1983)
>
> 仁不急於親賢，雖有仁民愛物之心，小人在位，無由下達，聰明日蔽於上，而惡政日加於下，此孟子所謂不知務也。

Mengzi was acutely aware that benevolent governance is a vast and complex systemic social project. The ruler's personal virtue and will are the starting points, but he must rely on an efficient executive team composed of virtuous and capable individuals to truly translate the ideals of benevolent governance into practices that benefit the people. Furthermore, the purpose of this measure is to eliminate personal violence in the political system. Otherwise, even if the monarch can design a just institution, the violence and malfeasance of individual officials within that institution will also ruin benevolent governance. Therefore, attracting and employing the worthy talents under Heaven is not only an expression of the ruler's virtue, but also the urgent task for realizing benevolent governance.

In summary, Mengzi's concept of benevolent governance extends far beyond mere opposition to war. It is dedicated to establishing a social order founded on justice, peace, and the absence of oppression. These measures constitute a mutually reinforcing, positive pacifist governance framework aimed at systematically improving people's livelihoods and promoting social harmony. However, it must be pointed out that, from today's perspective, the benevolent governance advocated by Mengzi also contained structural violence, such as the hierarchical system, patriarch, and aristocratic privilege. Therefore, we can certainly say that Mengzi's positive peace was not perfect. However, from the perspective of Mengzi's era, his ideas were undoubtedly pioneering. He noticed those forms

of structural violence that were taken for granted by the people of his time, and advocated eliminating them.

At the end of 2A5, Mengzi refers to a ruler capable of implementing benevolent governance as "the Agent of Heaven" (*tiān lì* 天吏). He argues that such a ruler would have no enemies under Heaven, and he possesses both the qualifications and the capabilities to become the True King ruling all under Heaven.

> If a ruler can truly practice these five things [of benevolent governance], then the people of neighbouring states will look up to him as their parents. To lead the children to attack their own parents—such a thing has never succeeded since the human race began. Being like this, he will have no enemy under Heaven. He who has no enemy under Heaven is the Agent of Heaven. And such a one has never existed who did not become the True King. (Mengzi 2A5)
>
> 信能行此五者，則鄰國之民仰之若父母矣。率其子弟，攻其父母，自生民以來，未有能濟者也。如此，則無敵於天下。無敵於天下者，天吏也。然而不王者，未之有也。

In Mengzi's view, in a state practicing benevolent governance, where the ruler fulfils his role of protecting the people well, such a state becomes highly attractive to the people of neighbouring states suffering under tyranny. Moreover, these neighbouring people also wish to live in peace under a benevolent ruler. Consequently, they will regard the benevolent ruler of their neighbouring state as their own parent. If their tyrant tries to mobilize them to attack the state practicing benevolent governance, they will refuse to obey him. And when the benevolent ruler enters their land to punish the tyrant, they will not see him as an enemy, but as their liberator.

The phrase "having no enemy in the world" signifies that the benevolent ruler has gained the universal support of the people under Heaven. This confirms his qualification to become the True King of all under Heaven.

If my interpretation of benevolent governance as positive pacifism is valid, it implies that, in Mengzi's view, the True King ruling all under Heaven must be a positive pacifist. He is able to establish a harmonious society free from oppression and violence. Furthermore, by implementing benevolent governance, he can win the universal support of the people under Heaven, thereby eliminating all hostility from the populace. This qualifies him to rule all under Heaven.

In another passage concerning the war between Qi and Yan (2B8), Mengzi advances a crucial claim: only the Agent of Heaven possesses the legitimate authority to begin an act of *zhēng*.

> Shen Tong asked, 'Is Yan to be attacked?' I answered him, 'It is.' [The state of Qi] thereupon attacked Yan. If he had asked, 'Who has the authority to punish it?' I would have answered him: 'Only the Agent of Heaven has the authority to punish it.' (Mengzi 2B8)
>
> 沈同問: "燕可伐與？" 吾應之曰: "可"，彼然而伐之也。彼如曰: "孰可以伐之？" 則將應之曰："為天吏，則可以伐之。"

This means that, in Mengzi's view, only the Agent of Heaven, that is, a positive pacifist ruler who fully implements benevolent governance, has the legitimate authority to undertake a foreign military action. However, this conclusion at least seems paradoxical. It leads to two further problems: (1) Within the framework of positive pacifism, how can the existence of military actions be permitted? (2) Why, and how, can a "pacifist" take military action?

Pragmatic Pacifism: Mengzi's Stance on War

As previously mentioned, Mengzi's stance and propositions on war should be examined within the framework of his idea of benevolent governance. In the previous section, we discussed the rationale for classifying benevolent governance as a form of positive pacifism. Thus, the question now arises: as positive pacifism, if the ultimate goal of benevolent governance is to eliminate structural and personal violence in society, how can war—a typical form of personal violence—be permitted under certain conditions?

To answer this, we must first understand the role of military action within Mengzian benevolent governance. In the Confucian vision, there is no war in an ideal society where benevolent governance is fully realized under Heaven. The description of the Grand Unity (*dà tóng* 大同) society in the *Liji:* "Liyun" (禮記: 禮運) can serve as clear evidence of thus:

> When the Great *Dao* prevails, the realm under Heaven is for the common good. The virtuous and the capable are selected; sincerity is emphasized, and harmony is cultivated. Thus, people do not only love their own parents, nor only care for their own children. The elderly are provided for until their death, the able-bodied are employed usefully, the young are nurtured to maturity, and the widowed, orphaned, childless, disabled, and ill are all cared for. Men have their work, women have their homes. Goods are loathed to be cast away upon the ground, yet need not be kept for oneself. It is detested when labour is not exerted by oneself. Hence, conspiracies are suppressed and do not arise. Robbery, theft, rebellion,

> and treachery do not occur. Thus, outer doors need not be closed. This is called the Grand Unity. (*Liji* 1989, "Liyun")
>
> 大道之行也，天下為公。選賢與能，講信修睦，故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，矜寡孤獨廢疾者，皆有所養。男有分，女有歸。貨惡其棄於地也，不必藏於己；力惡其不出於身也，不必為己。是故謀閉而不興，盜竊亂賊而不作，故外戶而不閉，是謂大同。

In the Grand Unity society, which represents the highest political ideal in Confucianism, rulers gain the people's recognition through their virtue and competence, thereby acquiring the right to govern. The transfer of power occurs peacefully through abdication rather than violent revolution. Violent elements within society have been largely eliminated owing to the exceptionally high moral standards of its members. Mengzi's political ideal is to achieve benevolent governance throughout the whole realm under Heaven. Here, "ideal" refers to a good and worthy goal to pursue, rather than a theoretical prototype divorced from reality. This implies that Mengzi believed that even during the Warring States period, benevolent governance could also be achieved under Heaven by a benevolent ruler. To realize this ideal in the realm of real politics, it was necessary to deal with the "non-ideal" realities where benevolent governance was not yet implemented under Heaven.

Military actions, represented by the act of *zhēng*, are precisely responses to such non-ideal situations. As noted by Bell (2008a, 228) and Ni Lexiong (2008, 206), from a Confucian perspective the very occurrence of military action signifies the loss of an ideal state. Therefore, for Mengzi, there is no ideal *zhēng*. Violent revolution becomes necessary because the peaceful transfer of power is no longer possible.

Thus, the original question can be reframed as follows: (1) If benevolent governance does not absolutely oppose all military action, can it still be classified as a form of pacifism? And (2) How to interpret Mengzi's stance on warfare within a pacifist framework?

The first question is relatively easy. As Andrew Fiala (2023) points out in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on "Pacifism", although pacifism is characterized by a commitment to peace and opposition to war, it is divided into numerous schools based on differing understandings of war and peace, as well as varying degrees of commitment to non-violence. Among these, only "absolute pacifism" opposes all war in the strictest sense, while many other pacifist schools acknowledge the moral necessity of certain wars under specific circumstances. Therefore, the simple fact that Mengzi did not absolutely oppose all military action cannot exclude his thoughts from the realm of pacifism.

Moreover, it is crucial to emphasize that Mengzi's acknowledgment of the legitimacy of military action under certain conditions does not imply that he was a just war theorist. The fundamental distinction between just war theory and pacifism lies in their core concerns. Just war theory is primarily focused on establishing moral criteria for warfare, whereas pacifism is fundamentally oriented toward the achievement of peace. Thus, although just war theory also regards peace as an ideal state, it should not be considered a form of pacifism. Similarly, while many strands of pacifism do not absolutely oppose all wars and may accept certain ones as morally permissible under extreme conditions, they should not be conflated with just war theory. For pacifism, the moral permissibility of war in exceptional cases derives solely from the aim of preserving peace. In this sense, the issue of *zhēng*, as a sub-issue within the framework of benevolent governance, should be considered an internal matter within positive pacifism rather than being treated independently as a just war theory.

In order to answer the second question—Why, and how, can a "pacifist" take military action?—I will introduce Olaf Müller's conception of pragmatic pacifism and employ this framework to support a pacifist interpretation of Mengzi's stance on warfare. I will then respond to the just war pacifist reading proposed by Hagen, arguing that it is unnecessary to impose an absolutely non-violent interpretation on the concept of *zhēng* to classify Mengzi as a pacifist. The presence of violence in the conduct of *zhēng* cannot negate the pacifist stance in Mengzian political philosophy.

Müller explains pragmatic pacifism as follows:

> Pragmatic pacifism is based on the following principles: First, one should not hammer out one's rejection of war and military intervention once and for all, but rather reinforce it again and again in each individual case—with an open mind to the particularities of the respective situation in which a decision must be made between war and renouncing war. Second, one should be prepared for the fact that the peace-loving option does not necessarily offer the best ethical decision. Thirdly, one should endeavour to view every situation in such a way that peaceful solutions to the crisis become plausible. In short, pacifism should be understood as a tentative guiding principle, not as dogma. (Müller 2017, 453–54; original text in German, my translation)

The most salient feature of this position lies in treating the pursuit of peace as a guide to action within each specific context, rather than as a rigid moral dogma to be followed unconditionally. It emphasizes not a moral rejection of military action *per se*, but rather a commitment to continuously seeking contextually viable pathways for the peaceful resolution of conflicts during crises. Nevertheless, it

does not preclude the use of force when absolutely necessary, such as in confronting Nazi or other forms of fascist aggression. Building on this position, Müller further proposes two guiding principles.

> *Epistemological rule in favour of peaceful alternatives*: persistently seek promising peaceful alternatives to the military intervention in question.
>
> *Epistemological rule regarding uncontrollable escalation*: Sharpen your awareness of the uncontrollable, irreversible side effects and long-term consequences of military intervention, from the uncontrollable spread of the weapons used, to the brutalization of soldiers on all sides and the fanaticization of civilians, to the danger that another world war could break out. (Ibid., 458–60; original text in German, my translation, emphasis added)

These two principles are likewise grounded in the pragmatic pursuit of peace. They necessitate careful consideration of two critical questions prior to any military intervention: First, have all possibilities for peaceful conflict resolution been exhausted? Second, is there sufficient awareness of the myriad uncontrollable and irreversible consequences that such military intervention may precipitate?

In *Pacifism: A Defence* (*Pazifismus: Eine Verteidigung*), Müller (2023, 11) draws a crucial conceptual distinction between an act of war (*Kriegshandlung*) and a warlike act (*kriegerische Handlung*). The former is a qualitative concept, exemplified by one state declaring war against another, invading foreign territory, or combat engagements between opposing armed forces. The latter, however, is a comparative concept. Warlike acts constitute a spectrum, ranging from training troops, purchasing armaments, and providing military aid, to military mobilization, localized armed conflicts, and large-scale conflicts, all differing in their degree of militarization. Pacifists *tend to* oppose all conduct across this spectrum, directing particularly vehement criticism toward acts exhibiting higher militarization. Their core contention is that the higher the degree of militarization, the more objectionable the act.

Müller's position retains its pacifist character by virtue of its unwavering commitment to peace, its dedication to conflict resolution through non-violent means, and its consistent criticism of warlike acts. Nevertheless, if all possibilities for peace have been exhausted and proved to be ineffective, and limited warlike actions could prevent much more severe violence, such acts may serve as a pragmatic means to deal with a crisis.

Mengzi's stance on warfare aligns with the core principles of pragmatic pacifism.

First, Mengzi does not regard military action as the exclusive means for benevolent rulers to eliminate tyranny. As Twiss and Chan (2015a) point out, there is

evidence to support the claim that Mengzi considers military force a last resort for overthrowing tyrannical regimes. Prior to its deployment, sustained efforts must be made to transform tyranny through peaceful means. Only when such means prove wholly ineffective does military intervention to rescue people from a tyrant's oppression become justified.

In 5A6, Mengzi emphasizes that Heaven only abandons irredeemable tyrants:

> Those whom Heaven abandons must be like Jie and Zhou. (Mengzi 5A6)
>
> 天之所廢，必若桀紂者也。

An act of *zhēng* becomes absolutely necessary only when tyranny reaches intolerable and irreversible extremes. Within the same dialogue, Mengzi also mentions the case of Yi Yin's exile of Tai Jia (太甲):

> Tai Jia overturned Tang's constitutional norms; Yi Yin exiled him to Tong. After three years, Tai Jia repented and reproached himself, and cultivated the virtue of benevolence and righteousness at Tong. For three years, he listened to Yi Yin's instructions, then returned to the capital Bo again. (Ibid.)
>
> 太甲顛覆湯之典刑，伊尹放之於桐。三年，太甲悔過，自怨自艾，於桐處仁遷義；三年，以聽伊尹之訓己也，復歸于亳。

According to the Confucian narrative, Yi Yin assisted Tang in overthrowing the Xia tyranny, after Tang's death, his successor Tai Jia subverted his father's benevolent governance. As the high minister of the Shang dynasty, Yi Yin did not execute Tai Jia but exiled him to Tang's mausoleum. When Tai Jia reformed himself morally after three years, Yi Yin restored him to the capital again. This case confirms that when peaceful means can transform tyranny, it should always be prioritized over military action.

Second, as mentioned in the previous section, the only legitimate authority to perform the act of *zhēng* is the Agent of Heaven. The defining characteristic of the Agent of Heaven is that, owing to their consummate virtue, they have gained the real support from the populace across the realm under Heaven. Consequently, they will have no enemy in the course of *zhēng*. This signifies that in a legitimate act of *zhēng* in the Mengzian sense, the Agent of Heaven, by virtue of their supremely virtuous character, should encounter no resistance from the people, nor even from the majority of the opposing army. The hostile forces that the benevolent ruler truly needs to confront are solely the tyrant and the core faction within the tyrannical ruling clique. As Mengzi puts it:

> He who possesses the *Dao* has many to assist him; he who loses the *Dao* has few to assist him. When assistance is reduced to the extreme, even one's kin turn against him. When assistance reaches its extreme, the whole realm under Heaven submits to him. To attack with the submission of the whole realm under Heaven those against whom even kin have turned, thus the superior man either refrains from warfare, or, if he must wage it, he will surely triumph. (Mengzi 2B1)
>
> 得道者多助，失道者寡助。寡助之至，親戚畔之；多助之至，天下順之。以天下之所順，攻親戚之所畔；故君子有不戰，戰必勝矣。

A benevolent ruler's *zhēng* is supported by the entire realm under Heaven in order to oppose a very small number of ruthless tyrants and their cohorts. When the decisive moment arrives, *zhēng* can maximally eliminate the severe structural violence caused by tyranny and establish a positive peaceful system based on benevolent governance under Heaven through low-intensity military operations targeting the tyrannical ruling clique.

In principle, Mengzi tends to reject all military actions. As I mentioned earlier in this section, war does not exist within the Confucian political ideal. However, when such military action serves as the last resort to overthrow tyranny and restore peace with low levels of harm, Mengzi would acknowledge the justice of *zhēng* under non-ideal conditions. This stance aligns with the guiding principles proposed by Müller.

Hagen (2022, 5–6) argues that Mengzi's concept of *zhēng* demands absolute non-violence. He contends that the occurrence of combat signifies that the leader of the *zhēng* has not yet gained sufficient popular support, thereby rendering the action illegitimate.

Strictly speaking, the process of *zhēng* cannot be absolutely non-violent. Even if the forces of a benevolent ruler encounter no resistance from the populace and the majority of the enemy army, combat with the tyrant to be punished and his faction is, in practice, always unavoidable. In this process, there will always be those who remain loyal to the tyrant and resist the expeditionary force.

The question then arises: does the occurrence of such combat and collateral damage negate the legitimacy of *zhēng* and challenge the characterization of Mengzi as a pacifist?

I argue that the answer is negative.

First, we can affirm that Mengzi would absolutely oppose the army actively harming or harassing civilians. This stance is directly evidenced by his strong criticism of the atrocities committed by the Qi army in the state of Yan:

> Now with Yan oppressing its people, your Majesty go and punish it. The people supposed that you were going to save them out of water and fire. They greeted your army with baskets of food and bottles of drink. But your army slayed their fathers and elder brothers; put their sons and younger brothers in fetters; destroyed their ancestral temples; and carried away their valuable vessels. How can such a course be permissible? (Mengzi 1B11)
>
> 今燕虐其民，王往而征之。民以為將拯己於水火之中也，簞食壺漿，以迎王師。若殺其父兄，係累其子弟，毀其宗廟，遷其重器，如之何其可也？

The people of Yan viewed the Qi army as their liberators. However, upon entering Yan, the Qi army killed civilians, destroyed ancestral temples and looted, thereby quickly losing the support of the Yan people. Mengzi thus concluded that King Xuan of Qi was not qualified to be the Agent of Heaven who could have the legitimate authority to carry out the act of *zhēng* (see Mengzi 2B8). This is because the sole motive of the Agent of Heaven in executing *zhēng* is to rescue the people suffering under tyranny, whereas King Xuan launched the war for land and wealth, making his actions essentially no different from those of the tyrannical Yan. For Mengzi, military violence intentionally directed against the civilian population always directly negates the justice of military action, with no excuses.

Two more controversial situations remain. First, if some civilians or soldiers, for various reasons, actively participate in resisting the *zhēng*, do they still count as innocent? We cannot find a clear answer in Mengzi's text. However, Xunzi responds directly to this issue:

> In executing punishment, it is not the common people who are executed, but those who bring chaos to the common people. If the common people shield those bandits, then they too are bandits. (Xunzi 1988, 15.1f)
>
> 凡誅，非誅其百姓也，誅其亂百姓者也；百姓有扞其賊，則是亦賊也。

For Xunzi, if common people aid the tyrant, they are like the tyrant himself—bandits who deserve punishment. Therefore, he would claim that such people are not innocent in war.

For Mengzi, however, the issue is more complicated. If such people are few in number, their support for the tyrant would not alter the nature of the *zhēng*. Mengzi would likely hold a position similar to Xunzi's, deeming these people not

innocent. However, if a large number of people choose to support the "tyrant", this signifies that the leader undertaking the *zhēng* has not yet gained sufficient support of the people under Heaven. The time to overthrow the tyrant is not ripe, and the leader undertaking the *zhēng* is still not the Agent of Heaven. In this case, a benevolent ruler would not rashly initiate military action. In 1B10, Mengzi contrasts the differing choices of Kings Wen and Wu of Zhou as follows:

> If annexing [Yan] pleases its people, then annex it. This was practised by an ancient sage, namely King Wu. If annexing it displeases the people, then do not annex it. This was practised by an ancient sage, namely King Wen. (Mengzi 1B10)
>
> 取之而燕民悦，则取之。古之人有行之者，武王是也。取之而燕民不悦，则勿取。古之人有行之者，文王是也。

Zhao Qi's 趙岐 commentary on this passage explains the historical context:

> King Wen refrained because the Three Benevolent Men [of Shang] were still present, and court musicians had not fled. He feared that taking [Shang] would displease the people of Yin, hence he did not take it. (Jiao 1987, 151)
>
> 文王以三仁尚在，乐师未奔，取之惧殷民不悦，故未取之也。

During King Wen's era, King Zhou still had virtuous ministers assisting him, and the Shang dynasty had not yet completely lost popular support. Thus, attacking Shang at that time might have provoked resentment among the people. Therefore, despite King Zhou's manifest tyranny, King Wen did not launch a military action against him, for the time has not yet come, and King Wen was still not the Agent of Heaven.

The second situation involves collateral damage to non-combatants during the *zhēng*. Hagen argues that collateral damage also constitutes killing the innocent and thus undermines the legitimacy of the *zhēng*. I contend that this absolutist reading is incompatible with the pragmatic spirit inherent within Mengzi's philosophy.

"Expediency" (*quán* 權) is an important concept in Mengzi's thought. Its original meaning is "to weigh" or "to balance". Feng Youlan (1982, 144) interprets *quán* as flexibility, which appears to violate a principle on the surface but actually accords with it in substance. Liu Xiaohong (2015) further proposes that *quán* is the practical wisdom that realizes abstract moral principles in practice, whose ultimate principle is "benevolence".

A dialogue between Mengzi and Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 vividly illustrates this concept:

> Chunyu Kun said: 'Is it prescribed by the rules of propriety that males and females shall not allow their hands to touch in giving and receiving anything?'
>
> Mengzi replied: 'It is so prescribed.'
>
> Chunyu Kun asked: "If a man's sister-in-law be drowning, should he rescue her with his hand?'
>
> Mengzi said: 'He who would not rescue a drowning sister-in-law is a wolf. That males and females should not touch hands in giving and receiving is the general propriety; to rescue a drowning sister-in-law with the hand is an exercise of *expediency*.' (Mengzi 4A17)
>
> 淳于髡曰："男女授受不親，禮與？"
>
> 孟子曰："禮也。"
>
> 曰："嫂溺則援之以手乎？"
>
> 曰："嫂溺不援，是豺狼也。男女授受不親，禮也；嫂溺援之以手者，權也。"

According to ritual propriety, members of the opposite sex should not touch each other. An explanation for this rule can be found in the *Liji:* "Fangji" (禮記: 坊記):

> The Master said: 'loving virtue [should be] like loving the beauty.' The feudal lords do not angle for beauty within their domains. Therefore, the superior man keeps away from the beauty to set an example for the people. Hence, males and females do not touch hands in giving and receiving. (*Liji* 1989, "Fangji")
>
> 子云： "好德如好色。"諸侯不下漁色。故君子遠色以為民紀。故男女授受不親。

The purpose of this propriety was to restrain human desires, as Confucians believed that an obsession with sexual pleasure would cause people to neglect the cultivation of virtue. However, in the scenario of a drowning sister-in-law, rescuing her immediately should be the natural response triggered by one's heart/mind

of compassion (*cè yǐn zhī xīn* 惻隱之心), akin to the situation Mengzi described where a man suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well (see 2A6). If someone sees their sister-in-law drowning but does not save her, they have totally lost their genuine moral heart/mind (*běn xīn* 本心), and are not different from a beast devoid of morality. For such a person, adhering to a form of propriety originally established to cultivate virtue becomes meaningless. Therefore, *quán* in exceptional circumstances is essential to preserve the true spirit of morality.

This rationale can similarly apply to Mengzi's attitude towards collateral damage in war. Consider a classic Confucian example: King Wu's campaign against Tyrant Zhou. Let us suppose that an innocent child is trampled to death by a startled warhorse. Causally speaking, the child's death is directly linked to King Wu's campaign. Would Mengzi therefore deny the justice of King Wu's campaign against Tyrant Zhou?

I believe that while Mengzi would undoubtedly view the child's death as a tragedy, he would not negate the justice of the *zhēng* itself. His position can be explained through the lens of *quán*.

The core of Mengzi's opposition to the killing of the innocent lies in his opposition to violence. However, the existence of tyranny itself constitutes a fundamental, persistent violence against the people's survival. *Zhēng*, as the last resort to overthrow tyranny and restore peaceful order, is itself an exercise of expediency in extremely exceptional circumstances. In such a context, eliminating tyranny has the highest level of moral urgency. Sporadic collateral damage, though tragic in itself, is incomparable in nature and scale to the pervasive, institutionalized harm inflicted by tyranny. In such cases, the pursuit of absolute non-violence is unrealistic. To deny the legitimacy of using military force to overthrow tyranny due to concerns about potential collateral damage would condemn the majority of the people to continue suffering greater and more enduring harm. This is akin to refusing to save a drowning sister-in-law out of fear of violating the prohibition on touch—both stem from a failure to weigh moral exigencies in concrete situations, thereby damaging the spirit of morality.

In conclusion, I argue that Hagen's interpretation of Mengzi's concept of *zhēng* as demanding absolute non-violence is inappropriate. Its main flaw lies in neglecting the pragmatic dimension within Mengzi's thought. Under the extreme condition where tyranny must be eliminated through limited military action, *zhēng* itself represents a choice to exercise expediency in a non-ideal state. Serving this purpose, Mengzi's *zhēng* can accommodate a limited degree of unavoidable combat and unintentional collateral damage. Nonetheless, Mengzi should still be regarded as a pacifist rather than a just war theorist. On the one hand, his ultimate aim was never to prescribe the moral criteria for a just war, but to construct positive peace. On the other hand, Mengzi's attitude towards war corresponds to

pragmatic pacifism: peaceful means always retain priority, and limited warlike action is permissible solely as a last resort to prevent large-scale violence and restore peace.

Conclusion

This paper offers a positive-pragmatic pacifist interpretation of Mengzian political philosophy, while also critiquing the interpretations that are currently prevalent in academia, including those based on realism, just war theory and just war pacifism. Compared to Hagen's just war pacifist reading, the most important contributions of my positive-pragmatic pacifist interpretation are twofold. First, it entails a shift in perspective: rather than examining Mengzi's stance on war in isolation, my interpretation contextualizes his view on warfare within his theory of benevolent governance, thereby locating his political philosophy within a framework of positive pacifism. Second, it moves beyond the absolutist characteristic of just war pacifism by adopting a pragmatic pacifist perspective under the framework of benevolent governance to account for Mengzi's conditional support of *zhēng*. This approach supports the reading of Mengzi as a pacifist and aligns with the practical flexibility of his political philosophy. I argue that the essence of Mengzi's pacifism does not lie in setting unattainable standards for a just war, but in his commitment to establishing a peaceful order within the realm of real politics.

The contemporary international community is facing a period of profound turbulence, with wars still raging and conflicts frequently erupting. The level of disorder might be comparable to that of the Warring States period in which Mengzi lived. Back then, feudal lords vied for supremacy while the people suffered greatly; today's world similarly confronts regional wars, great power rivalries, and crises in global governance. Against this backdrop, eliminating war and restoring peace should be the humanistic ideal of our era.

Due to space limitations, it is difficult to delve deeply into the complex historical and practical factors behind any specific case here. Yet I believe that Mengzi's discourse on benevolent governance can provide meaningful, principled guidance for building a peaceful global order today. The fundamental path to lasting peace does not lie in passively preventing one war after another, but rather in promoting the establishment of a kind of "benevolent governance" on a global scale. In an international context, what Mengzi called "benevolent governance" can be understood as a more inclusive and justice-oriented model of global governance. Its core lies in establishing an order based on justice, mutual benefit rather than national strength, and on respect rather than coercion. This entails focusing on and striving to eliminate the widespread structural violence embedded in international society, thereby advancing toward a positive global peace.

This structural violence manifests in multiple dimensions: unfair trade rules and exploitative labour divisions within the global economic order; de facto inequality among nations in the international political system, along with neocolonial practices and hegemonic interference by powerful countries; cultural imperialism, systemic racism, and the monopoly over knowledge production and information dissemination by developed countries; the inequitable impacts of climate change and the continued ecological exploitation of the Global South countries by the Global North. These institutionalized forms of violence often serve as breeding grounds for conflicts and wars around the world.

If efforts remain confined to surface-level political manoeuvring and crisis management in international relations, it may be possible to temporarily prevent a few conflicts from erupting. Yet such approaches cannot eradicate the conditions that give rise to recurrent warfare. As long as deep-seated structural violence in the global system remains unaddressed, war will continue to recur as an inevitable outcome. Therefore, to achieve lasting global peace, it is not enough to rely solely on tactical mediation and conflict resolution. Instead, it is essential to promote the structural reform of global governance and the reconstruction of a global moral order. Although this transformation is immensely difficult, it constitutes an indispensable foundation for sustainable global peace.

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Confucian Social Philosophy Between Self and Family

*Kevin James TURNER**

Abstract

Our world is increasingly chaotic. It is important to draw on philosophical resources to help in navigating the coming turbulence. As a philosophical tradition born of troubled times, Confucianism is one such resource. Confucianism is not necessarily pacificist but is characterized by a consciousness for the well-being of others and society. This article looks to the Confucian relational self, social ontology, and the political significance of the family. It is guided by Confucius' statement that when the way fails in the world one should conceal themselves and his claim that governing is to be found in the family rather than being employed in government. When contextualized within Confucian social philosophy, we are afforded a perspective that shows how the ontological structure of the self-other relationship makes the family a public rather than private institution and informs possible avenues of political action when the way fails in the world.

Keywords: Confucian philosophy, relational self, social ontology, family, public and private

Konfucijanska socialna filozofija med jazom in družino

Izvleček

Naš svet postaja vse bolj kaotičen. Pomembno je, da črpamo iz filozofskih virov, ki nam lahko pomagajo pri soočanju s prihajajočimi izzivi. Konfucijanstvo, filozofska tradicija, ki je nastala v nemirnih časih, je eden takšnih virov. Konfucianizem ni nujno pacifističen, vendar je osnovan na zavesti o blaginji drugih in družbe. Ta članek preučuje konfucijanski relacijski jaz, socialno ontologijo in politični pomen družine. Vodilo mu je Konfucijeva izjava, da se je treba, ko v svetu ni več prave poti, skriti, ter njegova trditev, da je vladanje mogoče najti v družini, in ne v službi vlade. Ko to umestimo v okvir konfucijske socialne filozofije, dobimo perspektivo, ki kaže, kako ontološka struktura odnosa med jazom in drugim ustvarja družino kot javno, in ne zasebno institucijo, ter nakazuje možne poti političnega delovanja, ko v svetu ni več prave poti.

Ključne besede: konfucijska filozofija, relacijski jaz, socialna ontologija, družina, javno in zasebno

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Confucian Philosophy's Social Orientation

Confucianism is a philosophy of social action, and despite its talk of harmony (Li 2014), it is not necessarily a pacifism. From Confucius' disciple Zi Lu 子路, who died fighting for his lord against a *coup d'état* in the state of Wei (Lau 1979, 210), to the much later Wang Yangming 王陽明, who personally led military suppressions of rebellions (Isreal 2014) and Wang Chuanshan 王船山 who actively participated in the Ming resistance against the Qing government (Tan 2021, 21–35), Confucians of all kinds have found it necessary to participate in activities that are decidedly not pacifist. This does not rule out pacifist action, but it does show that pacificism is not a necessary feature of Confucian identity. What is definitive of Confucian identity, this article maintains, is the common belief that social change is possible. Confucius was, after all, ridiculed for "knowing he cannot succeed but trying anyways" (*Analects* 14.38). Following Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, Confucian philosophy can be characterized by a "consciousness of worry" (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識) (Xu 2001, 18–22), implying that Confucians take responsibility for the well-being of society and the state. Confucianism is not, and should not be, a do-nothing philosophy.

While the phrase "inner sageliness outer kingliness" (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) first appears in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 where in the final "Tianxia 天下" chapter it laments the social, cultural, and political chaos of its time, it later came to represent the Confucian ethico-political ideal (Cai 1984, 145–50; Chan 2003, 105–25; Wang 2021, 168–218).[1] As Jana Rošker describes it:

> The inner sage represents the consciousness of a morally aware Self that is constantly cultivating its personality and has internalized all the important principles of Confucian morality… [and] the external ruler is the public, political counterpart to the internal sage. (Rošker 2023, 81)

This double nature of the Confucian ideal highlights that Confucianism is an "in the world" philosophy. It does not concern itself with personal cultivation alone, but links one's moral cultivation to the task of caring for the world. The phrase "inner sageliness outer kingliness" is heuristically useful, too. What does it mean for "sageliness" to be "inner" and "kingliness" to be "outer"? How do these two dimensions relate to each other? Are they two distinct realms, or do they somehow interact with each other? Is "outer kingliness" predicated on "inner sageliness" or

1 John Makeham notes the modern Taiwanese Confucian scholar Lin Anwu's 林安梧 dissatisfaction with New Confucianism's overemphasis on the "inner sageliness" ideal "at the expense of practice of social application" (2003, 42).

the other way around? When we consider the realm of politics and social action, how do "inner" and "outer" relate to the realms of the "public" (*gong* 公) and the "private" (*si* 私)?[2]

The family provides an approach for unfolding these questions. From the importance given to family in Roger Ames' (2021; 2025) role ethics, to Sun Xiangchen's 孫向晨 (2019) attempt to reconcile modern individualism with classical Chinese notions on the family and Zhang Xianglong's 張祥龍 (2025) phenomenological reinterpretations of "family and filiality", the prominence of the family in Confucian philosophy is evident. Generally speaking, when we think of the family we think of something private, something that "goes on" within the four walls of a house and between two individuals bound in a legal (sometimes religious) contract, usually with children and often grandparents. Conceiving of the family as a public institution would seem to devalue the family, yet the Confucians understood the importance of well-ordered, individual families to the greater public good and were well-aware of its political nature. As Roger Ames writes "We can go back to the *Analects of Confucius* to argue that it is the family that is traditionally taken to be the ultimate source of governance" (Ames 2025, 210). *Analects* 1.2 states "It is rare for a person who is filial and fraternal to be fond of disobeying their superiors" and the *Daxue* 大學 (*Expansive Learning*) says "Being filial is how one serves one's ruler". These passages show that social and political order is rooted in a bottom-up system where the family takes precedence over the state in determining whether harmony or chaos reigns. This is why Yan Fu 嚴復 remarked that socio-political order is 70% the family and only 30% the state (Zhou 2010, 19). Yet when considered from the perspective of the Confucian relational self and the social ontology that informs it, the role of the family as a public institution in effecting socio-political order takes on a deeper philosophical meaning.[3] When understood in the interpretive context of

2 Erica Brindley (2013) has argued that "public and private" emerged as a problematic in the 4th century BCE in China. Rory O'Niell has also discussed facets of this problem in early Chinese political philosophy (2025).

3 I. M. Sullivan has challenged the role of the Confucian family in the constitution of sociopolitical persons by reference to queer experiences of the family. Noting that "the current Confucian social ontology structurally excludes certain vulnerable groups, such as queer persons and persons with disabilities" (Sullivan 2021, 271), Sullivan distinguishes between biological and chosen families arguing that "at the structural level … a Confucian role ethics rooted in biological family relations is harming queer children insofar as it systematically neglects to provide a path for becoming human and flourishing" and "chosen families and other queer kin relations are common in queer communities not only among those who have been rejected by biological family but also by those who are loved by their birth family or need 'other roots' in order to become human and flourish" (ibid., 275–76). By focusing on the lived experiences of queer youths today, Sullivan highlights a particular failing of the Confucian family as it is practiced in fact, but as this article intends to show, Confucian theorizing on the public dimension of the family does not limit it to biological relations but necessarily includes non-biological relations within its relational network.

Confucian social ontology, it becomes clear how private or local activities can have public or global effects.[4]

This article is guided by two passages from the *Analects*:

> When the way prevails in the world, one should show themselves; when the way fails in the world, one should conceal themselves. (8.13)

> Someone asked Confucius: 'Why aren't you in government?' Confucius replied: '*The Book of Documents* says: 'Being filial with one's parents and fraternal with one's brothers; apply this to governance.' If this is what is meant by governance, then what reason is there to be in government to engage in governance?' (2.21)

What does "concealing" oneself when political disorder reigns and "family as governance" mean for Confucian ethics and political philosophy? Does "concealing" imply the total retreat from the political domain? How does the "family" function as a political arena? This article will look to the Confucian family, arguing from its understanding of the self as relational and its social ontology that the family should be understood as "public" rather than "private" in order to show not only how Confucian ethico-political philosophy is rooted in the family but how work in the family has socio-political consequences.[5]

4 It is necessary to recognize that the Confucian family has not always been the healthiest of institutions, as the prescribed division of labour that dictates men work outside and women work inside has been used by patriarchal power structures to oppress women. However, this "division of labour" is questionable. Richard Lynn's translation of the "Family" (*jiaren* 家) hexagram from the *Zhouyi* 周易 (*Book of Changes*) is revealing: "As far as the Family is concerned, the women's proper place is inside it, and the man's proper place is outside" (Lynn 1994, 363). It is unclear how the man's proper place could be outside the family if the family is understood as the marriage unit constituted by the husband and the wife. A man's working in the world is not "external" to the family, because it is presumably on behalf of the family. If the man's working outside was not related to the family, then the meaning of the "Family" hexagram would not make much sense. The wife's working "within", also, is not necessarily limited to the confines of the physical space of the house. The wife was often tasked with managing family affairs (it is still common today for Chinese wives to manage the family's finances, including the husband's income, allocating him an allowance), and since this includes the husband, her work necessarily has a "public" dimension, too. Could we, in light of this, reformulate the "inner/outer" distinction in terms of a functional view: As part of the family, both man and woman do have distinct roles, but the husband's working outside of the home might take place outside the spatial parameters of the physical home but not "outside" the family in a functional sense, and the wife's working at home might take place within the spatial parameters of the physical home but is likewise not "inside" the family thereby but is "inside" because the work she does has functional significance, too?

5 A methodological note: The task taken up herein is not one of historical reconstruction but one of philosophical reconstruction. In other words, while it takes historical accuracy as an indispensable element of research into Chinese philosophy, it does not consider it to be the end of the story.

The Confucian Relational Self

A central problematic in modern philosophy coming from the Western tradition has been the question of the ontological status of the self. The traditional understanding of the self can be correlated with the "liberal individual" understood as independent, autonomous, and rational. Each self exists on its own without recourse to other people, reason is a pre-social faculty that all selves possess, and autonomy characterizes one's actions when done according to universally valid reason rather than the dictates of the relative opinions of others. Robert Solomon has described this conception of the self as involving the "transcendental pretence" where it is understood as "timeless, universal, and in each one of us around the globe and through history" (Solomon 1989, 4) and "that in all essential matters everyone, everywhere, is the same" (ibid., 6). Solomon identifies the beginning of this transcendental pretence in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *The Social Contract* laments that "man was born free and is everywhere in chains" (Rousseau 2002, 156). This conception of the self as ontologically independent undermines its relationship with others and humans' basic sociality. In this Rousseauean conception of the individual, the self is encumbered where all relations are external and are added on from the outside like chains. This implies that social relationality is necessarily one of conflict rather than cooperation. If I am to be free, then I cannot be beholden to others. This way of understanding the nature of the self has, for better or worse, become a part of modernity's shared common sense, and even though it has been challenged by postmodernism, pragmatism, and other intellectual traditions, it nevertheless remains influential.

As an alternative to the radical individualism of the "transcendental pretence", Confucianism has been turned to as offering a relational conception of selfhood. Rather than conceiving of relations as external, Confucian philosophy

Philosophical reconstruction looks for the possible meanings nascent within the texts and draws them out, reconfiguring what they say into a coherent philosophical position. Employing an analogy where Confucians are housebuilders, Chenyang Li writes: "The philosophical approach to reconstructing the house, in contrast [to the historical approach of describing its architecture], requires us to remedy its design flaws, replace decayed material, and methodically modify parts that are no longer suitable for modern living, to the best of our ability today" (Li 2024, 9). This does not entail the wholesale overthrow of what Confucianism once was to create something entirely new; instead, it implies that there is something in the old tradition that is "valuable in important ways and is mostly worthy of inheriting" (ibid.). The task, then, is not an act of *ex nihilo* creation, but is the *creatio in situ* project of rebuilding what "the ancient housebuilders had attempted while also taking into consideration what they would have opted for" in our own times (ibid.). Philosophical reconstruction thus has the function of generating something new through interpretive mechanisms where two horizons are fused, thereby (re)constructing an interpretation that is consistent with the texts themselves and philosophically meaningful. With the state of our own world today more and more resembling the socio-political chaos of Confucius' own time, we have even more reason to appeal to Confucian thought for philosophical insight beyond sinological research paradigms.

takes them as internal, as part of the very constitution of the self.[6] As Herbert Fingarette puts it, "unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings" (Fingarette 1979, 217), and Rošker states that for Confucian philosophy "society is primary, since no individual, no one person, can survive outside it or without their fellow human beings and the community" (Rošker 2023, 85). What this means is that the self cannot be abstracted out of its contexts, but must be understood within them. These contexts not only include the synchronic dimension of one's social peers, but also the diachronic dimensions of history and culture. Rather than seeing others and society as external, where the self is encumbered by engaging with others, the Confucians see social relations as internal to one's own being or becoming. This means, in turn, that relationality is not to be understood in a top-down determinative fashion where society exerts absolute control over its members. Instead, as Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑 writes, "Classical Confucianism thinks that 'self' and 'other' are always situated in a consummately integrated harmonious state" (Huang 2017, 117). This means that the two poles of the relationship—self and other—constitute each other within a holistic process of becoming. This does not simply imply that self and other contribute to each other's constitution, it implies that the very constitution of the self includes the other. Self and other are ontologically inseparable. This line of thinking resonates with pragmatic philosophy: John Dewey attributes the emergence of mind to social dialogue (Dewey 1929, 170) and George Mead states that "the self is not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it is, so to speak, an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current" (Mead 1962, 182). Therefore, in this relational conception of the self, not only do selves exist within their social contexts, but their social contexts exist within the selves, too.

The stark contrast between this alternative conception of the self offered by Confucianism and the traditional understanding of the liberal individual has not been without controversy. In particular, those more aligned with the latter position worry that the Confucian self runs the risk of a radical relationality that undermines liberty and autonomy. Gan Chunsong 干春松 has given expression to this concern: "A view that has deeply penetrated people's minds is that the concepts of autonomy and the self do not exist within Confucian thinking, that the Confucian self always disappears within family and kin relationships" (Gan 2023, 95). Likewise, Philip J. Ivanhoe phrases the issue as follows:

> The Confucian relational view of the self, like many other East Asian models of the self, often is misunderstood as describing or requiring a 'loss' of self, which seems to advocate a plunge into oblivion or nihilism,

6 For a depiction of how "external" and "internal" relations differ, refer to the figures in Thomas Kasulis (2002, 37, 57, 96).

> possibilities that are alien, frightening, and wholly unappealing to most people's common sense—East or West. (Ivanhoe 2013, 21–22)

But is this concern warranted? Is it a "misunderstanding" or is there something expressed in these concerns that requires a solution? Or does the concern of those who express such a view stem from the inability to think outside of an "either/or" so characteristic of the Western tradition (Bernstein 1983, 8–20)? Are they so tied up within their own language game (Searle 1994, 2–4) that they cannot see the Confucian alternative as an alternative game itself? If the relational self does not succumb to a radical relationality that eliminates all possibility of the existence of particular selves as distinct from their social contexts, then how should we understand its relationality?

Again, resonances with pragmatism can help us make sense of Confucian social ontology, and the philosophy of John Dewey in particular is useful for understanding the nature of the "internal relationality" of the Confucian self. In his *Experience and Nature*, eschewing the stark dualism Western philosophy inherited from the Cartesian tradition, Dewey proposes a functional conceptualization of the inner and outer relationship, where what is considered "inner" is what functions within the life activities of any given organism: "A living organism and its life process involve a world or nature temporally and spatially 'external' to itself but 'internal' to its functions" (Dewey 2016 [1929], 278), and in his *Art as Experience* he elaborates: "[L]ife goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it … The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way" (Dewey 1958, 13). A tree, for example, is spatially and temporally delimited (it is in that place and that time, unable to move), the sun, water, soil, insects, and so on are all physically external to it. But, as far as the life activities of the tree are concerned, can it live without the sun, water, soil, and insects? Without these, there is no tree. None of these "external things" lose their physical externality, the sun is so many millions of miles away, but when considered from the perspective of the tree, the sun could not be more internal to its existence. This line of thinking is also applicable to the social existence of humans. In his *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey introduces the notion of "habits" which are "like functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment" (Dewey 2002, 14), and affirms the role of society by writing "the social environment acts through native impulses and speech and moral habitudes manifest themselves" (ibid., 15). From this we can see the social, that is, other people, function within the life processes of particular selves and should not be considered "external" to them in any strict sense of the term. This, then, is the meaning of "internal relationality": A relation is internal as long as it functions within the life processes of the thing in question.

For Confucian philosophy, others and society are internal to the constitution of the self because they function within the self's life process of becoming. But what are these relations? How do they constitute the Confucian self? What is the role of the family in the formation of the self? In order to make sense of this it is necessary to look in greater detail at Confucian social ontology.

Confucian Social Ontology

What is the social ontology behind the Confucian relational self and how does it inform Confucian thinking on the political function of the family? The Confucian self can be described as "opening like the character ten" (*shizi dakai* 十字打開),[7] indicating it relates to others along horizontal (synchronic) and vertical (diachronic) axes (Hall and Ames 1998, 32). These two dimensions constitute the basic structure of Confucian social ontology. The horizontal and vertical dimensions of the relational self constitute it as a nexus of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships where individual selves as parts and the societies to which they belong each contain one in the other. This "mutual containment" of self and other can be understood in terms of what David Hall and Roger Ames have called the "focus-field" model:

> The self is focal in that it both constitutes and is constituted by the field in which it resides. The field is the order constituting its relevant environs. By definition, the focal self cannot be independent. The structure and continuity of the focal self is immanental, inhering in and continuous with its context. And since the field is always entertained from a particular perspective, the self as focus shares the particularity, indeed uniqueness, of the particular perspective. (ibid., 1998, 43)

In light of this "focus-field" model we see that there is no separation between the self and its field, that is, from others or society; each mutually entails the other. What's more, this "focus-field" holography resonates greatly with George Mead's social psychology that affirms the particularity of individuals in their constitutional relationship with society. He writes:

7 The character for "ten", *shi* 十, is written like a cross or a plus sign. Even though this phrase was first coined by the Song dynasty Confucian philosopher Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1192 CE) to describe the "heart-mind/nature theory" (*xinxinglun* 心性論) of the *Mengzi* 孟子 where "nature" (*xing* 性) is connected to the "heart-mind" and *tian* 天vertically and to "caring government" (*renzheng* 仁政) and "caring for the people and loving things" (*renmin aiwu* 仁民愛物) horizontally (Cai 1984, 228), I believe that applying it to an interpretation of Confucian social ontology can be hermeneutically productive.

> The fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it—or rather of this organized behaviour pattern which it exhibits, and which they prehend in their respective structures, is not in the least incompatible with, or destructive of, the fact that every individual self has its own peculiar individuality, its own unique pattern; because each individual self within that process, while it reflects in its organized structure the behavior pattern of that process as a whole, does so from its own particular and unique standpoint within that process, and thus reflects in its organized structure a different aspect or perspective of this whole social behavior pattern from that which is reflected in the organized structure of any other self within that process … because each reflects this relational pattern from its own unique standpoint; so that the common social origin and constitution of individual selves and their structures does not preclude wide individual differences and variations among them. (Mead 1962, 201)

From Mead we see that the pattern of society's structure is internalized in individuals who, from their unique perspectives within that society, reflect the structure back out, to others and to society itself. The importance of this reflectivity should not be understated, as it implies a social network of mutual containment (in the way a mirror contains an image) where society as a whole and all members thereof are reflected in each and every individual self. This infinite reflectivity that occurs between individual and social patterns across unique perspectives within the social whole provides an impetus for transformation and change, too, because changes in one self ripple through the reflective chain affecting the totality of the social pattern and all other selves which reflect it.

To see how this works in the Confucian context, it is necessary to introduce several key concepts from Confucian thought, especially *ren* 仁 (love, care, consummate humanity). Through an analysis of this concept in conjunction with auxiliary concepts, we will be able to see how the relationship between self and other is a dynamic ontology that unfolds across horizontal interpersonal and vertical intergenerational relationships whereby self and other, self and society become integrated in a dialectically creative process that provides the logic behind the Confucian conception of the family as political.

The horizontal dimension of interpersonal relationships is perhaps best exemplified by Confucian ethics, particularly as reflected in the Confucian concept of *ren*. But what does *ren* mean? Beginning with the logography of the received version of the character that is written as "person/people" (*ren* 人) and "two" (*er* 二), we can clearly see indication of the horizontal dimension of interpersonal relationships. This is one piece of evidence behind the idea that "without others there is

no self" seen above. Second, *ren* is also defined as "loving others" (*airen* 愛人). It should be pointed out that when Confucius uses the phrase "loving others" the term "others" is a translation of *ren* 人, and while this term is quite general in its reference, even referring to "the people" as a political entity, it is also often connected to the term *ji* 己, i.e. self (Fingarette 1979, 131; Shun 2004, 187), informing us that it should be understood as "others" in contrast to "oneself".[8] So when Confucius says "loving others" is *ren* he is not only referring to the ideal government's (i.e. Mengzi's *renzheng* 仁政) relationship with the people under its rule, but also to ethical interpersonal relationships.

The horizontal dimension can also be found in the ethical notion of "extension". In *Analects* 6.30, when a student asks Confucius if someone who was able to "broadly extend to the people and rescue the masses" (*boshi yu min er neng jizhong* 博施於民而能濟眾) could be considered *ren* 仁, Confucius replies that this would be sagacity (*sheng* 聖) and then defines *ren* thus: "Establish what you want in yourself in others and achieve what you want in yourself in others" (*ji yuli er liren ji yuda er daren* 己欲立而立人己欲達而達人). To be able to "establish" and "achieve" in others what one oneself wants requires that one understands oneself first in order to extend what one desires to others. This is why Confucius continues: "To be able to make analogies with what is near at hand [i.e. oneself] can be called the method of *ren*" (*nengjin qupi kewei ren zhi fang ye* 能近取譬可謂仁之方也). This also explains the close connection between *ren* and "knowing" (*zhi* 知) seen in *Analects* 12.22, for example (Wang 2022). Furthermore, in both *Analects* 12.2 and 14.24 Confucius states: "That which you yourself do not desire, do not extend (*shi* 施) to others". This negative formulation of the ethical rule highlights the horizontal dimension between self and other whereby one begins from one's own situation and extends it to others. Importantly, what is revealed in these passages from the *Analects* is a relationship that takes place between oneself and particular others, the man on the street, the teacher in the classroom, the worker in the shop, and so on.[9]

The *Mengzi* continues the notion of "extension" applying it not only to his ethics but also his political philosophy. *Mengzi* 1A7 records a long conversation between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi wherein the former recounts an experience the latter had encountering an ox being led for sacrifice in the consecration of a bell. When Mengzi inquires why the king replaced the ox with a sheep, he replies: "I could not bear its suffering, as if an innocent man being led to his execution".

8 *Analects* 1.4, for example, records a saying from Zengzi: "I daily reflect on my person (*shen* 身) on three things: Was I dedicated in my dealings with others (*ren* 人)? Was I trustworthy in engaging friends? Did I practice what I learned?" Here, *ren* is clearly used in the general sense of "others" rather than the political sense of "the people".

9 Steve Burik writes: "The smallest framework of this relationality [of the Confucian self] deals with the specific relations a self can take towards specific others" (Burik 2010, 741).

Mengzi then takes the opportunity to elaborate on how much the king would achieve if only he would extend his grace (*tuien* 推恩) to his subjects in the same way he did the ox. This notion of extension is also seen in the *Mengzi*'s idea that the sovereign should share his wealth with the people. *Mengzi* 1B1 records another conversation between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi on music. The king is worried that his being overly fond of music is a problem, but Mengzi reassures that there is nothing more to being a true king than "sharing your fondness [for music] with the people" (*yumin tongle* 與民同樂). While the relationship between the king and his subjects is certainly vertical, Mengzi's point is that the king should distribute his wealth across the land. This spatial notion, whereby the wealth of the king is spread, is contained within the word *shi* 施 (i.e. to extend) seen above. The *tuan* 彖 commentary to the "Qian 乾" hexagram in the *Zhouyi* 周易 (*Book of Changes*) writes: "Clouds move and rain spreads" (*yunxing yushi* 雲行雨施). Rain certainly falls from up on high, but as clouds spread across the firmament it falls to cover all of the world below. This is reflected in another natural metaphor from *Analects* 12.19, where the virtue of the ruler is compared to the wind that causes the grass, the virtue of the people, to sway when it blows. The dimensional ambiguity of the political relationship in fact reinforces rather than undermines the bidimensional reading of the self, because even though the two dimensions can be identified as distinct, in the final analysis, they cannot be separated.

The vertical dimension of the Confucian self is best characterized by intergenerationality and, interestingly, the concept of *ren* is also relevant here. First, throughout the classical corpus, there is a conceptual link established between the terms *ren* and *qin* 親 (parents, relatives, family).[10] The *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, a dictionary from the Han dynasty, simply defines *ren* as *qin* (*ren qin ye* 仁親也). The "Jingjie 經解" (Interpreting the Classics) chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*) also states "it is called *ren* when those above and those below each treat the other with family affection". The *Mengzi*, too, makes this connection: both 6B13 and 7A15 define "treating one's family with affection" (*qinqin* 親親) as *ren*. In addition, in 1A1 Mengzi states "there has never been one who is *ren* yet has abandoned his parents (*qin* 親)", and in 4A27 he also says "the fullness of *ren* is serving one's parents (*qin* 親)".[11] The conceptual link between *ren* and "parents" and by extension "family" establishes a vertical intergenerational relationship between self and others. The vertical dimension of the relational self is also expressed in the Confucian concept of "filiality" (*xiao* 孝). The *Xiaojing* 孝經 (*Classic of Filiality*) begins with Confucius teaching his student Zengzi 曾子 that "your body, with its skin and hair, are received from your parents, to bring

10 See Zhang (2025, 1–10) and Sun (2025, 170–98) for further discussions of *qin* 親.

11 This connection is less evident in the *Xunzi* 荀子, but in the "Dalüe 大略" chapter it states "love is the expression of one's consummate humanity, therefore it is found in 'familial affection'" (*ren ai gu qin* 仁愛故親).

it to no harm is the beginning of filiality", and he continues "filiality begins in serving one's parents" (*xiao shiyu shiqin* 孝始於事親). Thus, both *ren* and *xiao* are connected through the concept of *qin* and, hence, in *Analects* 2.2 Confucius states: "Filiality and fraternity are the root of *ren*" (*xiaoti yezhe qi wei ren zhi ben yu* 孝弟也者其為仁之本與).

The *Xiaojing* passage is important for another reason: it highlights that the intergenerationality of the Confucian self also involves the body insofar as it is consanguineous with both one's ancestors and descendants (Sun, X 2019, 228–35). One's body is "received" (*shou* 受) from one's parents in the *Xiaojing*. In the "Jiyi 祭義" (Sacrificial Meanings) chapter of the *Liji* it states "one's person is the inherited body (*yiti* 遺體) of one's mother and father" and this is repeated in the "Zengzi daxiao 曾子大孝" (Zengzi's great filiality) chapter of the *Dadai liji* 大戴禮記 (*Dai the Elder's Book of Rites*), only with the words "mother and father" (*fumu* 父母) replaced with "parents" (*qin* 親). Not only does this refer to the focus-field relationship of self and other through the rhizomatic nature of the body, specifically the *ti* 體 body (Sommer 2008), but it also brings into resolution the "focus-field" model of relationality where the child is a focus within the field of the family drawing its various relations (i.e., parent-child, sibling-sibling, uncle-nephew, etc.) into a single nexus.

In addition, the relationship between body and intergenerationality is also connected to the concept of *ren*. While the standard version of the character received from history is written with the components for "person" and "two", the Guodian manuscripts unearthed in Hubei in 1993 contain an alternative version which provides a useful heuristic for understanding the intergenerationality of the Confucian relational self (Wang 2021, 1–46). This alternative version of the word *ren* is written as "body above heart-mind below" (*shenshang xinxia* 身上心下), that is, as 㤰. On the face of it, this might seem to undercut the self's relationship as it lacks the clear relational indicator (i.e. "two") of the standard version. It might also seem that being written as "body above heart-mind below" gives a more individualist valence to the concept of *ren*. However, given the intergenerationality of the body already mentioned, it is quite clear that this *ren* is still relational. In fact, it can be considered more relational because the character used for "body" is *shen* 身 which in some of its earliest uses referred to the pregnant body.[12] This, then, includes at least three people—the mother, the child, and the father—whereas the standard version only has two. Neither should the Confucian body be simply considered in physical terms. Instead, the Confucian body is social and cultural, as Gan Chunsong states that the body is a social

12 See the "Daming" ode as an example. In addition, some of its pre-standardized written forms clearly show a protruding belly. See https://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk//Lexis/lexi-mf/search.php?word=身 for more on this character, including versions in small seal, bronze, oracle, Guodian, and other scripts.

product produced through "ritual norms" (*liyi guifan* 禮儀規範) (2023, 107–18) and both Huang Chun-chieh (2016, 31) and Yang Rur-bin 楊儒賓 (1996, 15) confirm that it is a cultural body. Thus, not only is the body intergenerational within a familial line of descent, but it is also intergenerational within a genealogical transmission of culture.

Furthermore, that the Guodian version of the character for *ren* also includes "heart-mind" cannot be ignored. This "heart-mind" is not the *cogito* of familiar Cartesian brands of philosophy with the "transcendental pretence" separating it from and elevating it above others and the world. The "heart-mind" is also intergenerational. This can be gleaned from *Mengzi* 6A7, which records the barley analogy that is often read as putting forth the "heart-mind" as having some kind of *a priori* structure or metaphysical nature, but further examination of this passage shows that the *Mengzi*'s appeal to historical figures associated with the formation of cultural goods implicitly employs a notion of "sedimentation" whereby the tastes of the five senses are cultivated and enculturated within a historico-cultural tradition. This is then applied to the "heart-mind's" fondness for "patterns" (*li* 理—recall Mead above) which, rather than arguing for a transcendental structure of the mind, situates the "heart-mind" within a historico-cultural genealogy (Turner 2024).

Finally, I would like to return to the concept of *ren* in its association with "love". While we have seen that the standard definition of *ren* is "loving others", this is only one side of its meaning. Passages recorded in both the "Zidao 子道" chapter of the *Xunzi* 荀子 and the "Sanshu 三恕" chapter of the *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 (*Family Sayings of Confucius*) record a conversation between Confucius and three of his disciples—Zi Lu, Zi Gong 子貢, and Yan Hui 顏回. In each he asks them the two-part question of "What is the wise person like?" (*zhizhe ruohe* 知者若何) and "What is the humane person like?" (*renzhe ruohe* 仁者若何). His disciples provide three different answers. Zi Lu first responds that the "wise" causes others to "know themselves (i.e. the agent behind the causing)" and the "humane" causes others to "love themselves". Zi Gong then responds that the "wise" "know others" and the "humane" "love others". Finally, Yan Hui responds that the "wise" "knows oneself" (*zizhi* 自知) and the "humane" "loves oneself" (*ziai* 自愛). Among these three answers, Confucius praises the first two as referring to "scholars" (*shi* 士) and "scholarly exemplars" (*shi junzi* 士君子), respectively, and the last he praises as referring to "enlightened exemplars" (*ming junzi* 明君子). It should be kept in mind that these three answers to what the "wise" and the "humane" are like are not separate or exclusive, as all three can be applicable at the same time. The one who loves others is likely to cause them to love themselves in return, and the one who loves himself is likely to love others as a consequence, too. However, we still have to reckon with the fact that Confucius ranks them in ascending order with "knowing oneself" and "loving oneself" as

the highest. But what does this "self-love" specifically mean for the bidimensionality of the Confucian social ontology already discussed? Does it not lead to an egoism that undermines the relationality of the self?

No. If this "self-love" is situated within the bidimensional social ontology of Confucian philosophy where self and other mutually constitute each other, then this means that part of what is loved in "self-love" is the other. If we take the "focus-field" and Meadean models of how self and other relate in addition to Dewey's functionalist reformulation of the inner/outer relationship discussed above which understands part and whole to relate processually, holistically, and interdependently, then we can see that in "loving oneself" one is not egoistically turning away from others but is instead turning toward the "other" that functions within the life processes of oneself. This reflexive move is also the mechanism behind Confucian social ontology's mode of reproduction. Because selves are relationally constituted where both others as particular existences and others as the social totality are included within the ontological makeup of each individual self, therefore the existence of one self and the existence of another self each contribute to the becoming of both selves, and as such, when one self reflexively turns to "self-love" it is effecting a change in the constitutional relationship of the other self and when the other self reflexively turns to "self-love" it is likewise effecting a change in the relational constitution of the first self. Therefore, with the notion of "self-love" contextualized within the bidimensionality of the self-other relationship we are afforded an understanding of Confucian social ontology as being both holistic and processual, where the self is situated along horizontal lines of interpersonal relationships and along vertical lines of intergenerational relationships which coincide or meet in the person of each individual self contributing to their becoming. At the same time, through "self-love" each individual self turns toward itself and the whole of the social complex which is included within its own constitutional becoming in acts of self-cultivation that reproduce the relationships which constitute each self and the entire social ontology. This processual logic of the reproductive nature of the self-other relationship informs Confucian theories on social action, and helps us understand the connection between "concealing" and the "family as governance".

Politics Between Self and Family

The social ontology of Confucian philosophy underscores the dialectical relationship of self and society, and with this ontology as background the logic of how self-cultivation effects social transformation should be clear: because society is included within the self, by working on the self one is working on the social relations in one's existential constitution. But how does this social ontology of the relational self involve the problematic of the public and the private?

John Dewey is, again, enlightening on this point. In his *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey reformulates the categories of "public" and "private" in "consequentialist" terms (1946, 12–15). On the one hand, an act is private if it has private consequences, even if it is carried out by a public figure (appropriating tax revenue for personal expenses) (see Diaz 2021). On the other hand, an act is public if it has public consequences, even if it is carried out by a private individual (using one's own resources to clean up illegal dumping sites) (see St. Cry 2025). Thus, in conjunction with his reformulation of the "inner and outer" distinction seen above, we can say that the "public" is included within the "inner" as long as it functions within the life activities of whatever organism is in question. In addition, Dewey is also aware of the importance of "social conditions" as they function within the formation of selves, stating that "to change the working character or will of another we have to alter objective conditions which enter into his habits" (Dewey 2002, 19). Here, it is clear that the "social conditions" are "public" but function within the formation of "private" habits that constitute the self (ibid., 25). Dewey's philosophical reflections on the "inner and outer", "private and public" in conjunction with his notions of "habits" and "conditions" provide a dialectical understanding of how self relates to society and ostensibly "private" affairs can have far-reaching "public" consequences.

Understood in these Deweyan terms, it is clear why the family plays such an important role in Confucian ethico-political thought. Due to the social ontology, the family is not only a private matter, but is *per se* involved, implicated, and entangled in socio-political affairs. Therefore, when Confucius says that conducting oneself with filiality and fraternity in the family is "to govern", he is not being facetious in the face of an unkind critic. He is, in fact, appealing to his own social ontology. World order begins with oneself in familial contexts not as a stepping stone, but because the whole world is contained within the life process of the self and the initial circle of the family.

The *Daxue* can be helpful in revealing the ethico-political logic of the family. It introduces the sequence of "cultivating oneself, ordering one's family, governing a state, and pacifying the world" (*xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia* 修身齊家治國平天下). "Self-cultivation" comes first in the list, but it should not be taken as the first step in a series, nor should it be understood in terms of individualism because the term for "oneself" is the word *shen* and, as we have seen, this implies intergenerational consanguinity and cultural genealogy. Instead, all four activities should be considered taking place simultaneously. We can say that someone who has "cultivated himself" does not necessarily "order his family" let alone "pacify the whole world", but we cannot say that someone who has "pacified the whole world" has not or no longer performs the previous three. In fact, the *Daxue* makes this clear when it states "the ruler does not establish a teaching in his state that he has not [established] in his own family" (*junzi bu chujia er chengjiao yu guo*

君子不出家而成教於國). The question here is what is the model for the ruler to order his own family on? The *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Focusing the Familiar) states: "The way of the ruler finds its beginning in the [relation] of husband and wife." This means that the model for the ruler is found in the basic family unit (Tu 1989, 112), and clues us into the bottom-up emergence of socio-political order. At the same time, recalling the wind and grass analogy seen above, if the ruler can order his family he in turn becomes a model for the common people. Bottom-up emergence is thus involved in a top-down feedback loop effecting dialectical progress. Hence, the *Daxue* continues: "If a single family is humane, then the whole state will give rise to humaneness" (*yijia ren yiguo xingren* 一家仁一國興仁). This dimension between self and the world is seen in *Analects* 12.1, too, where Confucius says: "To discipline oneself and return to ritual is to be humane. To be able to discipline oneself returning to ritual for a day the whole world would then return to humanity."[13] We have here, then, a Confucian version of the Daoist notion of "seeking extension through contraction" (*yiqu qiushen* 以屈求伸)[14] whereby the private affair of "disciplining oneself to return to ritual" has public significance with wide effects. This is why Confucius rhetorically continues: "Humaneness proceeds from oneself. How could it proceed from others?"

Confucius's statement that one should "conceal" oneself when order does not prevail in the world does not entail the total withdrawal from socio-political action. Instead, it entails a shift in focus of where and how social action is taken. The notion of "concealing" refers to removing oneself from overt political arenas to less overt ones, in particular, the family. This is why Confucius also claims that filiality and fraternity are the work of governance. Public affairs are public, but so are private affairs. This is why "self-love" is important within Confucian social ontology because it highlights that local action is global action, since in reflexively turning toward oneself one is turning toward the relations one has with others and with society that constitute one's being or becoming. Therefore, beyond the public nature of the family expressed in the Confucian position that a consequence of well-ordered families is well-ordered societies, Confucian philosophy maintains that families are public in nature because they form the first circle of the self's relationality and the nexus in and through which society is dialectically reproduced.

13 The meaning of this passage seems to be open to interpretation. Both D.C. Lau (1979, 112) and Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (2014, 121) understand the *gui* 歸 as "consider" in the sense of "to confer" (*yu* 與) a title (this reading is found in Zhu Xi 朱熹). Huang Kan 皇侃, from the Southern Liang dynasty, however, seems to imply that this *gui* has the sense of "to return" giving the sentence the meaning "the whole world returns to the ruler they consider to be humane" (Huang 2013, 298). There is a third way of understanding this, too. Li Zehou 李澤厚 translates this passage into Modern Chinese as "If there is a day where all do this then all of China will return to *ren*" (Li 1999, 269). Burton Watson (2007, 80) and Edward Slingerland (2003, 125) provide similar English translations.

14 See Zhang Zailin 張再林 (2016, 97–106) for more on this idea.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article the idea of "inner sageliness outer kingliness" was introduced to ask the question of how moral cultivation and social action relate. Now, through the lens of Confucian social ontology, it can be seen how they work together in a dialectical manner where since self and other each contain the other, moral cultivation runs along the relational lines of the self's becoming outward toward other selves and society. By becoming a moral person one has influence on the moral character of others, and others, by becoming moral themselves, in turn, contribute to one's further moral development due to the ontological notion of mutual containment. This social ontology also informs the Confucian understanding of the family as having public consequences as it dissolves the dichotomy of public and private, functionally situating the public world within the private family. Now, this Confucian social philosophy has relevance to our modern times. As social and political order is destabilized in unforeseen ways across the world, it is becoming harder to maintain confidence in the public institutions that were meant to ensure our well-being. Beyond trusting our institutions, and when working within them to try to make social changes becomes dangerous, one is faced with the question of whether one should continue to do so. The Confucian notion of the family as a public institution understood through its social ontology offers a way forward—a return to the family. However, we can conclude with a final question: Is the family enough? Or, in the 21st century, should the logic of Confucian social philosophy be extended beyond the family narrowly defined to include one's local communities? As the first circle of the self's relationality the family is important, but even in "concealment", socio-political action cannot stop there.

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THEMATIC FOCUS
50 YEARS OF ISCP:
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THE CULTURE OF PEACE: FROM ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

Models of Adaption and Complementarity

Complex Adaptive Systems and Chinese Philosophy: A Fruitful Resonance

*Margus OTT**

Abstract

In this paper, a connection is made between complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory and Chinese philosophy. Some central features of CAS are presented, grouped under a complexity and an adaptivity set. Under the complexity-set the following characteristics are discussed: complexity, connectedness, modularity, scales, boundaries, embeddedness, heterogeneity, perspectivism, implication centres, distributedness, robustness, and patterns. And under the adaptivity-set the following notions are discussed: adaptivity, dynamics, openness, contextuality, non-equilibrium, non-linearity, sensitivity to initial conditions, threshold effects, path dependency, emergence, self-organization, and temporality. Corresponding notions from the Chinese traditions are also presented, from different times and texts. This suggests that Chinese philosophical traditions could offer good ontologies for CAS. Conversely, CAS could be used to resist certain ossifying and mechanizing tendencies in the Chinese tradition; for instance, the idea that *yin-yang* and five phases can be tied to fixed entities and qualities. No homogeneous Chinese tradition is presupposed, and rather it is claimed that the ideas underlying CAS can be found across traditions and in several thinkers.

Keywords: complex adaptive systems, comparative philosophy, ecosystems, temporality, contextuality

Kompleksni adaptivni sistemi in kitajska filozofija: plodno sozvočje

Izvleček

Članek vzpostavlja povezavo med teorijo kompleksnih adaptivnih sistemov (KAS) in kitajsko filozofijo. Predstavljene so nekatere osrednje značilnosti KAS, razvrščene v sklop kompleksnosti in sklop adaptivnosti. V sklopu kompleksnosti članek obravnava naslednje značilnosti: kompleksnost, povezanost, modularnost, merila, meje, vpetost, heterogenost, perspektivizem, implikacijska središča, razpršenost, robustnost in vzorci. V sklopu adaptivnosti pa obravnava naslednje pojme: prilagoditvena zmožnost, dinamika, odprtost, kontekstualnost, neravnovesje, nelinearnost, občutljivost na začetne razmere, pragovni učinki, odvisnost od poti, emergenca, samoorganizacija in temporalnost. Članek prav tako predstavi ustrezne pojme iz kitajskih tradicij iz različnih obdobij in besedil. To nakazuje, da bi kitajske filozofske tradicije lahko ponudile dobre ontologije

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za KAS. Obratno pa bi KAS lahko uporabili za odpor proti določenim togim in mehanicističnim težnjam v kitajski tradiciji; na primer proti ideji, da je mogoče *yin-yang* ter pet faz vezati na fiksne entitete in lastnosti. Članek ne predpostavlja homogene kitajske tradicije, temveč trdi, da je mogoče ideje, ki so v temelju KAS, najti v različnih tradicijah in pri več mislecih.

Ključne besede: kompleksni adaptivni sistemi, primerjalna filozofija, ekosistemi, temporalnost, kontekstualnost

Introduction

In the following, I will try to map the study of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) to the Chinese tradition. One major problem with such mapping is that neither counterpart can be unambiguously defined.

First, there is no single, commonly accepted formal definition of a *Complex Adaptive System*, or of complexity itself, for that matter. In fact, the lack of a single and clear model of representing CAS could itself be seen as a characteristic of it. In everyday life we have no difficulty detecting a CAS (although we may be sometimes mistaken, of course), when the connectivity of a system gives unexpected results, both bad ("for want of a nail" kind of stories, troubles undergone by conference organizers, etc.) and good (when a discussion generates completely new and unexpected ideas). Informally, a CAS can be delimited as a system where the dynamics of connected elements gives novel outcomes. Instead of a more rigorous formal definition, later in this text we will give a list of interconnected characteristics of CAS.

At the same time, it is also not clear what the "Chinese tradition" is. Things thought and done in China—but where, exactly? In the Yellow River Basin? In the greatest extent of the Chinese empire? In its sphere of influence? In the shifting borders of its historical development? Or is the Chinese tradition about things thought and said in Chinese—but in what form of Chinese? Ancient Chinese is very different from Modern Chinese. Are translations into Chinese also part of the Chinese tradition? What about texts from overseas Chinese who write in other languages? Furthermore, when I talk about the Chinese tradition, is it truly the Chinese tradition or a hybrid with my own cultural background? Hence it is quite hopeless to try to define a core of Chineseness (or any other tradition, for that matter), since every tradition is evolving and in interaction with its surroundings (other human cultures, but also non-human actors), and no tradition is internally homogeneous. It is itself a complex adaptive system. Yet, in a loose sense, there are certain cultural patterns that were formed in the Yellow River Basin, and its connected areas, that shaped those thinkers I will cite in the following, and to which those thinkers themselves contributed. There formed a textual reservoir in the Chinese language

in its different and evolving forms, with which certain thinkers have related themselves, and which they have modified with their contributions.

In the following treatment, the heuristics is from CAS to the Chinese tradition, i.e., I bring out certain characteristics of CAS and then pick out matching examples from different Chinese texts. This work is meant as a broad, preliminary and sketchy exploration of the topic. It will require a much lengthier treatment to flesh it out, one that also uses case studies with an opposite direction of heuristics, i.e. taking a Chinese philosopher or philosophical text, and laying out its affinities with CAS.

In the following discussion, no common ground and no commonality is presupposed for CAS and the Chinese tradition (see Ott 2022). Rather, commonalities can be seen as growing out of such bringing together these two (or more, if seen as inhomogeneous and multiple) and making them *resonate* (see Ott 2024b). It is often a bad thing to have in mind a certain idea and then to see the whole world from that angle, through the lens of that idea. Yet this can also be turned into a strength, if one does not confuse it to be an objective description, and if one continues to listen to the target field, and to be open to its talking back, so as to be willing to transform one's initial idea in light of such feedback. This would give new directions to one's research, modified questions to the target, and another hermeneutic cycle can begin. The main value of such resonances is what these cycles are able to produce: new connections, new ideas.

Example of a Complex Adaptive System

Since there is no single definition of CAS, let us bring an example instead, after which we can extract some general features. This is the famous case of the introduction of Nile perch into Lake Victoria. This lake had a rich and complex ecosystem (Mambolo et al. 2025; Goldschmidt 1996; Chu, Strand and Fjelland 2003), notably with several hundred cichlid fish species, most of which were endemic and had speciated very quickly during the last 15,000 years. In the 1950s the Nile perch was released into Lake Victoria (seemingly by the colonial Ugandan government in 1954, see Pringle 2005, 785). This is a large predatory fish that can reach over two meters long and weigh over 200 kg. It was hoped that this commercially harvestable species would boost the fisheries. In 1980s, when the Nile perch population boomed, it did in fact increase the landings of fisheries significantly (Taabu-Munyaho et al. 2016).

However, it drove many (perhaps the majority of) native cichlid fish species to extinction. "The 'new' Lake Victoria, which emerged after the Nile perch explosion, had a depauperate fish fauna, effectively reduced to just three species, Nile perch, Nile tilapia and dagaa" (ibid., 136). This shifted the balance in favour of prawn, while loss of haplochromine phytoplanktivores contributed to algal bloom (Goldschmidt,

Witte and Wanink 1993), as well as the proliferation of water hyacinth (Guya 2024), which can block light, deplete oxygen and serve as breeding place for mosquitoes and snails that spread pathogens, but which on the other hand may impede fishing and hence protect the fish stock (Kateregga and Sterner 2009). Moreover, while small fish could be dried in the sun, the bigger and fattier Nile perch required smoking, which induced deforestation near the lake shore (Pringle 2005, 522–23). Catching Nile perch required better equipment: sturdier boats and outboard motors, stronger nets. This created "a capital barrier to entry into the industry" (ibid., 522), and larger class divisions between those who owned the means of production and those who worked as hired labour (Asowa-Okwe 1989). After the boom years ended in 1992–1993 due to European Union import ban (Taabu-Munyaho et al. 2016, 136), many of those who had taken loans were not able to pay them back (Pringle 2005, 522). The introduction of Nile perch exacerbated the capitalization of fishing industry that had already started earlier (Geheb et al. 2008, 86–87). Capitalization of fisheries empowered middlemen connecting fishers and consumers, especially in remote landing places with no refrigeration facilities and poor transport connections. Furthermore, with men being away from home and at work for a long time, they often neglected their wives and children and got new partners at the landing sites, which then contributed to the spread of the HIV virus (Pringle 2005, 523).

While some of those tendencies—eutrophication of the lake and capitalization of the fisheries—were already present before the introduction of Nile perch, they were exacerbated by it. After the initial shock, a "degree of vertical and horizontal diversity is being restored, although it is still far from the complexity that formerly existed in the lake, since some trophic groups have not recovered" (Taabu-Munyaho et al. 2016, 138). The introduction of a fish thus had rippling effects on the whole ecosystem and also the social system around the lake, and thus serves as an example of how a change in a crucial part of a complex system can change the system in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. Such a disruption reveals the dynamic and non-linear interactions in a system, which we usually do not notice in the smooth course of things. And it also highlights the fact that CAS often cannot be put into discrete categories of "ecology" and "sociology", for example, and that these human and non-human systems are intricately connected.

Features of Complex Adaptive Systems: Complexity-set

From this example we can extract some general features of CAS.[1] I will divide them into two sets, the complexity-set and the adaptivity-set. The first is mainly

1 The literature on the topic is huge. For some introductions, see Gros (2024), Gunderson and Holling (2002), Holland (1995), and Lansing and Cox (2019); for philosophical approaches, see Cilliers (1998) and Hooker (2011).

logical and the latter mainly temporal. Of course, there is no clear division between the two—as is also the case between the different aspects in each set that imply each other. But I want to introduce 24 different aspects, and it is better to divide the presentation in half. Needless to say, such a list is far from exhaustive, but it captures a sufficient number of key features of CAS.

In the complexity-set there are the following features:

1. *Complexity*. There are a large number of nodes in the system. In our example they are represented by hydrological, chemical, biological, industrial, social, and other entities, such as Lake Victoria, Nile perch, cichlid species, water hyacinth, fisheries, anoxicity, constituents of gender and class relations, international politics, etc.[2] It should be stressed that a large number of nodes is a necessary but not sufficient condition of CAS.

2. *Connectedness*. Those nodes are connected to each other. What happens in one node influences other nodes. In CAS connectivity is relatively rich, i.e., each node has several connections to other nodes. The strength or "weight" of these connections is different. However, the "lateral" or "indirect" connections are as important as "frontal" and "direct" ones.[3] A node may also directly feedback to itself (e.g. cannibalism in Nile perch). The influences in such a system ramify rapidly: Nile perch drastically diminished local fish varieties and amounts, which in turn influenced the oxygen regime in the lake, human social interactions around the lake, and so on. Considering the already great number of nodes themselves, and the fact that they may be connected in several different ways, the number of possible states in which the system can be in becomes enormous.

3. *Modularity*. Still, the nodes also have a certain independence and there are modules with a certain autonomy. The influences in the system do not pass directly from each node to every other node, but there are zones of greater mutual connectivity. Such modules can both decrease change (it may absorb the impact for some time) and increase it (reaching a breaking point, it will change suddenly and with dramatic consequences). Decomposition into such subsystems always remains arbitrary to some extent (see Chu 2011). In our example, we had the modules of fish interactions, of fish and plant interactions, of fisheries, of lake and littoral interactions, etc. Modularity arises naturally from the fact that interactions between neighbouring nodes tend to be stronger than between distant nodes and intensively interacting nodes

2 Note that it is a very useful idea to extend agency to non-human and non-biological entities. See Bennett (2010) and Valmisa (2025).

3 An indirect influence can actually appear as rapidly as a direct influence: "indirect interactions do not take longer to reveal themselves than direct interactions in experimental manipulations of communities" (Lawton 1999, 182).

may form local clusters that may also specialize and differentiate, just as the ancestral cichlid in Lake Victoria, interacting with different food sources and habitats, diverged into different species.

4. *Spatiotemporal scales*. Modularity also creates a structure with different spatiotemporal scales: quicker and closer interactions *vs* slower and distant interactions. These tempi and loci may again interact in various ways. For instance, the interaction between fish reproduction and fisheries, or the long-term boom and bust of different species: cichlids, Nile perch, prawn, and molluscs.

5. *Boundaries.* The internal boundaries between modules are of the same nature as the external boundaries of the system itself. It is a question of viewpoint as to whether we consider something as a module or system. Maw (fish bladders) is a module, and the Nile perch is the system. For the maw trade, it is the opposite, Nile perch is a module and maw is the system. And from another viewpoint, a Nile perch is a module and Lake Victoria's ecosystem is the system; the maw trade is a module, and global international trade is the system. Strong interactions can create a relative closure of a (sub)system, where interactions between different participants mutually enhance each other. Mutual support applies even in the case of predation: prey certainly supports predators, but the presence of predators maintains the health of prey populations, by eliminating weaker members and forcing the population to be physically and mentally fit. But especially in geologically confined environments, such as an island or a lake, abrupt interventions, like the introduction of an invasive species that evolved in a different context, may overcome the adaptation capabilities of the prey and drive them into extinction (sometimes with dire consequences to the predator itself). The closure of a system is never absolute; all systems are connected to other systems (we will discuss openness in the next set).

6. *Embeddedness*. Each node is embedded in one or several modules; the module is embedded in the larger system, and the larger system itself is embedded in a yet larger system (Ostrom 2009). Interactions between different fish species in Lake Victoria are embedded in the larger ecosystem of the lake and its surroundings, that is in turn embedded in larger ecological and social systems, up to the level of the planet, Solar System, galaxy, and universe. A node may participate in different modules or sub-systems. The borders between sub-systems and between different systems can be drawn in different ways (Chu, Strand and Fjelland 2003). Only the economic system was considered when the Nile perch was introduced into Lake Victoria, but it then resulted that Nile perch participates, directly and indirectly in many different systems, including forests, family structures, and power relations.

7. *Heterogeneity*. Connectedness and modularity will create heterogeneity during the evolution of the system. Some entities may form a cluster simply by being initially located near each other; some entities will find themselves at the border of the system, by this very fact becoming different from those entities that are deeper inside the module and more buffered against external influences. Adding a new node may also actually decrease heterogeneity, as happened in the case of Nile perch. Formerly, cichlid species had been specialized in different layers of the water column and different zones of the littoral area. Nile perch, on the other hand, conquered all parts of the lake, both vertically and horizontally, making the system more homogeneous.

8. *Perspectivism* is less often mentioned in accounts of CAS, but due to embeddedness and contextuality the whole system will appear differently to different observers (Uexküll 2010; Kok, Loeber and Grin 2021). In our example, it is clear that representatives of fisheries, protectionists, local communities, as well as a Nile perch, a cichlid, or a shrimp, will perceive the Lake Victoria system differently. There is no one unique viewpoint that could be established as sufficient and definitive. Even if we would like to prioritize the human viewpoint, it is obviously entangled with other beings and factors from which it cannot be neatly disentangled, let alone the fact that there are contrasting interests between different human groups and individuals themselves.

9. *Implication centres*. Since a node is connected to other nodes, and receives feedback from them, and adapts in response to it, its perspective implies those other nodes. A node is not only what it is, in the sense of a delimited spatiotemporal region (e.g. the "inside" of my skin), but other nodes of the system are in a way present in it. We will call this presence of other nodes, implication. Each node is an implication centre for the whole system. Some of those implied others are more proximal than others: those with which a node has more habitual and frequent connections and are therefore more "explicit" than others. Yet, since the system changes and adapts, the degree of explicitness of the implied others can never be completely established *a priori*. Some distant nodes may become close, and formerly close nodes may fall into obscurity. Moreover, some implication centres become "hubs" in the system, having more proximate and explicit connections than others. Just as in our example the Nile perch became an important hub in the new ecological and social system in and around Lake Victoria. Or how certain people are highly connected to others and greatly shorten the pathways from any node to any other node in social networks.

10. *Distributedness and decentralization*. CAS do not have central command, although they may develop modules for supervision which usually do not have complete control over the system. In the case of Lake Victoria there are certain government agencies that oversee fishing, wildlife, and other aspects

of the social and biological functioning of the lake, but firstly they are divided among Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya; secondly, there are different agencies and organizations whose interests may also be in conflict; their control over different nodes of the lake system is very limited: for example, they cannot boost fish landings over a long term by mere command. Control and knowledge of CAS is distributed among its members themselves, just as control and knowledge in the brain is distributed over its neurons.

11. *Robustness*. The distributed character of CAS makes them also robust and resilient in the sense that they are largely able to compensate for changes in their nodes and external shocks. Only when the change and shock exceed a limit, the system will abruptly change, as it happened after the introduction of Nile perch. Even so, the system will try to work towards a new dynamic equilibrium.

12. *Patterns*. CAS also tend to change the kind of knowledge we have of them. In simple linear systems, their behaviour can be reduced to a formula that can usually be represented also in a mathematical form. CAS, however, are irreducible to universal laws that would enable us to predict them precisely, yet we can detect more or less regular patterns of attractors. In our example, the effects of an invasive species have certain regularities (in our case, the initially slow spread and then boom of Nile perch, demise of cichlids and cannibalism of Nile perch, then a new equilibrium, see Taabu-Munyaho et al. 2016, 130), but the precise trajectory can vary widely in different geographical, ecological, evolutionary, trophic, etc. contexts, and also between seemingly very similar lakes. As we shall see in the next set, even small differences in initial conditions may give a very different outcome.

Features of Complex Adaptive Systems: Adaptivity-set

1. *Adaptivity*. Connectedness and modularity create conditions for adaptivity. Without any connection, nodes would certainly not adapt their respective behaviour. But also, without any modularity there would be no adaptation, only random uniform interactions; the general behaviour of the system would simply be a statistical average of those single interactions (just as the pressure in a volume of gas is the statistical result of the interactions of individual molecules). In ecological and social systems, that are always connected and modular, different nodes and sub-systems adapt mutually. The mutual adaptations can help to maintain the system, and contribute to its resilience and robustness, so that it will endure for a prolonged period. But sometimes for living beings the outcome of mutual adaptation may also be death and extinction, as was the case for many cichlid species in our example.

2. *Dynamics*. Connections and adaptations unfold in time; CAS are dynamic, they evolve (Kok, Loeber and Grin 2021). More precisely, this unfolding creates time itself with its distinct rhythms and phases. When mutual adaptation has been reduced in a model, linear and statistical dynamic models may apply. In real systems, you can never discard mutual adaptations and the ensuing non-linear effects, so that CAS would represent a more general model than simple dynamic systems.

3. *Openness*. Classical science investigated closed systems where a certain number of variables were picked out and the others were discarded as not relevant. For some purposes it may work reasonably well, but not in others, and in any case it will at best be an approximative and limited approach. Nodes are also open to "lateral" and unforeseen influences (Chu, Strand, and Fjelland 2003): fisheries to the influence of water hyacinth that impedes fishing; peasants to deforestation; etc. Openness refers to the fact that no system can be absolutely closed and made linear. There will always be lateral influences that will feed back to their starting point. This is not in contradiction with the boundaries or relative closure discussed in the previous set, because certain interactions do reinforce each other and become relatively stable, and able to even out external influences.

4. *Contextuality*. The way a node is affected by other nodes depends on its context, the configurations of its connections to other nodes and their previous history. The death of a single cichlid fish in a healthy population would not have significant consequences, but in an endangered population the loss of a single individual may entail the collapse of the whole population.

5. *Non-equilibrium*. The systems that interest us here are far from equilibrium in the thermodynamic sense that they depend on throughput of energy and matter. The "order" and the structures they create locally depends on the dissipation of energy. In this sense, their dynamics is about wasting and squandering of energy, making the global "disorder" or entropy greater.

6. *Non-linearity*. Embedded and contextual CAS inevitably manifest nonlinearities where cause and effect are not proportional (Liu et al. 2007). In such systems, it is not only a single node A that creates an effect in the node B, but B is to some degree influenced also by P, Q, R, … But in a CAS, A itself is also related to those nodes P, Q, R, … which condition it to some extent. Causation does not follow a single path but is ramified into several branches. Furthermore, the outcome of that bundled influence on B then feeds back to A, P, Q, R. In that case, the A, P, Q, R, … will be no longer what they were at the onset of considered causation; their being a cause has already changed them, so that in the new round of causation their influence will be somewhat different.

7. *Sensitivity* to initial conditions of CAS. The non-linear effects in the modular connected CAS make it so that even a small perturbation somewhere may push the system to a very different trajectory. In our example, one change in the system, the introduction of a small number of Nile perch into Lake Victoria had profound consequences and ripple-effects to large ecological, economical, and social systems. The most famous example of such sensitivity of CAS is the "butterfly effect" (Lorenz 1972): in principle, the wing flap of a butterfly in Estonia may lead to a thunderstorm in Ljubljana. Some CAS (e.g. the brain) work themselves toward such a sensitive state, a "self-organized criticality", balancing rigidity and chaos (Cilliers 1998, 96–98).[4]

8. *Threshold* effects: changes made to the system may not alter it for quite some time, until a critical point is reached when the system radically changes and reaches a new metastable state (Liu et al. 2007). And we may not notice that the threshold has been reached until it has already been crossed (it is difficult or impossible to predict when exactly the system will flip). With the Earth's climate there are certain "tipping points", the crossing of which leads to large and accelerating changes.[5]

9. CAS often manifest *path dependency* and legacy effects (Liu et al. 2007). Their current state is determined by a previous state, and a microscopic fluctuation back in time may lock in the macroscopic behaviour down the line. Interactions may become self-reinforcing, while others may vanish because they were used too little. If industrial fishing has been introduced, fishing gear bought, processing facilities built, and marketing networks set up, then this system needs to be fed by fish landings, and since the capitalist logic requires growth, the most straightforward way to growth is to fish more. Such a system will not stop naturally but will be stopped by external factors (disappearance of fish, social pressure, war, etc.). The clearest case of path dependency is extinction: in that case, certain interactions disappear and cannot be brought back, and the system reorganizes itself. The ecological balance in Lake Victoria has changed dramatically, and with some species becoming extinct it will never be possible to simply revert to the earlier situation, even if Nile perch was somehow eliminated. Path dependency and locking in phenomena are common in our culture: the qwerty keyboard, 240 volts, railway track width, marine container sizes, and so on.

10. CAS manifest *emergent* behaviour that comes from the system as a whole and that cannot be derived from its individual elements. An investigation of a single H_20 molecule will not give you the Bénard convection cells or

4 "[D]ynamical systems with extended spatial degrees of freedom naturally evolve into self-organized critical structures of states which are barely stable." (Bak, Tang and Wiesenfeld 1987, 381)

5 See, for instance, https://global-tipping-points.org/.

the turbulences of boiling water. Emergence is common in ecological and social systems. After the introduction of Nile perch, the socio-ecological system manifested several emergent phenomena, including the boom of prawn, bloom of algae, deforestation and spread of HIV.

11. *Self-organization* refers to the ability of CAS to produce emergent patterns where macroscopic structures are formed without central control and with local micro-scale interactions. The changes mentioned in the point above were not foreseen and planned, but arose spontaneously through mutual interactions.

12. *Temporality*. For the above reasons, time in CAS has very different meaning from closed and predictable systems. In the latter cases, time as such—time as duration—does not play any real role (this was Bergson's main intuition, see Bergson 1992). We could say that a simple process may "take time", but it will not "give time", since everything is already there in the initial situation, and can be foreseen and predicted without hesitation. In CAS, on the other hand, processes must unfold in real time, for us to discover their tendencies and emergent forms. The initial situation in CAS is heavily underdetermined, and it must acquire determination in the concrete evolution of the system, full of historical and contextual chances that may radically change the outcome down the line.

Chinese Philosophy and CAS: Complexity-set

Let us now make explicit some connections between CAD and Chinese philosophy.[6]

1. *Complexity*. Most Chinese ontologies envisage the universe as a complex whole. The principal concept is the Way or *Dao* 道 from which everything is unfolded (Liu 2010, 41–76). This complex whole is reflected in the 64 hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching* 易經) (Shaughnessy 1996) that represent the main tendencies of all events; or the Huayan Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net where each jewel reflects all other jewels (Cook 1977). Even if seemingly non-complex notions are invoked such as the "One", it should usually be understood as complex: either ontologically and cosmologically as the enfolded state from which all is unfolded (similarly to the Way) or epistemologically as a state of mind that grasps the fold itself, i.e. the principle of

6 For some literature on the topic, see Culliney and Jones (2017, especially Part 3 and 4), Sim and Vasbinder (2020), Herfel, Gao, and Rodrigues (2011). It is difficult to reference the following broad treatment since the sources would be too numerous. Only a handful of references will be provided to serve as an example.

complexification, and not as something simply opposed to complexity (e.g. "hold fast to the one", *zhiyi* 執一, Roth 1999, 62–63).

2. *Connectivity* or *relatedness*. In practically all Chinese ontologies, entities are conceived as being connected to each other and mutually influencing each other. This can be seen in such notions as *yin-yang*, the triad (*san* 參) of Heaven-Earth-Humans (*tian-di-ren* 天地人), four images (*sixiang* 四象), five phases (*wuxing* 五行), five relations (*wulun* 五倫), or eight trigrams (*ba-gua* 八卦). They imply each other: in *yin* there is always *yang* and in *yang* there is *yin* (represented on the familiar *taiji* image by a small dot of opposite colour inside each side: ☯). The same applies to all the other notions that we mentioned: e.g. in each of the five phases the other four are implied. You cannot separate those entities, but neither can you unite them in a static whole. A chrestomatic example is Zhou Dunyi's 周敦頤 "Explanation of the Supreme Limit diagram" (*taijitu shuo* 太極圖說):

> Limitless and yet Supreme Limit. The Supreme Limit through movement generates yang. When its movement reaches the limit, it becomes tranquil. Being tranquil, it generates yin. When tranquillity reaches the limit, it reverts to move again. Movement and tranquillity become the root of each other. The partition into yin and yang establishes the two modes.[7]
>
> 自無極而為太極。太極動而生陽，動極而靜，靜而生陰。靜極復動。一動一靜，互為其根；分陰分陽，兩儀立焉。

3. *Modularity* is expressed by the very fact that the Way differentiates itself into different aspects and entities. Although *yin* and *yang* are inseparable, they are not identical. The same applies to the notions we mentioned above (five phases and others), as well as to all things. While they are connected and interacting, they have a certain specificity. The quote from Zhou Dunyi presented above continues like this:

> *Yang* shifts and *yin* integrates, and they generate water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. When the five energies have been smoothly spread out, four seasons run their course. Five phases are englobed in *yin-yang*; *yin-yang* are englobed in the Supreme Limit; the Supreme Limit is fundamentally the Limitless. [Yet] when the five phases are generated, each has its specific nature.[8]

7 The Chinese text is from https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=323161. For other translations, partially used here, see Adler (2014, 170–74), Chan (1963, 463), De Bary and Bloom (1999, 673).

8 Cf. Adler (2014, 179–81), Chan (1963, 463), De Bary and Bloom (1999, 673–74).

> 陽變陰合，而生水、火、木、金、土。五氣順布，　　四時行焉。五行，一陰陽也；陰陽，一太極也；太極，本無極也。五行之生也，各一其性。

4. *Scales*. Both *yin-yang* and the five phases ramify into ever finer branches. In something with *yin* dominance there is always both *yin* and *yang*, and in this *yin* aspect again one can distinguish *yin* and *yang* aspects. There are accommodating (*yin*) and aggressive (*yang*) persons; in that accommodation there is passive accommodation (*yin* of *yin*) and passive-aggressive attitude (*yang* of *yin*), etc. A cultivated person is able to take into consideration different scales of time and space. This may warrant patience and withholding immediate action, if the long-term processes are in your favour (e.g. your opposing army is thin on supplies and wearing itself out) or to take immediate action if the time is ripe and large-scale effects can be had (e.g. you opposing army has not yet established defences and even if outnumbered, you can create confusion in its ranks and perhaps even route it). A good general is able to assess the situation involving different temporal and spatial scales (this is the "initial assessment" *shiji* 始計 that opens Sunzi's *The Art of War* (Sun-Tzu 1993, 73–74)).

5. *Boundaries*. Processes tend to constrain each other and to "coagulate" into systems with boundaries. One of the common terms used to denote actualized things, *xing* 形, strongly highlights the boundary or contour of the thing. The role of a cultivated person is to understand the processes that led to the formation of those things, and how they will transform in the future. That is, cultivated persons are able to "melt down" those coagulated rigid things and states of affairs.

6. *Embeddedness*. Each phenomenon is to some extent individualized and distinguished from its surroundings and at the same time embedded in wider systems. The Western philosophical tradition has paid relatively more attention to the first aspect and the Chinese one to the latter. An excellent example of embeddedness can be found in Sunzi's *The Art of War*, where the war effort is seen as intimately embedded in the economy, geography, climate, politics, administration, logistics, and so on.

> For an army of one thousand fast four-horse chariots, one thousand four-horse leather-covered wagons, and one hundred thousand armor-clad troops, and for the provisioning of this army over a distance of a thousand *li* […] only when you have in hand one thousand pieces of gold for each day can the hundred thousand troops be mobilized. (Sun-Tzu 1993, ch. 2, 75)

凡用兵之法，馳車千駟，革車千乘，帶甲十萬；千里饋糧，[…] 日費千金，然後十萬之師舉矣。

The first [criterion for gauging the outcome of war] is the Way […]. The Way is what brings the thinking of the people in line with their superiors. Hence, you can send them to their deaths or let them live, and they will have no misgivings one way or the other. (Sun-Tzu 1993, ch. 1, 73)

一曰道 […]。道者，令民與上同意也，可與之死，可與之生，而不畏危。

7. *Heterogeneity* is the result of a differentiation process, from *yin-yang* all the way to the myriad entities or "ten thousand things" (*wan wu* 萬物). They all have their specificity and complement each other. As an example, consider this from Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1549):

In Heaven and Earth there is one *qi*, which is constantly coming into being. It is sometimes constant, sometimes changing, [and results in] all things that are produced being uneven. Therefore, if *qi* is one, then there will be one principle, but if the *qi* are many, then there will be many principles. Present-day Confucians talk only about principle being one and leave out the fact that [principles] can be many, this is one-sided. Heaven has its own principle; Earth has its own principle; man has his own principle, things have their own principles; darkness has its own principle; brightness has its own principle. Each and every one of these is different. Collectively speaking, they are all transformations of *qi*. Beginning from a single source, the great virtue produces and transforms [all things] deeply. Spoken of in the particular, then, *qi* has a hundred ways of manifesting itself. The lesser virtues flow out like rivers [in different directions] and each thing finds its nature and destiny rectified. (Ong 2006, 471–72)

天地之間，一氣生生，而常，而變，萬有不齊。故氣一則理一，氣萬則理萬。世儒專言理一而遺理萬，偏矣。天有天之理，地有地之理，人有人之理，物有物之理，幽有幽之理，明有明之理，各各差別。統而言之，皆氣之化，大德敦厚，本始一源也。分而言之，氣有百昌，小德川流，各正性命也。(Wang 1989, 848)

The "rectification" mentioned at the end of the text does not mean that things would enter a static and perfect system. It rather means that they modify each other in a dynamic and evolving system.

8. *Perspectivism* is emphasized in several different strains of the Chinese tradition. It is forcefully put forward by Zhuangzi, according to whom all creatures have their viewpoint:

> If people sleep in damp places, they develop lumbago or even partial paralysis. But would the same thing happen if a loach did so? If people dwell in trees, they will tremble with vertigo. But would the same thing happen if a gibbon did so? Of these three, which knows the proper place to dwell? People eat meat, deer eat grass, giant centipedes savour snakes, hawks and crows relish mice. Of these four, which knows the proper food to eat? (Mair 1994, 20–21)
>
> 民溼寢則腰疾偏死，鰌然乎哉？木處則惴慄恂懼，猿猴然乎哉？三者孰知正處？民食芻豢，麋鹿食薦，蝍且甘帶，鴟鴉耆鼠，四者孰知正味？

Moreover, what is considered "useless" by humans can be very useful for other creatures, since they are not killed prematurely (for food, lumber, etc.) or plundered (e.g. fruit trees). Perspectivism is also implied in Confucius' golden rule that you should not do unto others what you would not want to be done to yourself.

9. *Implication centres*. People are often distinguished in the Chinese tradition by their capacity to imply other agents and viewpoints. In traditional Confucianism, someone who pursues only their own benefit, is considered a "small person" (*xiaoren* 小人), a petty man; and someone who is able to include other viewpoints into their own viewpoint, and thereby to imply other nodes in their own node, is an "exemplary person" (*junzi* 君子). In both Confucian and Daoist traditions, a sage (*shengren* 聖人) is someone who implies others to the maximum degree and is therefore also capable of responding adequately to the requirements of a complex situation.

10. *Distributedness*. The idea of distributed command was most forcibly proposed by Zhuangzi, who attacks the idea that a part of a person's personality can be a "ruler" in their body (Mair 1994, 13–14). A person's agency is not located in one place in their person—in the heart or brain or elsewhere—but is all over the whole body. It extends even further: in the *Zhuangzi*'s skill stories, the knife and ox carcass for the butcher, or water and its flows for the swimmer, become as if parts of their persons (cf. Ott 2024a, 141–81). For

most other thinkers, there did in fact exist a central locus of control: the heart-mind in the body and ruler in the country. But if we look closer, their power is more distributed than it may seem at first glance. In Chinese medicine, the "heart" is one aspect in the five-phase system, and not a self-standing autocrat. In the political realm, thinkers devised different conceptual schemes that would require the rulers to distribute their power: for Mohists, the ruler is subject to Heaven that is all-encompassing, and by implication, the ruler must be unbiased and unselfish and take into account all members of society and indeed dedicate special attention to the most vulnerable members of it. For Confucians, rulers have sole command, but on the condition of them being benevolent (hence benevolence acting as a means of power distribution), without which they could even be overthrown (Mencius). Even for Legalists who devised the most centralized political system, rulers must in fact be kind of "empty spaces" that do not take initiatives but only review, approve or reject the initiatives of others (Ott 2013).

11. The *robustness* and resilience of dynamic systems in the Chinese context can be made clear in comparing the difference between the Chinese five phases and Greek four elements. The Greek four elements are (or at least became to be seen in the later tradition) actual components of things, each with their own root (*rhizoma*) or section (*stoicheion*), so that if you took away one element, the system would be harmed in a linear fashion. But the Chinese five phases contain each other in a hologramlike fashion (cf. above, point 2), so that even if you could somehow extract one of them and eliminate it, the others would compensate for that change. The system would be afflicted, and it may deteriorate, but it this would not happen in a linear way.

12. It may be argued that the main goal of Chinese education was to develop the ability of *pattern* recognition. There are several important notions that can be translated by "pattern": *wen* 文, *li* 理, *xiang* 象, *fa* 法, *shi* 式, and others. The word for "culture" itself, *wen* 文, originally meant "pattern, ornament", and the related pictogram seems to have depicted a tattooed or painted body: . Moreover, the word that is often translated as "law", *fa* 法, and that indeed comprises criminal law, actually means "model, pattern". If it is translated as "law", a modern reader may have the false impression that the Chinese authors were "empirical", unable to abstract from the particular to a well-defined universal law. What was mostly intended, however, by these authors, was the refinement of pattern recognition ability, and those models or examples were thus intended as a guide in this process. Indeed, the argument may even be reversed: a universal law is just a particular pattern, one among many, a local approximative case where nonlinear effects have been discarded. The extremely important concept of *li* 理—which according to the traditional Chinese etymology referred to the veins of jade—can be translated as

pattern, and those patterns, veins (cf. below, point 11) or principles (as Ong translated it, see above, point 7) can be detected both on the macroscopic and microscopic levels, in both physical and psychological realms. The aim of education is to better grasp those patterns, and the interrelations of the patterns in one's mind and those in the wider world.

Chinese Philosophy and CAS: Adaptivity-set

1. *Adaptivity*[9] is a necessary outcome from connectivity and modularity. What happens in *yin*, affects *yang*, and *vice versa*.

> Being and nonbeing engender each other; difficult and easy complete each other; long and short compare each other; high and low overturn each other, melodies and sounds harmonize each other; front and back follow each other. (Laozi §2)
>
> 有無相生，難易相成，長短相較，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。

This also opens the possibility of both direct and indirect regulation: one can increase *yin* by directly enhancing *yin*, but also—and sometimes even more surely—indirectly, by decreasing yang:

> If you want to shrink it, first expand it; if you want to weaken it, first strengthen it; if you want to abolish it, first establish it; if you want to take from him, then first give him. (Laozi §36)
>
> 將欲歙之，必固張之；將欲弱之，必固強之；將欲廢之，必固興之；將欲奪之，必固與之。

Knowing that elements and dynamic aspects are intertwined, one may influence that element or aspect indirectly by influencing those other links that feed into it. A key Chinese concept related to mutual adaptation is "harmony" / "harmonizing" (*he* 和) (see the discussion in Valmisa 2025, ch. 4.; cf. Li, Kwok and Düring 2021).

2. *Dynamics*. The interconnected modules or entities unfold their relations in time; the adaptation discussed above takes place in duration. Change and transformation are the central tenets of mainstream Chinese philosophy. To take just a few examples,

9 For this topic, see Valmisa (2021).

> Daily renewal is what is called 'abundant virtue'. Incessant engendering is what is called 'change'. (Shaughnessy 1996 "Appended Statements A")
>
> 日新之謂盛德。生生之謂易[10]

> When Heaven and Earth unite, all things are born; when *yin* and *yang* are connected, shifts and transformations arise. (Xunzi n.d., "Li Lun")
>
> 天地合而萬物生，陰陽接而變化起.[11]

> The articulation of Heaven and Earth, *yin* and *yang* incessantly engender and are not exhausted. (Zhu Xi, *Yulei* 3)
>
> 這箇天地陰陽之理生生而不窮。[12]

3. *Openness*. The Way is an open-ended process and there is no completely self-enclosed system. All are prone to change and liable to external influences. There is no yang "in itself", but it always contains an element of yin, and vice versa. There is not a thing "as such", but all things imply relations to other things, and all systems of things are radically open. Some schools of thought did present instances of relatively closed systems with discrete elements. For instance, the Mohists: if you need to draw a circle, you take a compass, and if you need to draw a right angle, you take an L-square. Those carpentry tools, as well as certain intellectual tools, were supposed to work in a discrete fashion, relatively independently of other factors, in a closed system. Moreover, the Legalist Han Fei argued that humans can most often, in a good approximation, be governed by the simple tools of punishment and reward. But most of the Chinese philosophical tradition has required a more nuanced consideration of different intertwined factors, effectively treating the given situation as an open system that has a great number of different relations with other systems, and probably also unknown factors that reach deep into the unfathomable intricacies of reality. Self-cultivation is about reaching further into those nuances.
4. The *contextuality* of knowledge is central in the mainstream Chinese philosophy, be it Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. In Confucianism, this is an important component of the concept of *yi* 義, "propriety". Exemplary persons will know how to behave adequately in each situation. They do not follow

10 Chinese text is from: https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/xi-ci-shang.

11 https://ctext.org/xunzi/li-lun.

12 https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/3.

fixed rules or a list of "duties" or "principles". Just as Confucius said with regard to a common person:

> The Master said, 'Do I possess wisdom? No, I do not. [For example, recently] a common fellow asked a question of me, and I came up completely empty. But I discussed the problem with him from beginning to end until we finally got to the bottom of it.' (9.8; Slingerland 2003, 89)
>
> 子曰：「吾有知乎哉？無知也。有鄙夫問於我，空空如也，我叩其兩端而竭焉。」

In Chinese medicine, the diagnose is not based on a single feature and the cure is usually not a single action. For example, if a Western doctor detects a lack of iron in a patient's blood, they order the patient to take medicine with iron, eat more carrots, etc. A Chinese doctor would dig deeper into the context of this situation: why did an ailment develop in the first place? How is it connected to other aspects of that patient? Of course, such a distinction is blurred in reality, because a good Western doctor will also include much contextual knowledge (and a lot of it is not included in textbooks, but they will acquire it by experience), and in Chinese medicine there are also cases of more direct, linear, and isolatable cause-effect relations.

5. *Far from equilibrium.* The *yin-yang* kind of setup precludes a steady state; a stasis can be only temporary at best, and the trick is not how to find the eternal and immovable, but how to balance diverging tendencies, to harmonize the heterogeneity in such a way that one can lead the best life physically, mentally, and socially. Such an effort cannot go on forever. Ultimately everyone dies, and even if with Daoist life-nurturing practices it is possible to prolong it, it is still an indefinite deferral, rather than eternity. One can "stay" only by changing. The ruler must "change people", and the word for 'culture' is literally a "change of patterns" (*wenhua* 文化). Existence is never at an equilibrium, and life is about changes and transformations (*bianhua* 變化). In the words of Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE): "When Heaven and Earth move, the myriad things change" (天地動而萬物變化,)[13]

6. *Non-linearities* inevitably arise from a *yin-yang* kind of model where the effect is fed back to the cause, so that, in fact, in that model cause and effect cannot be clearly distinguished. It is not that simple linear causality would be completely ignored but rather, in real systems, that it should be embedded in a larger or longer system that will be non-linear. A further layer of non-linearity is added in situations where ideas about the situation and expectations

13 https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng.

about its evolution themselves fashion that very situation itself. For example, in the famous "empty fort" strategy where you leave the impression that your fort is empty, in order to make your enemy fear a trap, while your fort is actually indeed empty. Here, the expectations and expectations about expectations exacerbate non-linearity.

7. *Sensitivity* to initial conditions is visible in the famous metaphor that an infinitely small deviation in the beginning will lead to an enormous deviation down the line. This is an important aspect of self-cultivation. A small act of carelessness in your behaviour may destroy years of diligence. Or the other way around, you may have been a scoundrel your whole life, but then you hear the word of Buddha, you become enlightened, and all your bad karma vanishes. So there would be also a sensitivity to "final conditions", or rather the possibility of creating a condition that will be sensitive. The sensitivity of initial conditions can be used strategically when one is aware that certain tendencies, or *shi* 勢, can have cumulative effects, and thus one becomes able to manage them in order to profit. In the words of Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073):

> There is nothing but tendencies under Heaven. A tendency may be light or heavy. A very heavy tendency cannot be turned around. But if you recognize that it is a heavy tendency, then it can be turned around. You have to exert force to turn around a tendency. If you do not recognize the tendency early enough, then the required force will not be easy.
>
> 天下，勢而已矣。勢，輕重也。極重不可反。識其重而亟反之，可也。反之，力也。識不早，力不易也。《通書》, §27 [14]

One must be aware of the initial stages of a development when it is still malleable and has not settled squarely into a new equilibrium.

8. *Threshold* phenomena can be seen most dramatically in sudden enlightenment – and this is not limited to Buddhists, but is also a common experience in case of Neo-Confucians, for example. There is an awareness that processes do not necessarily yield linear results, and "more" meditation does not lead to any faster enlightenment: one may set the conditions with meditation, but the enlightenment itself is related to so many and so small aspects that one is not able to handle them all consciously. The same is true in Chinese medicine, such as with the thresholds of an illness. Han Feizi韓非 tells the story of Bian Que, who described a ruler's illness as progressing through several

14 https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=999963.

thresholds until it finally reached the marrow and became incurable.[15] The dynamic strategies of indirect manipulation mentioned above (point 1) depend on non-linear interactions and thresholds. You may feed the arrogance of the person in a seemingly linear progression, but you know that at a certain juncture the system will reach a turning point.

9. *Path dependence* can be seen, for example, in the role of habits. Take the art of war: if I know that the general whom I fight with is overly cautious or overly courageous, then I can take advantage of it by intimidating him or laying a trap. Path dependence is also the reason why one has to be careful with the "incipient": if I allow a certain behaviour to happen, I may become locked into it and develop bad habits and a bad character. One will become what one does. This is why a culture needs to be constantly changed (cf. point 4 in this section): in dynamic interactions, patterns are formed, and they tend to lock in and ossify, and therefore they need to be changed and modified. One must "cherish the old, but understand the present" (溫故而知新,[16] *Analects* 2.11).

10. The *emergence* can be seen in the mainstream accounts of how things are born from the internal logic of the system by differentiation. "Dao begets One; One begets Two; Two begets Three; Three begets myriad things" (道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物, Laozi §42). Novelty is created by differentiation, by bifurcations in the system, in a distributed way, rather than in an external and centrally controlled fashion. And dedifferentiation, a collapse of attractors, is part of the story: just as winter follows autumn, so death follows life, and things or energies are reabsorbed into the general pool of energy.

11. *Self-organization* is a pervasive idea in the Chinese tradition. To demonstrate this, let us take an example from a much later time compared to previous ones, Tan Sitong (1865–1898):

> I'll try to speak about the beginning of Heaven and Earth and the myriad things. It was empty and obscure, scattered and dispersed. There were no things in it, it had neither interiority nor exteriority. […] Suddenly there was a trigger of movement, such as clouds. When two of them encountered, then yin-pole and yang-pole generate two electricities. When two electricities have been born, there is difference and sameness. They push and pull, generating sound and light; it is called "thunder". It shakes the subtle and enlightens the hidden, and from the enveloped and implicated, being begins. (*Renxue*, ch. 25)

15 https://ctext.org/hanfeizi/yu-lao.

16 https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng.

> 吾試言天地萬物之始，洞然窅然，恍兮忽兮，其內無物，亦無內外。[…] 俄而有動機焉，譬之於雲，兩兩相遇，陰極陽極，是生兩電，兩有異同，異同攻取，有聲有光，厥名曰「雷」。振微明玄， 參伍錯綜，而有有矣。[17]

We can see how Tan Sitong has already incorporated Western notions of electricity, anode and cathode (or yang-pole and yin-pole), but maintains the traditional scheme of a self-organizing cosmos.

12. Temporality. The above features make temporality central. One has to be aware of the mutual non-linear influences between entities, and to the ensuing transformations, reinforcing "good" ones and impeding deleterious ones. This aspect of ethics and self-cultivation is related to the topic of perspectivism mentioned above. Those different viewpoints have temporal consequences—each tries to emphasize the tendencies they consider most beneficial, and the different kinds of subjects mentioned at the end of the previous set can be distinguished on the basis of consequences that unfold in time. Sage-nodes who intricately imply other nodes are in harmony with the Way or "follow" it (*shun* 順), and their works proceed seemingly without effort (*wuwei* 無爲); narrow persons go against the Way (*ni* 逆) and get stuck, their influence does not spread. In the excavated text *The Rules of Canon* (*Jingfa* 經法), it is said:

> Each thing's association with the Way is called "veins". When veins are present, this is called "to follow". When a thing is not associated with the Way, this is called "to lose the veins". When veins are lost, this is called "to go against". Following and going against both have an inner logic, and therefore preservation and destruction, flourishing and deteriorating can be known.
>
> 物個合於道者，謂之理。理之所在，謂之順。物有不合於道者，謂之失理。失理之所在，謂之逆。逆順各有命也，則存亡興壞可知也。[18]

The "following" or "going against" of a partial system with respect to the whole can be known from its temporal evolution. It is possible that you go against a system you are embedded in but which itself goes against an even larger system it is embedded in, and that you, after all, follow the Way. For instance, if you disagree with a tyrant.

17 https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/%E4%BB%81%E5%AD%B8.

18 The Chinese text is from: https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=387844&remap=gb.

Concluding Discussion

The difference between the mainstream Chinese and Western traditions has been characterized using such terms as "concrete" vs "universalist", "practical" vs "theoretical" (Nakamura 1964), "holistic" vs "dualistic" (Rošker 2021). The intuitions that led to such expressions could perhaps be captured by saying that the Chinese tradition has paid greater attention to complex adaptive open systems, while the Western tradition has often focused mainly on simple linear closed systems.

This can be exemplified by the different conceptions of *causality* in those traditions. The Greek word for "cause" was *aitia*, which originally meant "charge, accusation, imputation, blame, guilt, fault" and it arose from the juridical context. In a court case we all understand that there are always multiple causes and motives, but the task of the court is to pass a verdict, to judge what the main factors are and who are the main culprits. So, also in the physical world, the task of a scholar is to identify the main "culprit" in an event. Aristotle famously distinguished between four aspects in such a culpability or causing of a thing: formal, material, final, and efficient cause. In each of those cases, in the final analysis the whole universe should be included, but the task of a thinker is precisely to stop and reduce such a proliferation and focus on the main cause, the main "culprit". This focus on just one cause was reinforced in the later tradition and it led to a linear understanding of causality: one thing produces another that produces another (and one of its consequences is that this series must have a beginning, which leads to one of the traditional demonstrations of God). In modern science, the four Aristotelian aspects of causation are mostly reduced to one, efficient causation, without intentionality: final causes should not play a role, at least not in "fundamental" science; form is produced by certain interactions that are its efficient cause and matter itself is the result of efficient causation (initially, during the Big Bang). This narrowing focus contributed to the rapid development of sciences (you can discard most of the aspects of the situation and focus on just one, or a few).

Although such an endeavour to linearize causality was present in China (e.g. the Mohists), the mainstream philosophical reflection was never exclusively focused on just one "responsible" cause, discarding background factors. On the contrary, an ideal person does not see just one cause but is able to gauge the whole situation with a great number of contributing factors that imply each other and therefore change in a non-linear fashion. Therefore, such thinking was able to better tackle and conceptualize situations and domains that are overwhelmingly non-linear, such as warfare and power struggle (see Jullien 2004), and it is notable here that Sunzi's *Art of War* is now studied in modern military academia all over the world.

Such a comparison or resonance between CAS and the Chinese tradition can also pinpoint the reason for certain weaknesses of the latter. For example, we mentioned above, in section 3, under "connectivity", the distinction into different interconnected aspects, most notably *yin-yang* and five phases. In the orthodox understanding, each of these aspects should be conceived as implying others: yin implies yang and yang implies yin, and each of the five phases implies all other four phases. In each case, one of the aspects is dominant or on the rise, but the others are also always present to some extent, they are never completely cancelled or exhausted. Moreover, the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* in their philosophical relevance should help to differentiate reality in even greater nuances, but always so that in each of the 64 constellations all the others are also implied. However, since they are represented as two or five or 64, they become very easily tied to those numbers. And since numbers are easily conceived as being external to each other and completely individuated in their own self, this may distort the understanding of these conceptions themselves, such as when certain phenomena are unambiguously tied to yin or yang or five phases: seasons, directions, colours, tastes, sounds, etc. Or when the *Book of Changes* gives rise to an endless numerological speculation that is formal, mechanical, and fruitless, and has thus often been denounced by philosophers (take Wang Chong, for example, or the idea that sages do not need divination, 聖人不煩卜筮[19], because they will understand the reality intuitively and in much greater nuances).

Outside of a critique of certain Western or Chinese blind spots, the two can join forces in order to foster more constructive thinking and develop an ontology that could accommodate the features of complex adaptive systems. Considering the complexity of our current social and ecological problems, it is clear that we need a frame of thought that would help us to grasp not only simple and linear systems, but also complex and non-linear ones. Further investigation is therefore warranted to spell out the commitments and affordances of such an ontology.

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19 "Sages did not take the trouble of bone cracking and milfoil divination" ("Zuo commentary", Duke Ai, 8. year, https://ctext.org/chun-qiu-zuo-zhuan/ai-gong-shi-ba-nian).

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Complementing Aggressive Activity with Laozian Stillness

*Rory O'NEILL**

Abstract

This article develops a Laozian perspective to assuaging conflict by means of a stillness that complements aggressive activity. Contrary to readings of the *Laozi* that understand stillness as a pure and undisturbed state, this article draws attention to parts that observe and engage with weapons and warfare, such as Chapters 31, 68, and 80. The article thereupon argues that Laozian stillness is intrinsically interconnected with its antonymous activity, including aggressive activity. Laozian stillness allows one to observe patterns that foster aggression, violence, and instability, and thereby enact a complementary and stabilizing role through that same stillness. Overweening and domineering forms of activity are seen in the *Laozi* as likely to lead to instability, unrest, and decline. In line with the Laozian recognition of the interplay of opposites, if one strives for a pure state of passivity divorced from aggression, then ironically this tends to exacerbate that aggression. If those who have the capacity to effect peaceful stillness detach from the world, the world thereby becomes more rife with aggressive activity. Furthermore, a political application of this interplay between stillness and activity implies that when stillness and activity are taken as fundamental political categories, they are not easily deployed in service of particular political motives. As such, the *Laozi* seeks to arrive at political stability, but this entails that political convictions must be fluid like water in order for this stillness to be brought about.

Keywords: Daoism, *Laozi*, stillness, political philosophy, conflict

Dopolnjevanje agresivnih aktivnosti z laoistično spokojnostjo

Izvleček

Ta članek predstavlja laoistično perspektivo blaženja konfliktov s spokojnostjo kot nečim, kar lahko dopolni agresivne aktivnosti. V nasprotju s tistimi interpretacijami *Laozija*, ki spokojnost razumejo kot čisto in nemoteno stanje, članek izpostavi poglavja, kot so 31, 68 in 80, ki se ukvarjajo z orožjem ter vojskovanjem. Avtor zagovarja tezo, da je laoistična spokojnost inherentno prepletena s svojim nasprotjem, kar vključuje tudi agresivnost. Laoistična spokojnost omogoča zaznavanje vzorcev, ki spodbujajo nasilje, agresijo in nestabilnost, ter tako omogoča dopolnjevanje in stabilizacijo, ki se udejanjita prav prek

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same spokojnosti. Pretirano vzvišene in oblastniške oblike delovanja so v *Laoziju* prikazane kot tvegane, saj vodijo v nestabilnost, nemir in propad. V skladu z laističnim razumevanjem prepletanja nasprotij pa prizadevanje za čisto pasivnost, ločeno od agresije, paradoksno spodbuja prav to agresijo. Če se tisti, ki imajo zmožnost udejanjiti miroljubno spokojnost, umaknejo iz sveta, postane svet toliko bolj prežet z agresivnim delovanjem. Politična implikacija tega razmerja med spokojnostjo in dejavnostjo je v tem, da ti kategoriji, če ju razumemo kot temeljni politični načeli, nista neposredno uporabni za zasledovanje določenih političnih ciljev. *Laozi* namreč stremi k politični stabilnosti, vendar ta zahteva, da so politična prepričanja tekoča kot voda – le na tak način je možno spokojnost dejansko uresničiti.

Ključne besede: daoizem, *Laozi*, spokojnost, politična filozofija, konflikt

Introduction

This article focuses on the notion of stillness, as found in the Daoist text the *Laozi* 老子, against a broader theme of how Eastern pacifism might offer resources for remedying contemporary global issues, including mitigating political conflicts. The article argues that when Laozian stillness is considered in the context of the *Laozi*'s promotion of balancing extremes, it is revealed as a means of tempering extreme and unstable positions. However, when Laozian stillness is understood as a striving for a state of purity—an absolute and undisturbed serenity divorced from worldly activity—it sits problematically alongside the rest of the *Laozi*.[1] Furthermore, such a striving for pure stillness has the capacity to exacerbate rather than alleviate global tensions. While this striving for pure stillness can be found in deployments of the *Laozi* in Western popular culture, and in certain strands of religious Daoism, it is difficult to reconcile with the philosophy of the *Laozi* as a whole.

This article understands the *Laozi* as identifying certain patterns within the world and suggesting—at times tacitly and at times explicitly—how longevity might be achieved given these patterns of reality. Given that the text often speaks to the topic of governance, the longevity considered is at once that of the individual and the polity. Through a close reading of relevant parts of the text, this article seeks to provide a measured reading of a Laozian attitude to activity and stillness, passivity and aggression. It hopes to serve as a corrective to certain readings that are influenced by later philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions. The present inquiry is motivated in particular by social media usages of Daoism in which an "Eastern path" is invoked as a counterpoint to perceived Western aggressiveness,

1 A parallel discussion can be observed regarding the *Zhuangzi* as some interpretations understand the Zhuangzian position as a distancing from the social world, engaging only when necessary, and others read the text as allowing for a more thorough social engagement (see Hu 2025).

particularly that associated with Christianity in the American political landscape. Such narratives typically present Daoism as a spiritually superior withdrawal from striving and aggression that denounces any involvement with a supposedly violent and dogmatic Western culture. In this denouncement of Western morality, however, Daoism becomes another form of moral absolutism—one of purity and stillness—thereby mirroring the dogmatic tendencies it claims to reject.

Domineering activity is viewed in the *Laozi* as excessively abundant in the human world. Laozian stillness does not seek to escape activity but rather engages it as its complementary counterpart. The fact that this stillness can even result in domination over its active counterpart (as will be seen in *Laozi* 61) is a testament to the fact that it does not necessarily imply detachment. Isolating stillness as something pure and divorced from the turbulence of the human world ignores this interplay between opposites that is integral to the philosophy of the *Laozi*. Stillness and activity together are conducive to enduring longevity. In addition to this complementary role, stillness is required to observe the patterns of the world. Stillness is thus at once the means by which one recognizes the overabundance of activity, as well as the complement to that activity.

The following section questions whether Laozian stillness represents attaining a state of purity, by juxtaposing Laozian stillness with notions of pure and transcendent stillness upheld in the later Daoist tradition and with the Christian quietist tradition, with which Daoism has at times been associated. The article then examines the semantic landscape of stillness within the *Laozi*, focusing on "quiescence" (*jing* 靜), "cessation" (*zhi* 止), and "holding to the centre" (*shou zhong* 守中). It is found that all these notions form part of a philosophy of balance and complementarity. The article then engages the theme of stabilizing conflict. To this end, parts of the *Laozi* that explicitly consider violence and war are examined, such as Chapters 31, 68, and 80. It is found that stillness is not divorced from action but actively complements it. Finally, the Laozian treatment of stillness and activity as fundamental political categories, considered prior to any specific political intentions, is suggested as an approach toward mitigating contemporary conflicts.

A Pure Stillness?

There are many ways to interpret the *Laozi*, and many different strands of Daoist thought. While the notion of achieving a pure state of clarity and stillness has indeed become important to later religious Daoism, whether or not promoting purity is a feature of the Warring States philosophical texts is debated (Di Giacinto 2015).

The image of the Daoist sage as one who retreats from the world to cultivate moral or spiritual purity is common to popular and some religious understandings of

Daoism. A dominant sect that promulgates this version of Daoism is the Quanzhen 全真 ("Complete Perfection") lineage which began in northern China in the 12th century and is now closely associated with the Chinese Daoist Association. As James Miller notes, although this elite monastic form has become dominant in contemporary China, it represents a relatively late form of Daoism (Miller 2013, 114). The *Laozi*, alternatively known as the *Daodejing* 道德經 (*Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power*), was adopted as one of its central texts in the early formation of the sect, along with texts such as the *Qingjing jing* 清靜經 (*Scripture on Clarity and Quiescence*) (Komjathy 2007, 106). This Daoist lineage has from the beginning promoted quietistic meditation (ibid., 240–41) and, in the words of Ma Yu 馬鈺 (1123–1185), a disciple of its founder Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113–1170), it represents a striving for "perfect clarity and perfect purity" (ibid., 185). In this Quanzhen context, the character *jing* 靜, meaning "quiescence" or "stillness", is sometimes interchanged with *jing* 淨, meaning "purity" (ibid., 448). Ideas of cosmic and individual perfection and purity are also reinforced by certain contemporary interpretations of the *Laozi* influenced by strands of Daoism that developed in medieval times. In Lydia Kohn's understanding of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, the universe "functions to the highest possible good of all" (Kohn 2009, 365) and "the underlying blueprint of the universe arranges things to perfection" (Kohn 2020, 125). While Kohn also recognizes the presence of opposing and complementary elements within a Daoist worldview, the overriding emphasis on the universe's perfection risks reinforcing a one-sided image of Daoist stillness as a retreat from the turbulence of the human world to an original and natural perfection.

Connotations of terms such as "quietism", "passivism", "pacifism", and "purity" vary based on the contexts in which they arise. Their use across historical and geographical distances, while creating possibility for exchange between traditions, can also give rise to misunderstandings. An ideal notion of Daoist purity has shaped how Daoism has been appropriated in comparative religious and philosophical contexts, especially in juxtaposition with Christian traditions. Daoism is frequently grouped with Chan Buddhism and categorized in Western thought as "quietist", "passivist", or "pacifist" (Yip 2003, 3).[2] Christian translations of the *Laozi*, including that of the Protestant missionary James Legge, have contributed to a "morally pure" reading of the text (Girardot 1999). In non-academic contexts, striving for spiritual purity is a notable aspect of Daoism's online presence on social media of the English-speaking world.[3] Eclectic spiritual leaders who appropriate a range of traditions, such as Rajneesh (1931–1990; also known as

2 Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), for instance, likened these traditions to quietism (Faure 1993, 33). More recently, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) condemned Laozian philosophy for its passivity that supposedly leads to an irresponsible combination of escapism and quietism (Wenning 2020, 146).

3 For more on Daoism's online global landscape, see O'Neill (2025).

Osho), are influential in this context. Although Rajneesh's text on the *Laozi* begins by emphasizing the role of balance and the promotion of ordinariness over extraordinariness and extremism, it still propagates the myth of *Laozi* as a radical quietist who "for ninety years […] refused to write anything or to say anything" (Osho 2012, chap. 1, para. 35) and "is the absolute anarchist" (ibid., para. 62).

There are several difficulties in understanding the universe, from a Daoist perspective, as arranging things to perfection, or functioning to the highest possible good, and in understanding the Daoist sage as a quietist who aligns with this perfection. One is the uncertain connotation of the "perfect" or the "good". For whom is it perfect or good? There is no denying that misfortune, sickness, aggression and violence exist in the world from the perspective of the *Laozi*. The answer might thus be that the world is perfect for the successful Daoist practitioner who may eradicate evil, or unnatural sickness, from their own body (Kohn 2020, 133). The universe would thereby be perfect or good for those who follow certain esoteric prescriptions. By contrast, political readings of the *Laozi* offer insights that may speak to more than—a narrow group of practitioners. With this political focus, we see a world inherently characterized by disturbance, danger and unrest. Hence, rather than stillness representing a quietist alignment with the perfect good of the universe, it is a practice of quietly observing a turbulent and dangerous world in order that one may survive in it.

As for associations between Daoism and Christian quietism, the quietism laid out in Miguel de Molinos's (1628–1696) *The Spiritual Guide* may indeed share with the *Laozi* the quietening of personal intentions. However, there are also stark contrasts. Firstly, *The Spiritual Guide* promotes a quietening of one's intentions so as to allow God's will to act through the practitioner. In de Molinos' words, "The way of inward peace is in all things to be conform to the pleasure and disposition of the Divine Will" (de Molinos 1885, v). For de Molinos, "by not speaking, nor desiring, and not thinking, one arrives at the true and perfect mystical silence" (ibid., 59). One may perhaps find in the *Laozi* a promotion of the quietening of words, desires and thoughts, but these are not in the service of anything comparable to how "God speaks with the soul" or "teaches it the most perfect and exalted wisdom" (ibid., 59). Fundamental to the Daoist worldview is that the *Dao* does not have any definite will. In contrast to de Molinos' suggestion that the practitioner must "keep pure that temple of God" (ibid., 13) so that God may act through them, quietude in the *Laozi* is not a vessel for a pure purpose like the will of God or, for that matter, the perfect ordering of a Daoist universe. The quietening of the will in the *Laozi* can be understood instead through a metaphor of something highly malleable and without definite direction—water. *Laozi* Chapter 8 states that "the highest good is like water". Water does not flow into any supposedly best place, such as that determined by any ultimate goodness. It simply takes the path of least resistance. In his discussion of Daoist atheism,

Brook Ziporyn allows for a degree of similarity between Christian negative, or apophatic, theology and Daoist indeterminacy. However, he holds the important distinction that due to its monotheistic underpinning the former does not arrive at a thoroughgoing indeterminacy (Ziporyn 2024a, 140–41; 2024b, app. A, supp. 8). Ziporyn characterizes the Daoist contrast to the apophatically perceived God as, "What is close to *Dao* is not mind or purpose or intention or personality, but exactly the opposite sort of thing: water …, the most formless, non-autonomous, yielding, non-controlling thing" (Ziporyn 2024b, app. A, supp. 8, 8). In a Christian quietist context, becoming a vessel for the will of a righteous God means that the quietist can be moved to act in a righteous manner, even in the form of righteous aggression (see, e.g. McDaniel 2010, 34–39). From a Laozian perspective, there is no ultimate good to motivate righteous aggression. As Ellen Zhang puts it, "There is nothing in the DDJ [*Daodejing*] that implies the idea of waging a war for a noble cause" (Zhang 2012, 488).[4]

It is important to note, however, that this absence of will is also complimented by its opposite—the fulfilment of what is beneficial to oneself. This can be observed from the following Chapter of the *Laozi*:

> The sky endures and the earth persists. That the sky and earth are able to endure and persist is due to how they do not themselves create; they are thereby persistently created. Therefore, the sage places her person behind others and thus her person comes out in front; she places her person in the periphery and is thereby preserved. Is it not due to the fact that she has no private intentions that her intentions are brought to fruition? (*Laozi* 7)[5]

We see here that when one's intentions are quietened, what that person may have otherwise intended is likely to become realized. It affirms a quietist and non-striving attitude, but with a built-in mechanism that undermines any determination toward pure absence of will or absolute altruism.

The native ideas most closely aligned with the notions of "passivism", "pacifism", and "quietism" in the *Laozi* will be discussed in the following section under the rubric of "stillness". This section has briefly sketched out some framings of Laozian stillness as pure, perfect, or divorced from the chaos of the world's activity. By subsequently showing the close connection between stillness and its opposite, activity, I wish to show that the notion of a pure and undisturbed Daoist stillness is difficult to align with the philosophy of the *Laozi*, which repeatedly emphasizes the interplay of opposites. As stated in *Laozi* Chapter 2, for instance,

4 An opposition to righteous anger is one motivation for Hans-Georg Moeller's Daoist-inspired "moral fool" (see Moeller 2009, 53–63).

5 Translations of the *Laozi* are the author's own. They follow the Wang Bi edition of the text (see *Laozi* 2011), except where footnotes indicate that alterations are made according to other versions.

"being and non-being produce each other", "difficulty and ease give rise to one another", and so on (see O'Neill and Peruzzi 2023, 4–5). To uphold stillness as an isolated ideal, one overlooks these observations that pervade the *Laozi*.

Stillness in the *Laozi*

The character *jing* 靜, translated here as quiescence, carries connotations of both becoming "still" (in modern Chinese, *jingzhi* 靜止) and "quiet" (*anjing* 安靜). It is one concept in the *Laozi*, along with "cessation" (*zhi* 止) and "holding to the centre" (*shou zhong* 守中), that counteracts the danger that arises from an abundance of domineering activity within the human world. Not only is stillness required to establish an equilibrium between stillness and activity, coming to rest is also required to observe the activity of the world and identify its patterns. Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 points out the connection between quiescence and observation, linking together the appearance of the term in the *Laozi* with the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Xunzi* 荀子. In the latter two texts, quiescence of the mind is illustrated by the reflective qualities of still water (Fung 1952, 292). As such, it is closely linked with observation (*guan* 觀) which, as Fung and many authors after him have pointed out, plays an important role in the philosophy of the *Laozi* (see ibid., 180–83). Many terms that have been identified in the *Laozi* as indicative of purity and clarity relate to water (Yates 1994, 492–93). In addition to an inherent goodness that comes with cleanliness and absence from pollution, the close connection between water, reflection and observation should not be ignored.

We see quiescence and observation together in the following Chapter:

> Reach the limits of emptiness; hold to the utmost quiescence. The ten thousand things join in activity, and I return to observation [*guan* 觀]. Things grow in entanglement [*yun yun* 芸芸], and each can be traced back to its root. Returning to the root, this is quiescence. It is called returning to the point of emanation. Returning to the point of emanation, this is constancy. Knowing constancy, this is illumination [*ming* 明]. Not knowing constancy is to recklessly give rise to inauspiciousness. With knowing constancy comes capaciousness; with capaciousness comes impartiality; with impartiality comes completion; with completion comes the great sky; with the great sky comes the *Dao*; with the *Dao* there comes longevity; reaching the end of one's bodily existence, one does not suffer tragedy. (*Laozi* 16)

The understanding, opposed in this article, of stillness in the *Laozi* as a pure state of serenity perhaps gains some support through the notion of "utmost quiescence"

at the beginning of this Chapter. However, even from this Chapter alone we may begin to see how this quiescence plays a complementary role. Quiescence is not considered in isolation, but as something from which the entanglement (*yun yun* 芸芸) of living things stems. Returning to the point of emanation is not an escape from this entanglement, but a nurturing of the root that supports its growth. The passage above makes several references to this mode of "returning". In the *Laozi*, remaining at rest denotes an absence of movement or activity that is closely linked to a state of non-coercion (*wuwei* 無為)—a characteristic of the sage. While the ten thousand things unfold of themselves (*ziran* 自然), the sage engages in restraint and practises non-coercion (see Wang 2010).

Emptiness (*xu* 虛) and quiescence are in parallel positions in the first two clauses of *Laozi* (Chapter 16). Just as quiescence is the state that complements activity, emptiness is the state that complements fullness. While "emptiness" is expressed in this Chapter with the character *xu* 虛, the interplay of emptiness and fullness is expressed elsewhere in the *Laozi* through the related notions of nothingness or non-existence (*wu* 無) and substantiveness or existence (*you* 有).[6] In one sense the pairs of quiescence and activity, and emptiness and substantiveness, comprise equal counterparts. In another sense, however, the former element in each of these pairs is valued more highly within the *Laozi*. The *Laozi* recognizes that the ten thousand things, including people, are naturally prone to activity and positive development into states of fullness. As a result, the ensuing activity and fullness require counteraction by the sage who deliberately "returns" toward quiescence and emptiness.

The link between quiescence and non-coercion can be observed in the following Chapter:

> Adopt appropriate measures to order the state; adopt unexpected measures to use one's army; through non-engagement with affairs, one may take all under the sky. On this basis: the imposition of many restrictions on society will lead to the people being impoverished; if the people have many sharp weapons, then the state will be in disorder; when the people are skilled and clever, then detrimental things will arise; if desirable things are clearly displayed then there will be many thieves. Thus, the sage says: I act non-coercively [*wuwei*] and the people will be transformed of themselves. I favour quiescence, and people will become ordered of themselves. I engage in no affairs, and the people will gain fortune of themselves. I have no intentions [*wu yu* 無欲], the people will become like unwrought wood of themselves. (*Laozi* 57)

6 See, e.g. *Laozi* (Chapters 2, 11, and 40).

The core message of this Chapter is summarized by what "the sage says"—the last four sentences of this translation. The people become ordered through the sage's non-coercion, stillness, not engaging in affairs, and being without intentions. The people enjoy a simple kind of fortune, described in analogy to an unadorned piece of wood. As a result, they do not cause disturbance, and the sage ruler is untroubled by them. Here we observe how equilibrium is achieved through the activity of the people being complemented by the inactivity of the sage ruler. By contrast, if the ruler issues many restrictions, provides weapons, trains the people to be clever and skilful, then the activity of the ruler would coincide with the activity of the people. There would hence be a lack of complementary inactivity to balance the activity of the people. The idea that soldiers should be used in an unexpected manner also implies that they are used occasionally, with unexpected spontaneity, rather than the military adopting a pervasive presence within society.

As we saw in *Laozi* (Chapter 16), quiescence is linked to the notion of observation (*guan*) and illumination (*ming*). It is not surprising, therefore, that quiescence is also linked to notion of clarity (*qing* 清). The binomial phrase "clarity and quiescence" (*qingjing* 清靜) is often used to convey an emblematic quality of the *Laozi*, although the precise connotations of this quality differ. As discussed above, in certain religious contexts it is understood to represent a form of purity. The connotations of clarity carried by this phrase should also not be overlooked (Röllicke 2015, 46). The phrase "clarity and quiescence" only appears in one Chapter of the *Laozi*, quoted here:

> Great completion is like a lack; its use does not lead to exhaustion. Great fullness is like a gushing, its use does not lead to an impoverishment. Great straightness is like crookedness; great skill is like clumsiness; eloquent speech is like stammering. Activity overcomes cold; quiescence overcomes heat. With clarity and quiescence, there is order [*zheng* 正] in all under the sky. (*Laozi* 45)

We see in Chapter 45 that order ensues from "clarity and quiescence", implying that coming to rest and observing the people's patterns of activity are aspects of sagely rulership. Spontaneous order was also seen in Chapter 57 to result from "quiescence". In *Laozi* Chapter 45, we see a discussion of complementary opposites—completion and lack, fullness and gushing (as in a full basin of water and water gushing out from that basin), straightness and crookedness, skill and clumsiness, eloquence and stammering. We then see activity and quiescence, set in parallel phrases, overcome cold and heat, respectively. This indicates that both activity and quiescence are necessary aspects of existence, just as cold and heat are. However, in the final line it is quiescence rather than activity that is conducive to attaining order—the sage must exercise stillness to counteract the activity of the people.

The character for "order" (*zheng* 正) itself contains an element of stillness. The Han dynasty dictionary the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 defines it as consisting of "one" (*yi* 一) and "cessation" (*zhi* 止). There are a number of instances of "cessation" in the *Laozi*. In the passage below, it is accompanied by the image of "unwrought wood" (*pu* 樸), which also featured in *Laozi* Chapter 57 where the people becoming like unwrought wood is described as a result of the sage's having no intentions.

> The *Dao* is constantly nameless, like unwrought wood. Although small, none under the sky can make it submit. If the princes and kings can hold to it, then the ten thousand things will become in accord with it. The sky and earth complement each other; like the falling of sweet dew, the people distribute themselves evenly without being ordered. With the initial carving there are names. Names come with the presence of things, and there is also a knowledge of cessation, and with this knowledge of cessation one avoids danger. *Dao* in all under the sky is like the waters filling the valley. (*Laozi* 32)

The *Dao* is discussed here as something small (*xiao* 小), whereas elsewhere it is spoken of as great (*da* 大) or linked to the great sky (*tian* 天) or all under the sky (*tianxia* 天下). Cessation is linked primarily with the small—the opposite of greatness strived for through much activity. Ironically, however, stillness and associated smallness lead to a kind of greatness—none under the sky can make it submit.

As we have seen from the quoted passages, notions of stillness come in association with emptiness, smallness or nothingness. A brief departure from the notion of stillness is warranted here to consider the interrelatedness of the small and the large from a Laozian perspective. The "one" can refer to both the smallest possible unit (the singular, the individual) and the largest possible—the whole. Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) comments on *Laozi* Chapter 22 that "one" means "the utmost diminishment" (*shao zhi ji ye* 少之極也). "One" can also mean the precise opposite—it can mean "greatness" or the whole. "Holding to the one" (*zhi yi* 執一) is a phrase found in the Mawangdui 馬王堆 version of the *Laozi* meaning to "grasp the whole" in a political sense (Behuniak 2009). While this might be seen to contrast with an attitude of "embracing the one" (*bao yi* 抱一), as the phrase is in the Wang Bi version of the *Laozi*, and which might have a connotation of embracing "particulars" (ibid.), the fact that the "one" has opposite connotations of the small and great does not mean that an interpretation must choose between them. A focus on the small can also imply attaining what is great. For instance, the Huang-Lao 黃老 text the *Shenzi* 愼子 states that "according with things" (*yin* 因), including "according with the particular circumstances of people" (*yin ren zhi qing* 因人之情), leads to greatness (see "Yinxun 因循"; Harris 2016, 112).

From this Huang-Lao perspective, attention to particulars does not imply that one remains tied to the micro focus, as it is inherently linked with the macro. As the second Chapter of the *Laozi* states, "fullness and nothingness give rise to one another", as do the high and the low, the long and the short. While there might be strong correlations among stillness, smallness, emptiness, and nothingness, they are each inherently linked with their respective opposite, and each may give rise to it. Considering the ethical implications of stillness later in this article, it is important to note that stillness is not a mere resignation from the world—an abiding in nothingness or smallness. The embrace of stillness and the ensuing emptiness and nothingness are inextricably linked to greatness. This greatness may manifest, for instance, in the capacity to bring order to all under the sky, thus assuming dominion (albeit a non-coercive dominion) over all under the sky.

Returning to the notion of "cessation" and its link with smallness, it is discussed in the following Chapter in accompaniment with warnings against the amassing of fame and fortune.

> Of name and body, which is dearer? Of body and wealth, which is of more value? Of gain and loss, which is the ailment? Hence, wide-reaching care necessarily has a great cost; excessive amassing necessarily leads to a hefty loss. Knowing sufficiency one avoids shame, knowing cessation one avoids danger and thus attains longevity. (*Laozi* 44)

The practice of cessation is associated here with an aversion to what is great, many or much. Cessation means not striving to acquire more wealth or reputation. It is important to point out, however, that this cessation is not geared toward attaining a transcendent spiritual purity but longevity, presumably of the body given the first two questions posed in the Chapter. The smallness that is arrived at through cessation—the lack of honour and fortune—is inextricably linked with greatness in the form of a long life.

Lastly in this section, the notion of "holding to the centre", which appears in the following Chapter, is worthy of attention in the context of the Laozian practice of stillness.

> The sky and earth are not humane; they treat the ten thousand things as straw dogs. The sage is not humane; they treat the hundred surnames as straw dogs. Between the sky and earth, is it not like a bellows? Empty but not exhausted, moving but continuing to blow. Many words lead to much impoverishment; it is better to hold to the centre. (*Laozi* 5)

"Holding to the centre" is traditionally understood as implying a practice of emptiness and quiescence (Xu 1985, 81–82). Not straying from this balanced and

centred point implies maintaining stillness. Although we do not find any character approximating "stillness" in Chapter 5, we do find the character for "emptiness". Based on the final two lines of the Chapter, the emptiness implied here may be a lack of words. The "many words" of the line that precedes "holding to the centre" is likely a reference to the issuing of orders. In a political context, words (as orders or instructions) are inherently linked to actions. Holding to the centre is a maintaining of stillness through not giving rise to actions. It is a state of balance, both in the sense of having the capacity to remain still and in the sense of striking a point of balance between extreme positions (O'Neill and Peruzzi 2023, 5–6). Considering that it is a practice of maintaining a position between extremes, however, we can see again that it is not an escape from a world of activity. On the contrary, it is a positioning of oneself in the centre of this world of activity and thereby being the point of equilibrium between extremes. Seeking absolute stillness at the individual level would imply a failure to take up this central position and would thus be contrary to enacting stillness in the world more generally.

From a Daoist perspective, an individual who seeks a balanced centredness without attentiveness to their surroundings is bound to fail. Equilibrium is established by counteracting the activity of the world. To illustrate how enacting stillness may in some cases require an active role, one may imagine observing an object that is out of balance and in danger of falling from a surface. In order to maintain stillness in one's environment, one must quickly reach for the object to prevent it falling. Quiescent observation is required in this case in order to be attentive to the object, and the stillness of the object is maintained through actively counteracting its imbalanced state. An overall equilibrium is thus maintained.

Knowing Brightness but Holding to Darkness: A Laozian Approach to Aggression

As this article aims to consider the role the *Laozi* might play in assuaging contemporary political tensions, this section moves from observing the general relationship between stillness and activity to considering the Laozian attitude toward specifically aggressive or violent activity. The section shows that while the *Laozi* does promote non-violence, it maintains an awareness that non-violent stillness is a complement to aggressive activity. The Laozi does not present a philosophy of escape—that is, it does not attempt to disentangle itself from violent or aggressive activity.

As discussed above, the *Laozi* frequently implies how balance and complementarity are central to the makeup of the world. Consequently, stillness is enacted through engaging with the activity of the world, not through abstention from it. Nowhere is this clearer than in Chapter 31, one of the few Chapters that directly addresses warfare:

> Weapons are inauspicious instruments; they are disliked by all, and thus the person who aligns with the *Dao* does not use them. Hence, the cultivated person [*junzi* 君子] values the left, and one who uses weapons values the right. Weapons are inauspicious instruments, not the instruments of the cultivated person; they are used only if there is no other resort, and mildness is held in the highest regard. Victory is not glorified; one who glorifies victory takes pleasure in killing others. One who takes pleasure in killing others cannot put their will toward [the wellbeing of] all under the sky. In auspicious affairs, the left is upheld; in sombre affairs, the right is upheld. The lieutenant stands on the left; the general stands on the right. This is to say, funeral rites are applied. The killing of many is treated with sadness; victory in war is dealt with by applying funeral rites. (*Laozi* 31)

From a surface level reading of this Chapter, one might simply conclude that the *Laozi* presents an anti-war philosophy (Lo 2015, 406). Revealed by a closer reading, though, is that the text does not deny the reality or even the necessity of violence. Instead, it frames military action as something to be undertaken with great reluctance, without glorification, and within a ritual context that acknowledges its destructiveness. The cultivated person does not remain outside the fold, refusing to have any part in war. Instead, the cultivated person plays their role by "valuing the left", by ensuring that aggression is tempered with gentility and humility. Violence and gentility, though opposites, are not irreconcilable, and their dynamic is reinforced by the ritual symbolism of left and right.

As stated in *Laozi* (Chapter 42), the myriad things carry *yin* 陰 ("passivity") on their backs while embracing *yang* 陽 ("activity"). In early Chinese cosmology, the left side was associated with *yang*—brightness, life and auspicious affairs—while the right was associated with *yin*—darkness, death and mourning (Chen 2006, 196). In many parts of the *Laozi*, the importance of the *yin* aspect is upheld. Here, if we acknowledge that the left-hand side symbolizes *yang*, there is no special promotion of *yin* over *yang*. What is ultimately upheld in the *Laozi* is balance and complementarity rather than treating *yin* as inherently more valuable than *yang*. The former is more frequently upheld simply because active *yang* elements are more commonly seen as overabundant in the human world. Chapter 31 neither one-sidedly promotes life nor death. Instead, a balance is struck between the genteel cultivated person—whose instruments are not those of war—and the army general. When death is in abundance—such as the "killing of many" that occurs when there is no other option but war—it must be complemented by its opposite. The necessity of war is not denounced, but the necessity for a compensatory ritual is emphasized, where the lieutenant takes up the position of the cultivated person,

opposite the general. The ritual described here is not an auspicious or glorious occasion, but a funeral ritual. War is thus complemented by an ensuing ritual of mourning.[7]

Rather than characterizing the *Laozi* as fundamentally opposed to war, it is more accurate to say that an equilibrium is established when violent activity is complemented by non-aggressive activity. While the *Laozi* tends to play the role of emphasizing the need for passivity and non-violence, it does so in the turbulent context of the Warring States. While the following Chapter does not refer explicitly to military affairs, it discusses aggressive qualities tempered by gentle and passive ones in the context of maintaining order in "all under the sky".

> Know one's masculinity, hold to one's femininity. Treat all under the sky as the valley. Treating all under the sky as the valley, not departing from enduring potency [*de* 德], one returns to the state of infancy. Knowing one's brightness,[8] holding to one's darkness, all under the sky is treated as the valley. If one treats all under the sky as the valley, then enduring potency is sufficient, and the unwrought wood [*pu*] is returned to. When the unwrought wood is divided there are things; when the sage uses [the unwrought wood] there are generals and officials. Hence, there is a great ordering that is not to be broken. (*Laozi* 28)

According to Chen Guying, "masculinity" implies "hard movement" (*gang dong* 剛動) and "active advancement" (*zao jin* 躁進), while "femininity" implies "gentle quiescence" (*rou jing* 柔靜) and "humble abasement" (*qian xia* 謙下) (Chen 2006, 183). In parallel with this coupling, "brightness", or literally "whiteness" (*bai* 白), implies masculine activity while "darkness", literally "blackness" (*ru* 辱), implies feminine passivity. This passage may be read as foregrounding the latter element in each pairing—passive, inactive notions of femininity and blackness—but we may note also that the former element in each of these pairs is not dismissed. The passage notes that it is important to know one's masculinity and one's brightness—they are not eradicated from the picture. This is similar to how weapons are possessed but not used in Chapter 80.

> A small and sparsely populated state [is achieved] by having weapons to hand but not using them, by making the people fear death and not travel far. Although there are ships and chariots, no one boards them. Although

7 This may be contrasted with earlier celebratory rituals of just war, such as those described in the early Chapters of the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Book of Documents*) (see Lewis 2006, 187).

8 This version of the Chapter omits 23 characters found in the Wang Bi version that likely constituted a later interpolation arising from the assumption that *ru* 辱 here meant "disgrace" rather than "black" or "darkness", and should therefore complement "honour" (*rong* 榮) rather than "whiteness" (Chen 2006, 183–84).

> there are armored soldiers, they are not deployed. Encourage the people to return to using knotted chords, to make delicious their foods, make beautiful their clothes, make safe their dwellings, and make joyous their customs. Although states are within sight of each other, the sounds of dogs and chickens cannot be heard between them. The people die of old age and do not engage with each other. (*Laozi* 80)

This Chapter is often read as a celebration of small and simple communities living in detached harmony with one another (see, e.g. Chambers 2023, 398). If we pay attention not only to what is not used, but also what is prepared for potential use, then we may see that it does not naively assume that there is simply no need for instruments of violence. The maintenance of peace is achieved in part through the preparation of instruments that could be used for war—weapons, ships and chariots. Much like how one's masculinity and brightness are "known" but one's femininity and darkness are held to, the preparation for war remains a background feature of this harmonious society. Foregrounded are various enterprises that busy and satisfy the people and thus cultivate stability: making the food delicious, making the clothing beautiful, making the housing safe, and making the customs joyous. As a result of being occupied with these, the people do not feel the need to travel or engage in risky activity that would not only put their chances of reaching old age in jeopardy, but would also be detrimental to the stability of the state.

The Chapter that precedes this famous description of small and sparse population suggests that there is likely to be lingering resentment and thus a latent potential for instability even in such a harmonious society.

> In harmonizing [*he* 和] great resentment, there will undoubtedly be residual resentment.[9] How can the situation be settled effectively? It is by the sage holding their side of the tallies and not seeking repayment of debts from the people. Those of generosity [*de* 德] are those who keep their tallies; those without generosity are those who make claims on others. The *Dao* of the great sky does not rely on family ties; it is found where there is proper engagement with others. (*Laozi* 79)

The acknowledgement of residual resentment is an indication that harmony is not simply established once and for all. The sage must continuously respond to resentment with a tolerant stillness—here inactivity is maintained through not seeking repayment or enforcing claims. To draw on a metaphor of "blunting

9 Chen Zhu 陳柱 and Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峰 argue that the four characters "repay resentment with generosity" (*bao yuan yi de* 報怨以德) should be moved here from Chapter 63 (Chen 2006, 341). The four characters emphasize the complementary role of the sage in relation to the people.

sharpness" in *Laozi* (Chapter 4), the sharp resentment of the people is blunted by the non-aggression of the sage who does not actively seek repayment of debts.

The pattern of knowing one's brightness and masculinity, yet holding to one's darkness and femininity—manifest in Chapter 80 as having weapons but not using them—also finds form in Chapter 68, which describes the ideal military commander:

> Those adept at ordering soldiers do not flaunt their aggression. Those adept at battle do not become enraged. Those adept at defeating the enemy do not compete [*yu* 與]. Those adept at employing people act as if they themselves were subordinate. This is what is known as the virtue of not contending [*bu zheng zhi de* 不爭之德]. This is known as the force of employing people. This is known as the ancient art of aligning with the sky. (*Laozi* 68)

This passage puts forward an ideal mode of engaging in military affairs. The ideal organizer of martial activity is described as one who does not flaunt their aggression, nor become enraged, nor even compete. Importantly, however, the Chapter does not deny the need for those who are adept at military affairs and for one who can defeat the enemy. Rather than presenting a radically pacifist denial of military involvement, the passage promotes the simultaneous presence of one who knows how to conduct military affairs, paired with the absence of unbridled aggression or overweening attachment to victory. Warfare, if it must occur, is approached with humility, even in the practice of employing people.

Often with a focus on Chapter 80, the *Laozi* is sometimes read as promoting a liberal political attitude that supports the co-existence of many independent states (Rapp 2012, 38–40). Chapter 80 provides rather unreliable grounds for this point of view, however. Although it does imply small communities living in detached harmony with one another, these "small states" are still envisioned as being parts of a larger polity.

> A great state flows downward, toward the intersection of all under the sky, becoming the female counterpart for all under the sky. The female persistently overcomes the male by means of stillness. Through stillness, she adopts the lower position. Hence, the great state abases itself to the small state, and thus integrates the small state.[10] The small state abases itself to the great state and thus integrates into the great state. Hence, abasement is the means to integrate people, and abasement is the means

10 The Wang Bi version has *qu* 取, which means "to take" but may have been a loan character for *ju* 聚, meaning "coming together" and translated here as "integrating" (Chen 2006, 293).

> to be integrated. The great state does not have an overweening desire to increase the number that it supports. The small state does not have an overweening desire to enter the affairs [of the great state]. Hence, the two gain what they desired; this is through the willingness of the greater to abase itself. (*Laozi* 61)

Its vision of peace involves a quietening of the will, leading to a humble interdependence, not defiant independence. Small streams run into large ones, willingly but not forcefully, and they are willingly accepted by the greater body of water, but not aggressively subsumed. As such, while the philosophy of the *Laozi* may be used to oppose domineering overlords, it is not a good candidate to support fierce and righteous defence of independence. The ideal vision seems rather that small and large states will harmoniously converge if sufficient humility is practised on both sides.[11] Returning to the comparison with Christian quietism, the quietening of will is illustrated by water—malleable and amenable to any outcome—in contrast with a quietening of one's individual will in the service of becoming a vessel for a greater, more righteous will.

This section has aimed to show how while non-violent stillness is promoted in the *Laozi*, it is done in the context of accepting pre-existing activity, including that of a violent and aggressive nature. A stable equilibrium can only be achieved through the complementary balancing of opposites. This means that passivity should not be sought in an extreme form, but should come to meet aggression, serving as a complement to it. Concomitant with this Daoist stillness that complements aggression is that it is not easily turned towards any political agenda. If stillness is to counteract aggression, then it must do so simply as stillness, not as stillness with an attached agenda. It should be noted again, however, that this absence of an agenda does not imply an absolute selflessness. We may consider again *Laozi* (Chapter 7), which asks, "Is it not due to the fact that she has no private intentions that her intentions are brought to fruition?" Through not holding to a particular agenda, one's interests (which were never explicitly formulated or pursued) become fulfilled.

Concluding Remarks: Stillness that Complements Aggression

This article concludes by suggesting a normative position that might be derived from the preceding reading of complementary stillness in the *Laozi*. A distinction

11 It should be noted that the applicability to today's politics of this ideal is also limited. Given the absence of alternatives to monocratic regimes in Warring States China, the convergence of small states into large ones may have been the only form of harmony in the political imagination of the time, which contrasts with most if not all present-day political contexts.

has been presented between a kind of stillness that seeks to distance itself from violence—to escape from violence and maintain clean hands—and a Laozian practice of maintaining harmonious stillness in the world by means of engaging with aggressive activity. From a Laozian perspective, non-violence has the propensity to give rise to its opposite, and an extreme stillness that wishes to distance itself from violence for fear of being made impure is conducive to furthering that violence. In more concrete terms, a supposed sage who maintains spiritual and moral purity by removing themselves from the world thereby denies the world of the influence of a person who can effect stillness. The insistence that stillness does not turn its back on violence should not, however, be construed as an apology for violence. Rather, it is an acceptance of the necessity of aggressive activity as part of the makeup of reality.

As we have seen from *Laozi* (Chapters 45 and 57), the practice of complementary stillness tends to result in a kind of "order" (*zheng*). The process of arriving at this order is described in negative terms—the absence of intervention—and we therefore lack a positive image of what kind of order is envisaged. Perhaps this lack of a positive description is precisely how the text remains relevant. It emphasizes the negative, passive, and restrained aspect of governance which conjoins with any given positive form, including the (aggressive) actions of those who hold political positions today. When complementary Laozian stillness and activity are taken as fundamental aspects of political analysis, the practice of stillness cannot be in the service of any particular political principle. From a Laozian perspective, we cannot predict precisely how stillness can bring peace into effect, much less can we predict how it might bring into effect a peaceful state of affairs in line with particular political motives. Stillness is a complement to action; mourning is a complement to waging war. But as to the question of which political quests are just and which are unjust, the *Laozi* does not provide answers.

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Shuwu's Tragedy: Rethinking Mencius' Arguments on the "Right of Rebellion"

*Max Junbo TAO**

Abstract

Justin Tiwald's reinterpretation of Mencius' "right of rebellion" as a moral framework critical of tyrannical forms of rule instead of an "open mechanism" for bottom-up revolts has been agreed upon and supported by a range of scholars' recent reflections. However, this new perspective still awaits further development due to the scarcity of textual sources and other empirical evidence in pre-Qin history. In the interests of specifying and substantiating historical Confucian views about political legitimacy and rebellion, this article focuses on a unique case called "Shuwu's Tragedy" from *Zuozhuan* and *Gongyangzhuan* with a rich corpus of Neo-Confucian commentaries and debates on a minister's "right" to denounce the monarch for brutality. Shuwu was a virtuous prince of the state of Wey who temporarily assumed the monarchical duties of his fleeing elder brother, Duke Cheng of Wey, and he successfully resolved a military conflict with the state of Jin in 632 BCE. However, Duke Cheng murdered Shuwu when Shuwu planned to return the throne to him. Wey's minister, Yuan Xuan, thus escaped from Wey and accused Duke Cheng in front of the hegemon, Duke Wen of Jin, which eventually triggered further bloody killings and chaos in Wey's court and family. After reviewing the Neo-Confucian commentaries, I argue that Shuwu's case strongly supports Tiwald's new thesis on Mencius' "right of rebellion". Furthermore, I discuss a fundamental question in Mencius' political ethics: which takes priority, chastening the tyrant or restoring order?

Keywords: Mengzi (Mencius), political ethics, resistance to tyranny, responsibility

Shuwujeva tragedija: ponovni razmislek o Mencijevih argumentih o »pravici do upora«

Izvleček

Justin Tiwaldova reinterpretacija Mencijeve »pravice do upora« kot moralnega okvira, ki je kritičen do tiranskih oblik vladanja in stoji nasproti »odprtemu mehanizmu za upore od spodaj navzgor«, je bila sprejeta in podprta v nedavnih razmišljanjih številnih teoretikov in teoretičark. Vseeno pa ta nova perspektiva še vedno čaka na nadaljnji razvoj zaradi pomanjkanja besedilnih virov in drugega empiričnega gradiva iz obdobja pred dinastijo Qin. Da bi natančneje opredelili in utemeljili zgodovinska konfucijanska stališča

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o politični legitimnosti ter uporu, se članek osredotoča na edinstveni primer, imenovan »Shuwujeva tragedija«, iz del *Zuozhuan* in *Gongyangzhuan*, ki vsebujeta bogat korpus neokonfucijanskih komentarjev ter razprav o »pravici« ministra, da obsodi monarha zaradi krutosti. Shuwu je bil krepostni princ države Wey, ki je začasno prevzel monarhove dolžnosti svojega pobeglega starejšega brata, vojvode Chenga iz Weya, in leta 632 pr. n. št. uspešno razrešil vojaški spopad z državo Jin. Kljub temu je vojvoda Cheng umoril Shuwuja, ko mu je ta nameraval vrniti prestol. Yuan Xuan, minister države Wey, je zato pobegnil in obtožil vojvodo Chenga pred hegemonom, vojvodo Wenom iz Jina, kar je na koncu povzročilo nadaljnje krvave poboje ter kaos na dvoru in v družini Wey. Po pregledu neokonfucijanskih komentarjev trdim, da Shuwujev primer močno podpira Tiwaldovo novo tezo o Mencijevi »pravici do upora«. Poleg tega pa v članku obravnavam temeljno vprašanje v Mencijevi politični etiki: ali ima prednost kaznovanje tirana ali obnova reda?

Ključne besede: Mencij, politična etika, odpor proti tiraniji, odgovornost

The question of whether Mencius believed in the "right" for the common people to rebel against their oppressors has been answered in the affirmative by numerous modern scholars over the past century (e.g. Jiang Yong 2005, 71–72; Lee 1992, 245; Ouyang 2009, 45–47; Tu 1993, 6; cf. Tiwald 2008, 269).[1] Beyond this background, Justin Tiwald offers a more nuanced discussion of Mencius' stance on the "right of rebellion" (hereafter abbreviated as the RoR), highlighting both a hierarchical division between the educated elites and the common people and a key idea of "Heaven's Delegated Official" (Tiwald 2008, 273). In Tiwald's reinterpretation, Mencius merely provided a moral framework critical of tyrannical forms of rule, where members of the ruling class could justify either instigating a revolt or usurping the throne under highly demanding preconditions; for the common people, Mencius never established an "open mechanism" for grassroots leadership and popular uprisings, as he deemed their moral judgment insufficient and prevented potential turmoil (ibid., 270–72). This new perspective on Mencius' RoR has been widely agreed upon and supported by a range of scholars' recent reflections (e.g., Angle 2017, 16–17; Back 2024, 97–105; Bai 2020; El Amine 2015, 40, 43, 47; Elstein 2012, 389; Kim 2016, 161–62; 2019, 68, 71–72; 2020, 75; 2024, 250).[2] Nevertheless, it still awaits further development due to the scarcity of textual sources and other empirical evidence in pre-Qin history.

1 The term "right" employed by this article merely refers to idiomatic words from old interpretations that have been popular over the past century. Mencius did not develop an idea of "right" similar to the Western concept. I sincerely thank Xiaojie Chen for pointing this out at the 24th ISCP conference presentation Q&A session.

2 See also some similar Chinese reinterpretations from Huang (2024, 63–65); Ke and Ma (2009); Zhang (2017).

This article focuses on a unique case with a high potential research value named "Shuwu's Tragedy" (*Shu wu canju* 叔武慘劇) from *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and *Gongyangzhuan* 公羊傳 with a rich corpus of Neo-Confucian commentaries and debates on a minister's "right" to denounce the monarch for brutality.[3] Shuwu 叔武 (?–632 BCE) was a virtuous prince of the state of Wey 衛國 (ca. 1040–209 BCE) who temporarily assumed the monarchical duties of his fleeing elder brother, Duke Cheng of Wey 衛成公 (?–600 BCE), and he successfully resolved a military conflict with the state of Jin 晉國 (ca. 1042–369 BCE) in 632 BCE.[4] However, Duke Cheng murdered Shuwu when Shuwu planned to return the throne to him. Wey's minister, Yuan Xuan 元咺 (?–630 BCE), thus sought help from Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (ca. 697 or 671–628 BCE), in the form of "litigation" (*song* 訟) to chasten Duke Cheng, which eventually triggered further bloody killings and chaos in Wey's court and family. Shuwu's tragedy later caused broad discussion in the Song dynasty (960–1279), and more than 30 Neo-Confucian scholars proposed various criticisms of Yuan Xuan's "*ultra vires* acts" and opinions on how to chasten a tyrant.[5]

In the following sections, I will first summarize the detailed textual patterns in the *Mengzi* that pertain to the RoR, and further substantiate the basic framework spelled out in Tiwald's reinterpretation.[6] Next, I will introduce the core issues in Shuwu's tragedy and then reconstruct the sophisticated Neo-Confucian discourse about the RoR as spelled out in comments about the case. A key element of this reconstruction of the Neo-Confucian discourse is the widespread assertion that Confucius himself made a veiled comment on Shuwu's tragedy in *Analects* (2022, 5.21). Building on the distinctive Neo-Confucian interpretation of that passage, I will outline the commentators' major opinions on the roles and actions of Yuan Xuan and Duke Wen. After reviewing the Neo-Confucian discourse, I will develop my core thesis that Shuwu's case strongly supports Tiwald's new thesis on Mencius' RoR by reconstructing a sophisticated, fine-grained hierarchical framework.[7] Finally, I will discuss a fundamental question in Mencius'

3 This article deploys a loose meaning of the term "Neo-Confucian" that refers to those scholars who at least employed and/or reinterpreted the ideas from classical Confucian texts and representative works by Neo-Confucian philosophers like Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).

4 Figures in ancient Chinese history often had several different names. For instance, Shuwu was also called Wu of Wey 衛武, Prince of Wey 衛子, or Yishu 夷叔. To make the article more consistent and accessible, I have standardized the various names of the same figure into a common name.

5 The Latin term *ultra vires* refers to "(doing something) beyond one's granted authority".

6 Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of Chinese literature are my own translations.

7 Notably, when this article references views, beliefs, or arguments attributed to "Mencius" as presented in the *Mengzi*, it does not assume that the texts and the ideas they reflect were necessarily authored by Mencius himself. The precise authorship and dating of such early Chinese philosophical texts remain subjects of ongoing academic debates, awaiting further archaeological

political ethics: which takes priority, chastening the tyrant or restoring order? For Shuwu's case, it seems that scholars commonly agreed that restoring order should supersede chastening the tyrant, but I will rather underline a shared fundamental principle in the Confucian corpus: those who are more politically privileged should take more responsibility (for the whole community). As commoners were not encouraged to engage in violent political struggles, I propose a hypothesis that Confucian scholars aimed to avoid large-scale chaos in the socio-political system and significant loss of life. I further suggest modifying the principle to fit the contemporary context—either changing the hierarchy of political responsibility from privilege-based to capability-based, or emphasizing the respect, care, and protection of ordinary civilians.

Mencius' Arguments on the RoR and Justin Tiwald's Reinterpretation

Mencius' arguments on resistance to tyranny in the *Mengzi* have commonly been categorized under three headings. The first involves Mencius' views about the proper appointment of leaders ("leadership appointment", for short). This approach can be summarized as the legitimization of rulership based on virtue and merit, people's consent, and/or "divine revelation" (in the name of "Heaven's conferral", *Tianyu* 天與). In Mencius' view, monarchs are "designated" under the ultimate authority from "Heaven" (*Tian* 天), and they thus need to fulfil their roles and responsibilities with regard to the ruled. If a successor based on primogeniture is not able to meet the demanding requirements as a "worthy" (*xian* 賢) ruler, an exceptional succession mechanism will be introduced to allow a more exemplary candidate to have the opportunity to be appointed by Heaven as the next leader—replacing the "unworthy" (*buxiao* 不肖) one.[8] The second heading is the "punitive expedition" (*zheng* 征). This is normally interpreted as a kind of justified military intervention in another state's domestic affairs or "liberation

discoveries for confirmation. Similarly, the accuracy and reliability of the narratives surrounding Shuwu's case are also very questionable, with disagreements over its details dating back as early as the Han dynasty (ca. 202 BCE–220 CE)—such as the alternative versions of the story recorded in *Guliangzhuan* 穀梁傳 (*Commentary of Guliang on Chunqiu*) (bk. 5) and *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian)* (2013, bks. 37 and 39). However, these uncertainties do not completely diminish the research value of Shuwu's case and Mencius' political thought. Generations of Confucian scholars commonly held traditional views of these historical figures, and thus frequently engaged in discussions and debates over Shuwu's tragedy. The interpretive study of such a "flawed" historical corpus offers insights into the various political ideas shaped by the longstanding beliefs, so as to generate some "historically situated truths" that facilitate a reconstruction of the philosophical foundation and system of political thought associated with (or, at the very least, in the name of) Mencius.

8 See *Mengzi* (2018, 2A5, 5A5, 5A6, and 7B14).

war" against the tyrant to save the commoners from oppression and suffering, in accordance with a set of highly demanding moral principles.[9]

The third heading, which serves as the main focus of this article, has previously been understood as the common people's RoR, incorporating an open mechanism for grassroots leadership and popular uprisings. In earlier interpretations, this mechanism was grounded in three key beliefs attributed to Mencius. First, Mencius believed that a tyrant could lose the "right" to rule. Second, Mencius maintained that under certain extreme conditions—such as severe suffering or unintended political crisis—a tyrant could be justifiably overthrown through forcible measures. Third, Mencius emphasized that even ordinary people would have the "right" to play a significant role in this process, whether through leadership, as the decisive factor, or straightforwardly participating in the actions of toppling the tyrant.

As Justin Tiwald (2008, 271) observes, the first two beliefs (that a tyrant can lose the "right" to rule and be justifiably overthrown through force or coercion) are relatively well-supported in the texts of *Mengzi*. A dialogue (*Mengzi* 2018, 1B6) between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 (?–301 BCE), certainly supports Mencius' first belief in monarchs' defeasible "right" to rule.[10] Another section, 1B8, supports Mencius' second belief that the forcible removal of a terrible ruler could be justifiable. But for the third belief in the ordinary people's significant role in resisting the tyrant, as Tiwald (2008, 271) has indicated, the *Mengzi* does not provide any straightforward statement. Instead, following Tiwald's (2008) review of the evidence, certain patterns can be observed in 1A5, 1A6, 1A10, 1B7, 1B8, 2A1, 3B5, 7A23, and 7A31 that the image of "the common people" (*min* 民) is often referred to as "followers" or "those clapping their hands" behind the exemplary leader (who has the potential to be a sage king or a true sovereign, *wang* 王). Furthermore, if there were several different leaders, 1A7, 1B10, 1B12, 2A5, 4A9, 5A5, 5A6, and 7B4 suggest that the common people would perform their demands and appeals in "passive forms of resistance", such as "voting with their feet". If there were no exemplary leader, then *Mengzi* (2018, 1A2, 1A3, 1B4, 3A3, and 3B9) merely describe the vulnerability and displacement of populations.[11]

9 See *Mengzi* (2018, 1A5, 1A6, 1A10, 1B7, 1B8, 1B10, 1B11, 2B8, 3B5, 3B9, 4A9, 5A7, and 7B4).

10 Here, Tiwald translates the term *shishi* (士師) as "marshal" perhaps due to the terminology introduced in *Book of Rites* (2008, 1A.69), "when there is a *shishi* before, the chariot will have a flag with a tiger's skin" (前有士師，則載虎皮) (Tiwald 2008, 271). However, as *Analects* (2022, 18.2 and 19.19) and *Mengzi* (2018, 2B5 and 2B8) suggested, *shishi* could also refer to a high-ranking officer of criminal judgment with death penalty power; hence, it is usually translated as "chief criminal judge" or "Chief Warden" (e.g., Legge 1861; Bloom 2009; Van Norden 2008).

11 Here, scholars have two different interpretations of the quotation from the *Book of Documents* in *Mengzi* (2018, 1A2). One suggests the anger of the people who wanted to perish with the tyrant together; the other suggests the people's desire to flee (Dai 1981; Yin 1988).

To further demonstrate the lack of evidence for the third belief, I discuss three representative texts often cited by supporters of the third belief below. The first one is 4B3, which is often employed as evidence of Mencius' belief in ordinary people's "right" to initiate or lead a just revolt against the tyrant (e.g., Jiang 1981, 19; Shao 2007, 86). Here is the well-known passage:

> Mencius said to the King Xuan of Qi: 'When the monarch regards the *chen* as own hands and feet, the *chen* regard their monarch as their belly and heart; when the monarch regards them as own dogs and horses, they regard their monarch as another mere noble living in the capital; when the monarch regards them as ashes and grassroots, they regard their monarch as a brigand and an enemy.' (*Mengzi* 2018, 4B3)
>
> 孟子告齊宣王曰：「君之視臣如手足，則臣視君如腹心；君之視臣如犬馬，則臣視君如國人；君之視臣如土芥，則臣視君如寇讎。」

In this passage, the term *chen* (臣) can refer to either general subjects ("the ruled") of the state or certain ranks of ministers in the court, and a few authors thus understand this text as the statement of the common people's just revolt (e.g., Jiang 1981, 19; Shao 2007, 86). Nevertheless, the sectional context shows that Mencius clearly distinguished the *chen* (ministers) from the *min* (the common people) and merely justified the resistance by the ministers with considerable political status and wealth:

> Mencius said, '… Nowadays, as a minister [*chen*], one's remonstrances are not followed, and one's advice is not listened to, so that the common people [*min*] cannot be benefited from the top [government]. Until [the minister] wants to leave the state for any reason, the monarch tries to seize and jail the one and hinder the one's journey, even placing the one in extreme jeopardy at the destination. Then on the day of departure, the monarch repossesses [the minister's] land property and residential house. This is why I call the monarch a brigand and an enemy.' (*Mengzi* 2018, 4B3)
>
> (孟子)　曰：「…今也為臣。諫則不行，言則不聽；膏澤不下於民；有故而去，則君搏執之，又極之於其所往；去之日，遂收其田里。此之謂寇讎。」

Another famous line from *Mengzi* (2018, 7B14) has also been regularly cited as Mencius' statement for ordinary people's significant role in overthrowing a tyrant (e.g., Jiang Yong 2005, 71; Jiang Guozhu 1981, 18; Ke and Ma 2009, 88; Ouyang 2009, 47):

> The people are of the greatest importance; the altars of the soil and grain are next; and the monarch is of the least importance. (*Mengzi* 2018, 7B14)
>
> 民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕。

Nonetheless, according to the context of the section, Mencius still seemed to see the common people as "followers" instead of an independent, proactive, or decisive force in overthrowing the tyrant:

> Therefore, to gain the approval of most people is the way to become the Son of Heaven;[12] to gain the approval of the Son of Heaven is the way to become a state's monarch (a vassal lord); to gain the approval of a state's monarch is the way to become a middle-ranking minister (a great officer). When a state's monarch endangers the altars of the soil and grain, the monarch should be replaced. (*Mengzi* 2018, 7B14)
>
> 是故得乎丘民而為天子，得乎天子為諸侯，得乎諸侯為大夫。諸侯危社稷，則變置。

The subject of the action of "replacing (the monarch)" (*bianzhi* 變置) here is ambiguous and unclear—in context, the power to appoint and dispose of the monarchs is more likely to be in the hands of the Son of Heaven instead of the common people of the state. Simultaneously, *Mengzi* (2018, 5B9) proposes an alternative model of "replacing the monarch" by the privileged ministers rather than the commoners.[13]

In addition, it will also be rather implausible if we use analogy to interpret that the common people can overthrow the Son of Heaven just like the Son of Heaven can dismiss a state's monarch—a more possible form of people's resistance against the unworthy highest sovereign will be "voting with their feet":

> [Mencius] said: '… After the death of the sage king Yao, when the three years' mourning was completed, Shun withdrew the power to establish the son of Yao and then lived near the south of the South River. The vassal lords, however, presented themselves before Shun rather than the son of Yao. The litigants appealed to Shun rather than the son of

12 Here, according to Zhu Xi's annotation in *Mengzi Jizhu* (7B14, in *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu*, vol. 3, bk. 7), the term *qiumin* (丘民) refers to "the lowest ranking of people" (*zhi wei jian* 至微賤); simultaneously, according to Wang Fuzhi's 王夫之 (1619–1692) interpretation in *Sishu Baishu* 四書稗疏, this term can also refer to "the majority or the massive amount of people" (*zhong min* 眾民). Hence, I translate it as "most people".

13 See more details of *Mengzi* 5B9 in the next section of this article.

> Yao. Singers praised Shun rather than the son of Yao. Therefore, I said, 'Heaven [gave Shun the throne]'.' (*Mengzi* 2018, 5A5)
>
> （孟子） 曰： 「…堯崩，三年之喪畢，舜避堯之子於南河之南。天下諸侯朝覲者，不之堯之子而之舜；訟獄者，不之堯之子而之舜；謳歌者，不謳歌堯之子而謳歌舜，故曰天也。」

Finally, of the various passages that are taken to link the common people with the violent overthrow of a tyrant, only *Mengzi* (2018, 4A2) seems to make the connection explicit:

> A tyrant who severely oppresses the people will be slain, following the collapse of the state; even if the one's oppression is less extreme, it will still place the ruler in danger and weaken the state. [The ancient tyrants of Zhou have thus] been called 'King You [the king of chaos]' and 'King Li [the king of brutality]', and their filial and devoted descendants can never change those names in a hundred generations. This is what is meant in the words of the *Book of Odes*, 'The collapse of the Shang dynasty is not far off; the evidence can be found from the [last] sovereign of the Xia dynasty'. (*Mengzi* 2018, 4A2)
>
> 暴其民甚，則身弒國亡；不甚，則身危國削。名之曰『幽厲』，雖孝子慈孫，百世不能改也。《詩》云『殷鑒不遠，在夏后之世』，此之謂也。

Here, the line "a tyrant who severely oppresses the people will be slain, following the collapse of the state" (暴其民甚，則身弒國亡) seems to clearly support popular uprisings. However, the context disproves it. This section mentions the four legendary cases of resistance to tyranny: the collapse of the Xia dynasty in ca. 1600 BCE,[14] the collapse of the Shang dynasty in ca. 1046 BCE, the exile of King Li of Zhou 周厲王 (ca. 890–828 BCE) in 842 BCE, and the death of King You of Zhou 周幽王 (ca. 795–771 BCE) in 771 BCE, but only the exile of King Li could be arguably related to an uprising of the capital's residents (*guoren baodong* 國人暴動). Notably, those residents were not the commoners, but instead mainly the lower-ranking officials and the lowest noble class (*shi* 士) living in the capital, and the recent studies of King Li's story recorded in the *Tsinghua Bamboo Slips* 清華簡 suggest that the core leadership of the revolt was a lord named "Gongbo He" 共伯和 (e.g., Li and Zhang 2024; Liu 2019; Tao 2013).

14 Notably, based on the existing archaeological evidence, we still do not know whether the dynasty earlier than the Shang dynasty was named Xia, but there is evidence that there was an early dynasty before the Shang, and generations of Chinese scholars named this dynasty the Xia (cf. Han 2024).

Therefore, in summary, no apparent textual evidence firmly supports the old interpretations of Mencius' arguments on the RoR as developing an "open mechanism" for grassroots leadership and popular uprisings. With this background in mind, the evidence supports Tiwald's argument that Mencius prohibited the people from exercising political judgment to exercise a "right" to remove a tyrant, even in relatively minimal respects. Let me now briefly review Tiwald's interpretation of Mencius on popular rebellion against tyranny, as well as his positive argument for that interpretation.

On Tiwald's interpretation, the people are allowed to participate in efforts to forcibly remove a tyrant when that effort is led by someone from the political class with heavenly sanction, but the forms of participation that Mencius permitted them are passive and reactive, such that the people do not qualify as having a proper RoR. For this, Tiwald argues, the people would at least need to be empowered to choose the timing and manner of the forcible overthrow of a tyrant. He points out that the power and authority of moral judgment and decision-making are unanimously monopolized by the ruling class, and people's judgments and voices cannot carry high weight in the process (Tiwald 2008, 271–72).

Tiwald further highlights two significant pieces of textual evidence illustrating the people's limited role in the removal of the tyrant within Mencius' ethical framework and legitimacy mode: one is the hierarchical division outlined in *Mengzi* (2018, 3A4) between the educated elites who "labour with their minds" (*laoxin* 勞心) and the people who "labour with their physical strength" (*laoli* 勞力); another one, more importantly, is the key idea of "Heaven's Delegated Official" (*Tianli* 天吏)—a divinely-sanctioned figure who holds prior authority to replace the monarch, as presented in *Mengzi* (2018, 2A5 and 2B8) (Tiwald 2008, 273).

In conclusion, according to Tiwald's research, we would better to understand Mencius' RoR as a moral framework that only members of the ruling class, ideally required to have exemplary excellence and sufficient ability of judgment, could utilize to launch the removal of a tyrant, and Mencius never showed his firm support for grassroots leadership and popular uprisings.

Tiwald's new interpretation of Mencius' RoR has been widely accepted in scholars' recent works. For one representative example, in Loubna El Amine's reflection, Mencius never proposed any "revolutionary" ideas of mobilizing grassroots; instead, the ideal scenario perhaps would be people's suffering as the signal for a potential sage king to launch a regime change process in line with the idealized legends (El Amine 2015, 44–47). Similarly, in Tongdong Bai's recent work, he also supports Tiwald's top-down model and further develops his vision of Mencius' limited "popular rights" towards a political system as "for the people, of the people, but not by the people" (Bai 2020). Sungmoon Kim is one of the scholars who most frequently cites Tiwald's new interpretation. Although he advocates a

democratic version of Confucian virtue politics, defending Mencius' affirmation of the common people's equal dignity, he also acknowledges the validity of Tiwald's view (Kim 2016, 162).[15]

Nonetheless, Tiwald's perspective still awaits further clarification and textual or empirical evidence due to the scarcity of representative examples in pre-Qin history that have rich Confucian commentaries. The mysteries of the detailed framework and exact implementations of Mencius' "limited" RoR have not yet been solved. In the interests of expanding the body of evidence to cases of bottom-up rebellion, this article turns to later Confucian commentaries on the unique case of Shuwu's tragedy. As we will see, there is a vibrant literature on this pre-Qin event that further elucidates and clarifies historical Confucian views on the RoR and the forcible overthrow of tyrants.

Shuwu's Tragedy and Neo-Confucian Commentaries

The general timeline of Shuwu's story is recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (hereafter abbreviated as the *Annals*). More detailed narratives can be mainly found in *Zuozhuan* (bk. 5) and *Gongyangzhuan* (bk. 5), and the translated narratives can be found in the English version of *Zuozhuan* (Durrant Li, and Schaberg 2016, 406–07, 420–27, 432–33). As an article focusing on political philosophy research, I will not provide a thorough account of historical study; instead, I will briefly introduce the story and extract the core issues below.

In 632 BCE, after "the Battle of Chengpu" (*Cheng pu zhi zhan* 城濮之戰), Duke Cheng of Wey dispatched his middle-ranking minister (or great officer, *dafu* 大夫) Yuan Xuan to establish his younger brother Prince Shuwu as the temporary monarch and then fled to another state due to fearing the military threat from the state of Jin. Shuwu successfully negotiated with Jin at "the Covenant of Jiantu" (*Jian tu zhi meng* 踐土之盟), and Jin's leaders agreed to restore Duke Cheng's position as monarch.

Almost simultaneously when Shuwu planned to return the throne, Duke Cheng heard some rumours that Yuan Xuan had arranged to continue Shuwu's rule after the covenant, and he executed Yuan Xuan's son. Shuwu and Yuan Xuan thus returned to the capital of Wey early and assumed a defensive stance. Residents in Wey's capital had divided their loyalties between Duke Cheng and Shuwu. It

15 Remarkably, Sungmoon Kim's emphasis on the Confucian idea of one's "responsibility" (*ren* 任) towards the realm under Heaven (*Tianxia* 天下) inspires me to rethink the rationale of Confucian scholars' establishment of a hierarchy of political responsibility (Kim 2016, 162). I will discuss this further in the final section of this article.

was not until the sixth month of the year[16] that Jin's leaders officially declared the restoration of Duke Cheng's position. Duke Cheng sent his senior minister (*qing* 卿) Ning Wuzi 甯武子 (?–?), who was still highly loyal and obedient, to meet with the representatives from the capital of Wey and declare a reconciliation with Shuwu and Yuan Xuan at "the Covenant of Yuanpu" (*Wan pu zhi meng* 宛濮之盟). But when Shuwu invited Duke Cheng to come back to the capital, Duke Cheng secretly sent his generals and guardians to assassinate him. After Shuwu was killed, Duke Cheng purged both his opponents and his conspirators. Only Yuan Xuan survived and fled to Jin.

Yuan Xuan sought help from the new hegemon (*ba* 霸), Duke Wen of Jin, in the form of "litigation" to chasten Duke Cheng. Duke Cheng appointed Ning Wuzi and some other ministers as his assistants to argue with Yuan Xuan in front of Duke Wen, but Duke Cheng did not prevail. Duke Wen then executed Duke Cheng's other assistants, and only Ning Wuzi was pardoned due to his frank loyalty. Duke Wen then arrested Duke Cheng and presented him at Zhou's capital in front of King Xiang of Zhou 周襄王 (?–619 BCE, as the Son of Heaven). Duke Cheng was confined in a dark cell, and Ning Wuzi was in charge of supplying him with food and provisions. Yuan Xuan went back to Wey and established Duke Cheng and Shuwu's younger brother as the new monarch.

In 630 BCE, as Duke Wen was not allowed to publicly execute Duke Cheng in accordance with the ritual and ethical protocols, he dispatched a physician to poison Duke Cheng in his cell. However, Ning Wuzi plied the physician with goods and had him dilute the poison so that Duke Cheng did not die. Duke Xi of Lu 魯僖公 (?–627 BCE) then interceded on Duke Cheng's behalf, presenting jade ornaments to King Xiang and to Duke Wen, and King Xiang then granted Duke Xi's request and released Duke Cheng in the autumn. Duke Cheng returned to the capital of Wey and hired two lower-ranking officials as assassins to put Yuan Xuan and two princes to death. Finally, Duke Cheng silenced the two officials and came back to power. He then enjoyed a steady reign for the next 30 years.

Here, the story had a bloody but "consummate" ending: ironically, after many brutal killings in Wey's court and family, Duke Cheng eventually stabilized the state. For the authors of *Zuozhuan* and *Gongyangzhuan*, they commonly agreed that Shuwu's story was tragic and horrible—a virtuous prince was murdered by his elder brother, but the murderer enjoyed a long life and a stable reign at the end. Similar opinions were shared by some Han scholars. For instance, *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露 (bk. 6) praises Shuwu as a model of loyalty comparable to several other virtuous figures recorded in the *Annals*. Similarly, *Han Shi Waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (bk. 7) expresses sympathy and indignation for Shuwu's death: "Shuwu was worthy [virtuous and capable], but he was murdered by his elder brother

16 Based on the ancient Chinese lunar calendar.

(叔武賢而殺於兄)". In addition, it suggests that Shuwu's death can be comparable to another case of Bigan 比干 (?–?), a virtuous prince and prime minister of the Shang dynasty who repeatedly remonstrated with the tyrant Zhou 紂 (ca. 1105–1046 BCE), and the tyrant then had his heart cut out from his chest in an act of brutal mockery—"Bigan was loyal, but he was executed by his sovereign (比干忠而誅於君)".[17]

In addition to Shuwu's tragic death, another more significant issue is the contrast between the roles and actions of Yuan Xuan and Ning Wuzi. The two ministers took diametrically opposite attitudes towards Duke Cheng: Yuan Xuan boldly litigated against Duke Cheng and sought intervention from the hegemon Duke Wen, but Ning Wuzi continuously remained loyal and obedient, serving Duke Cheng and even saving his life. Starting from the Song dynasty, a large number of Neo-Confucian commentaries were keen on discussing Shuwu's tragedy and how ministers should treat a tyrant similar to Duke Cheng. This trend originated from a widespread belief that Song scholars had discovered a veiled comment on Shuwu's tragedy in the *Analects* and by Confucius himself.

The pivotal passage for the Neo-Confucian reflections of Shuwu's tragedy is *Analects* (2022, 5.21), a well-known section about Confucius' ideas of political wisdom,[18] as shown below:

> The Master said, 'When the Way prevailed in the state [of Wey], Ning Wuzi acted as a wise man. When the state lost the Way, he acted as a stupid man. Others might equal his wisdom, but could not equal his stupidity.' (*Analects* 2022, 5.21)[19]
>
> 子曰：「甯武子邦有道則知，邦無道則愚。其知可及也，其愚不可及也。」

Before the 1100s, mainstream annotations on *Analects* 5.21, such as in *Lunyu Zhushu* 論語注疏, did not link it with Shuwu's tragedy; instead, they commonly

17 See Bigan's legend in such as *Analects* (2022, 18.1), *Mengzi* (2018, 2A1), *Xunzi* (2013, 8.18, 15.23, 18.6, 25.1, 26.11, 28.8, and 32.6–7), and *Shiji* (2013, bk. 3). Notably, in *Hanshu* 漢書 (bk. 77), a Han minister, Zhuge Feng 諸葛豐 (?–?), also employed a similar expression to warn the emperor to avoid the manslaughter of a virtuous person.

18 Some influential idle talk on these ideas can be found in inner chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi*.

19 In Zhu Xi's version, the section's numbering is 5.20. Here, the common translation of the term *keji* (可及) is "equal", but the problem is that native English speakers might be tempted to read it literally as "be as stupid as one seemed to be" (e.g., Ames and Rosemont 1999, 95–102; Legge 1861; Ni 2017, 162; Watson 2007, 35–40; cf. Roberts 2020, 64–66). I still employ the common translation while highlighting its potential for misleading; the term *keji* should refer to "one could achieve something equal to the model one". I sincerely thank Justin Tiwald for his advice on the translation of this term.

interpreted it as refining political wisdom by reflecting on Ning Wuzi's personality. The opportunity for Song scholars to discover the veiled meaning of this passage perhaps came from the example of Bigan given by Cheng Yi when he evaluated the following section:[20]

> When the state loses the Way, the one who is able to keep calm and maintain a low profile can avoid disasters. This was why [Confucius] said [of Ning Wuzi], '[others] could not equal [his stupidity]'. And there was a counterexample of someone who [unlike Ning Wuzi] should not act as a stupid man, Bigan. (*Ercheng Waishu* 二程外書 bk. 7; *Lunyu Jizhu* 論語集注 5.20 in *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu* 四書章句集注)
>
> 邦無道能沈晦以免患，故曰不可及也。亦有不當愚者，比干是也。

Cheng Yi's comment related to *Han Shi Wai Zhuan*'s comparison between Shuwu and Bigan perhaps inspired a few Neo-Confucian scholars, like Li Gang 李綱 (1083–1140) in *Lunyu Xiangshuo* 論語詳說 (bk. 3) and Zheng Ruxie 鄭汝諧 (1126–1205) in *Lunyu Yiyuan* 論語意原 (bk. 1), to go back to the historical narrative of Shuwu's tragedy and reinterpret it as a case of pretend naivete that could be usefully compared with Ning Wuzi's and Bigan's.[21] After that, generations of Neo-Confucian scholars agreed that in *Analects* (2022, 5.21), Confucius did not merely comment on Ning Wuzi's political wisdom but also criticized Duke Cheng's tyrannical rule as "the state lost the way (邦無道)", and lamented Shuwu's death as "who could not equal [Ning Wuzi's] stupidity (其愚不可及)"—those embracing their compulsory obligations (to assume the temporary monarchical duties, or to remonstrate with the tyrant) should also be mindful that this would thus make them easier targets for political attacks and punishment.[22]

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20 At the same time, scholars focusing on the *Annals*, like Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019–1068) in *Liushi Chunqiuzhuan* 劉氏春秋傳 (bk. 6), also noticed the uniqueness of Shuwu's tragedy, but they did not link the case with *Analects* (2022, 5.21).

21 It had a peculiar historical context—Li Gang served Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 (1082–1135) and Emperor Qinzong 宋欽宗 (1100–1161) and experienced a disastrous case of a monarch changing due to a war emergency (cf. Ebrey 2014, 421–74).

22 See Zhen Dexiu 真德秀 (1178–1235) in *Lunyu Jibian* 論語集編 (bk. 3); Cai Jie 蔡節 (?–1250s) in *Lunyu Jishuo* 論語集說 (bk. 3); Hu Bingwen 胡炳文 (ca. 1250–1333) in *Sishutong Lunyu* 四書通論語 (bk. 3); Zhan Daochuan 詹道傳 (?–1300s) in *Lunyu Zuanjian* 論語纂箋 (bk. 3); Hu Guang 胡廣 (1370–1418) in *Lunyu Jizhu Daquan* 論語集註大全 (bk. 5); Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578–1645) in *Lunyu Xue'an* 論語學案 (bk. 3); Cheng Tingzuo 程廷祚 (1691–1767) in *Lunyu Shuo* 論語說 (bk. 1); Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 (1791–1855) in *Lunyu Zhengyi* 論語正義 (bk. 3); Jian Zhaoliang 簡朝亮 (1851–1933) in *Lunyu Jizhu Buzhengshushu* 論語集注補正述疏 (bk. 3). Hereafter, I arrange Neo-Confucian scholars' textual sources in a chronological order so as to help readers trace the historical sequence.

Zhu Xi also supported the new interpretation of Confucius' comment on Ning Wuzi in *Lunyu Jizhu* (5.20) and *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類 (bk. 29, ch. 7).[23] He particularly clarified the difference between Ning Wuzi and Bigan:

> Compared with those who wisely took self-protection measures, Ning Wuzi was like a stupid one, but he acted as a stupid one in a proper way. For others in the same situation, even if disasters were avoided without negligence in one given respect, they would make mistakes in another respect. For 'Bigan's death due to his remonstrance', it seemed that [he] did not know how to act as a stupid person. However, for the righteousness of his position [as prince and prime minister], he should not act as a stupid one, and he thus had to handle the situation [in his] way [of remonstrance], which was different from Ning Wuzi's case. This was why Cheng Yi said, 'And there was a counterexample of someone who [unlike Ning Wuzi] should not act as a stupid man, Bigan.' (*Zhuzi Yulei* bk. 29, ch. 7)
>
> 若比以智自免之士，武子卻似箇愚底人，但其愚得來好。若使別人處之，縱免禍患，不失於此，則失於彼，此武子之愚所以不可及。若『比干諫而死』，看來似不會愚底人。然它於義卻不當愚，只得如此處，又與武子不同。故伊川 （程頤） 說：『亦有不當愚者，比干是也。』
>
> Cases cannot be generalized in a universal way. The sage [Confucius] did not require everyone to emulate Ning Wuzi's case; still, if one's role was similar to his, one could follow his case as an exemplary model. For Bigan, he was rather a direct descendant of the royal family [of the Shang dynasty]. After [another elder prince] Weizi had fled, Bigan had to remonstrate [with the tyrant, as was his duty]. [Bigan] fulfilled his duty [as a prince and prime minister] but died due to his remonstrance. When a person is in Ning Wuzi's role and situation, one should act as Ning Wuzi did; when in Bigan's role and situation, one should act as Bigan did. Do not stick to a single approach. (Ibid.)
>
> 世間事做一律看不得。聖人不是要人人學甯武子，但如武子，亦自可為法。比干卻是父族，微子既去之後，比干不容於不諫。諫而死，乃正也。人當武子之時，則為武子；當比干之時，則為比干，執一不得也。

23 Here, an interesting phenomenon is that Zhu Xi mainly employed the terminology and cases from Cheng Yi's texts, avoiding directly citing the works by Li Gang and Zheng Ruxie.

Here, Zhu Xi agreed that both Ning Wuzi and Bigan should be praised, and the distinct ways in which they dealt with the tyrant stem from their different roles and responsibilities.[24]

In addition, Zhu Xi extended the framework with detailed obligations of different levels of political actors:

> [Zheng Kexue] asked: 'Ning Wuzi was a senior minister who served multiple generations of monarchs. Others did not have to act like him.'
>
> [Zhu Xi] said: 'Yes. But it depends. If one were a guest minister, one could just leave according to the situation. If the situation had been such serious [dangerous or urgent], you could not escape. This [kind of judgment] is the most difficult; one should weigh the relative importance of the various factors.' (Ibid.)
>
> (鄭可學) 問：「甯武子世臣，他人不必如此。」
>
> (朱熹) 曰：「然。又看事如何。若羈旅之臣，見幾先去則可。若事已爾，又豈可去！此事最難，當權其輕重。」

In conclusion, Zhu Xi suggested that under an irredeemably bad or tyrannical ruler, the ruled should adhere to a hierarchical framework with at least three different ranks. For those privileged members of the royal family (*fuzu* 父族), the second tier of top leaders operating directly under the monarch, they have compulsory duties to attempt to stop the tyranny, even at the expense of their own lives. For the senior ministers (*shichen* 世臣), they need to adopt a more sophisticated approach to address the issue while maintaining loyalty and obedience to the monarch. For the guest ministers (*jilü zhi chen* 羈旅之臣) and other low-ranking officials, they might abandon their posts and leave or still uphold their duties, depending on the specific circumstances and their personal judgment.

Here, a question emerges: why would Zhu Xi make these fine-grained distinctions between the levels of ministers and the strictness/permissiveness of their duties to resist tyranny? Did Zhu Xi aim to reinforce the supreme authority of the monarch by limiting the active resistance of most ministers and officials? My opinion is no. Zhu Xi perhaps employed and further developed a similar framework in *Mengzi* (2018, 5B9):[25]

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24 In Zhu Xi's view, Ning Wuzi was merely a member of a collateral branch of the royal family (*gongzu* 公族) that was not as privileged as the direct descendants of the royal family, see *Zhuzi Yulei* (bk. 29, ch. 7).

25 Zhu Xi also cited *Mengzi* 5B9 in *Zhuzi Yulei* (bk. 13): "… and there is a kind of ministers who should not abandon [their posts]—the privileged (又有一種退不得底人, 如貴戚之卿是也)."

> [King Xuan of Qi] asked: 'Are there differences among high-ranking ministers?'
>
> [Mencius] replied: 'Sure, there are. Some are privileged ministers [who are often members of the royal house]; some are ministers from other clans.'
>
> The king asked: 'How about [the obligations of] those privileged ministers?'[26]
>
> [Mencius] answered: 'When the monarch has a significant fault, they should remonstrate with the monarch; if [the monarch] does not listen to their repeated remonstrances, they ought to change the monarch.'
>
> … The king then asked about [the obligations of] those ministers from other clans. [Mencius] answered: 'When the monarch has a fault, they should remonstrate with the monarch; if [the monarch] does not listen to their repeated remonstrances, they can leave the state.' (*Mengzi* 2018, 5B9)

> (齊宣) 王曰：「卿不同乎？」
>
> (孟子) 曰：「不同。有貴戚之卿，有異姓之卿。」
>
> 王曰：「請問貴戚之卿。」
>
> 曰：「君有大過則諫，反覆之而不聽，則易位。」
>
> …然後請問異姓之卿。曰：「君有過則諫，反覆之而不聽，則去。」

Notably, in detailed annotations of *Mengzi* (2018, 5B9), Zhu Xi did agree with Mencius' statement that the privileged would have the "right" to replace the monarch:

> 'A significant fault' refers to the fault that will cause the collapse of the state. 'Changing the monarch' means replacing [the current monarch] with another worthy member of the royal family. It is perhaps because the privileged ministers have intimate bonds with the monarch and thus cannot leave the state. The ancestral temple [of the royal family] is of great importance; [the privileged] cannot bear to see it destroyed, so [they] have to launch such a process [of replacing the monarch]. (*Mengzi Jizhu* 5B9, in *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu*, vol. 3, bk. 5)

26 Here, I translate the term *gui qi zhi qing* 貴戚之卿 as "the privileged (ministers)" instead of literally "those nobles and relatives" due to the legend of Yi Yin 伊尹 (?–?), who was a slave but became the top leader and exercised the power of replacing the monarch, see *Mengzi* (2018, 2A2, 2B2, 5A6, 5A7, 5B1, 6B6, 7A31, and 7B38).

> 大過，謂足以亡其國者。易位，易君之位，更立親戚之賢者。蓋與君有親親之恩，無可去之義。以宗廟為重，不忍坐視其亡，故不得已而至於此也。

Hence, I suggest that Zhu Xi's rationale should be viewed together with Mencius', which will be further discussed in the final section of this article.

Despite the nuanced discussion of the hierarchical framework, Zhu Xi did not clearly evaluate the roles and actions of Yuan Xuan and Duke Wen in chastening Duke Cheng. About 30 other Neo-Confucian scholars further evaluated the roles and actions of Yuan Xuan and Duke Wen. Surprisingly, the direct comments on Yuan Xuan commonly criticized his "litigation" against Duke Cheng as an "*ultra vires* act". The commentators shared four harsh criticisms of Yuan Xuan: being so presumptuous as to jail the monarch and violate the hierarchical order; being so arrogant as to blame the monarch's faults without self-reflection; being so selfish as to destabilize the state in a moment of anger; and being so unwise as to intensify the internal conflicts of the royal family and cause more deaths.[27]

Here, remarkably, Yuan Xuan in his particular case did not launch forcible or coercive means by himself. Instead, he appealed to the hegemon, Duke Wen, through a relatively "civil" process of "litigation"—having a public argument with Duke Cheng's "defence team" in front of Duke Wen and then presenting the result before King Xiang (as the Son of Heaven). But most commentators firmly stated that Yuan Xuan never had the "right" to challenge his monarch's authority, thus forming a consensus that there should be a certain standard: Yuan Xuan, as a middle-ranking minister, did not have the moral and political authority to propose and even lead the removal of his monarch. The one exceptional case was the

27 See Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019–1068) in *Liushi Chunqiuzhuan* 劉氏春秋傳 (bk. 6); Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138) in *Hushi Chunqiuzhuan* 胡氏春秋傳 (bk. 13); Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) in *Yeshi Chunqiuzhuan* 葉氏春秋傳 (bk. 10); Zhang Daheng 張大亨 (?–1100s) in *Chunqiu Tongxun* 春秋通訓 (bk. 2); Zhao Pengfei 趙鵬飛 (?–1150s) in *Chunqiu Jingquan* 春秋經筌 (bk. 7); Xiao Chu 蕭楚 (?–1150s) in *Chunqiu Bianyi* 春秋辨疑 (bk. 1); Li Mingfu 李明復 (1174–1234) in *Chunqiu Jiyi* 春秋集義 (bk. 24); Wei Liaoweng 魏了翁 (1178–1237) in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Yaoyi* 春秋左傳要義 (bks. 25); Jia Xuanweng 家鉉翁 (1213–1297) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Xiangshuo* 春秋集傳詳說 (bk. 12); Lü Dagui 呂大圭 (1227–1275) in *Lüshi Chunqiu Huowen* 呂氏春秋或問 (bk. 6); Chen Shen 陳深 (1260–1344) in *Du Chunqiu Bian* 讀春秋編 (bk. 5); Wang Yuanjie 王元傑 (?–1350s) in *Chunqiu Yanyi* 春秋讌義 (bk. 5); Yu Gao 俞皐 (?–1350s) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Shiyidacheng* 春秋集傳釋義大成 (bk. 5); Li Lian 李廉 (?–1350s) in *Chunqiu Huitong* 春秋會通 (bk. 11); Zheng Yu 鄭玉 (1298–1358) in *Chunqiu Queyi* 春秋闕疑 (bk. 17); Wang Kekuan 汪克寬 (1301–1372) in *Chunqiu Huzhuan Fulu Zuanshu* 春秋胡傳附錄纂疏 (bk. 13); Hu Guang in *Chunqiu Daquan* 春秋大全 (bk. 15); Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560) in *Chunqiu Zhengzhuan* 春秋正傳 (bk. 15); Jiang Bao 姜寶 (1514–1593) in *Chunqiu Shiyiquankao* 春秋事義全考 (bk. 6); Wang Qiao 王樵 (1521–1599) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* 春秋輯傳 (bk. 5); Gao Panlong 高攀龍 (1562–1626) in *Chunqiu Kongyi* 春秋孔義 (bk. 5); Zhu Zhaoying 朱朝瑛 (1605–1670) in *Du Chunqiu Lüeji* 讀春秋略記 (bk. 5); and Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* 春秋家說 (bk. 1B).

comment of Zhuo Erkang 卓爾康 (?–1650s) in *Chunqiu Bianyi* 春秋辯義 (bk. 2), in which he suggested that Yuan Xuan was "right" to bring accusations against Duke Cheng to Duke Wen, but Yuan Xuan should have then committed suicide after he finished making his case so as to prove his pure loyalty and selflessness.[28]

With regard to Duke Wen of Jin's role in this case, many commentators (even somewhat adopting Xunzi's idea) proposed that due to the collapse of the Zhou King's highest authority, Duke Wen as a hegemon should undertake the obligation to maintain the order and stability of Wey.[29] However, in principle, he did not grant the authority to punish another monarch since he had insufficient capability of moral judgment and a "flawed heart" for the public interest, with evidence of this being when Duke Cheng was able to bribe his way out of prison.[30] Therefore, Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 1B) and Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820) in *Mengzi Zhengyi* 孟子正義 (bk. 28) suggested that the chastening of Duke Cheng could be better understood in accordance with *Mengzi*:

> Mencius said, 'In the *Annals*, there were no righteous wars. Indeed, there were some wars better than others. [Still,] a 'punitive expedition' should be launched by the supreme authority to punish the subordinate authority; there were no 'punitive expeditions' between two hostile states.' (*Mengzi* 2018, 7B2)
>
> 《春秋》無義戰。彼善於此，則有之矣。征者上伐下也，敵國不相征也。

28 Here, Zhuo Erkang's opinion was perhaps significantly influenced by the case of Yu Qian 于謙 (1398–1457) in 1457 (cf. Twitchett and Grimm 1988, 305–42).

29 See Liu Chang 劉敞 (1019–1068) in *Liushi Chunqiuzhuan* (bk. 6); Sun Jue 孫覺 (1028–1090) in *Sunshi Chunqiu Jingjie* 孫氏春秋經解 (bk. 6); Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138) in *Hushi Chunqiuzhuan* (bk. 13); Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148) in *Yeshi Chunqiuzhuan* (bk. 10); Zhao Pengfei 趙鵬飛 (?–1150s) in *Chunqiu Jingquan* (bk. 7); Zhang Qia 張洽 (1161–1237) in *Zhangshi Chunqiu Jizhu* 張氏春秋集注 (1983, bk. 4); Li Mingfu 李明復 (1174–1234) in *Chunqiu Jiyi* (bk. 24); Jia Xuanweng 家鉉翁 (1213–1297) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Xiangshuo* (bk. 12); Yu Gao 俞皐 (?–1350s) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Shiyidacheng* (bk. 5); Wang Kekuan 汪克寬 (1301–1372) in *Chunqiu Huzhuan Fulu Zuanshu* (bk. 13); Hu Guang 胡廣 (1370–1418) in *Chunqiu Daquan* (bk. 15); Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560) in *Chunqiu Zhengzhuan* (bk. 15); Jiang Bao 姜寶 (1514–1593) in *Chunqiu Shiyiquankao* (bk. 6); Zhu Zhaoying 朱朝瑛 (1605–1670) in *Du Chunqiu Lüeji* (bk. 5), and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 1B).

30 See Xiao Chu 蕭楚 (?–1150s) in *Chunqiu Bianyi* (bk. 1); Gao Kang 高閌 (1097–1153, cited by Wang Kekuan) and Wang Kekuan 汪克寬 (1301–1372) in *Chunqiu Huzhuan Fulu Zuanshu* (bk. 13); Li Lian 李廉 (?–1350s) in *Chunqiu Huitong* (bk. 11); Zheng Yu 鄭玉 (1298–1358) in *Chunqiu Queyi* (bk. 18); Zhao Pang 趙汸 (1319–1369) in *Chunqiu Shishuo* 春秋師說 (bk. 3); Xiong Guo 熊過 (ca. 1506–1580) in *Chunqiu Mingzhilu* 春秋明志錄 (bk. 5); Wang Qiao 王樵 (1521–1599) in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* (bk. 5); Zhu Heling 朱鶴齡 (1606–1683) and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) in *Du Zuo Richao* 讀左日鈔 (bk. 3).

Here, Jiao Xun underlined that Yuan Xuan's "litigation" and Duke Wen's intervention had some "justification", but they still could not be "authorized" since the initiators (Yuan Xuan and Duke Wen) did not grant proper authority and violated the hierarchical order.[31] In the next section, I reconstruct the sophisticated hierarchical framework that strongly supports Justin Tiwald's new interpretation of Mencius' arguments on the RoR. I further discuss a fundamental question: which takes priority, chastening the tyrant or restoring order?

Core Thesis and Further Discussion

The reconstructed hierarchical framework involves at least nine ranks with different obligations and roles in chastening a tyrant (as shown in Table I). The top three ranks are for positions whose authority is rooted in forces beyond the state itself (Heaven). In principle, the removal of a tyrant should be the "right" and responsibility of the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi* 天子). In the context of Shuwu's case, this would be the Zhou King. Otherwise, ideally, only a monarch with certain moral potential to be a sage king or a true sovereign (*wang* 王)—as indicated in *Mengzi* (2018, 1B8)—might be designated by Heaven to remove the tyrant. A hegemon (*ba* 霸) lacks legitimacy to remove another state's monarch. Still, the hegemon's provisional supervision and ordering of the state can be justified as a "necessary evil" when it is the lesser of two evils.

Table 1: The Nine-Rank Hierarchical Framework

Tier group	Rank	"Right" to remove a tyrant	Obligation to maintain/ restore order	Usual roles and actions in chastening a tyrant.
Authority beyond the state itself	The Son of Heaven (*Tianzi* 天子)	Yes	Compulsory	Leadership with the highest authority (replacing the monarch or punitive expedition).
	The true sovereign (*wang* 王)	Yes	Compulsory	Leadership with righteous authority (punitive expedition).
	The hegemon (*ba* 霸)	No	"Necessary evil"	Better not to be in a position of leadership due to flawed authority.

31 See similar interpretations of *Mengzi* 7B2 by Zhao Qi 趙岐 (?–201) in *Mengzi Zhushu* 孟子注疏 (bk. 14) and Zhu Xi in *Mengzi Jizhu* (7B2, in *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu*, vol. 3, bk. 7). Jiao Xun further indicated another case of officers rebelling against Duke Xian of Wey 衛獻公 (?–544 BCE) in ca. 559 BCE. He lamented the death of the temporary monarch established by the officers—Prince Piao 公孫剽 (?–546 BCE), being comparable to Shuwu's tragedy.

Three types of *qing* (卿, high-ranking ministers) of the state	The privileged (*gui qi zhi qing* 貴戚之卿)	Yes	Compulsory	The usual way is to make a remonstrance; they should not leave the state. The most privileged can be in a position of leadership.
	Senior ministers and nobles (*shichen gongzu* 世臣公族)	No	Compulsory	The usual way is to help maintain order and resolve issues; they may keep silent, but they should not leave the state.
	Guest ministers and clansmen (*yixing zhi qing* 異姓之卿)	No	Situational	The usual way is to make a remonstrance; otherwise, they can leave the state.
Middle-to-bottom ranks	Middle-ranking ministers (*dafu* 大夫)	No	Situational	The usual way is to help maintain order and resolve issues; otherwise, they can keep silent or flee the state.
	Residents in the capital (*guoren* 國人)	No	Situational	The usual way is to help preserve stability; otherwise, they can flee the state or welcome the removal of the tyrant.
	The common people (*min* 民)	No	No	They can flee the state or welcome the removal of the tyrant.

The second tier of three ranks is the most complicated one, which includes the members of the royal family and major senior ministers of the state's court. They are usually in senior titles of *qing* (卿; cf. Yan 2021, 50–55), but different types of *qing* have dramatically different roles and obligations, and only the most privileged can grant the authority to launch the removal of a tyrant. The highest classification in this tier involves those people with certain political privileges (often the senior members of the royal family or the prime minister, *gui qi zhi qing* 貴戚之卿 or *fuzu* 父族) who have the highest responsibility to remonstrate with the monarch with regard to his flaws, even at the risk of sacrificing their own lives. Since this classification covers an array of titles and offices with special political privileges, I will refer to them with the shorthand "the privileged". For the privileged, such remonstrances were to be seen as a special prerogative that political institutions require in order to address the monarch's significant mistakes. If the monarch refuses to listen to the remonstrances of the privileged, the foremost among them should take exceptional measures to replace the monarch with a worthy candidate from the royal family. If the foremost among the privileged fails to fulfil this duty, the next in line would assume responsibility. The next rank in the second tier includes those senior ministers and nobles (*shichen* 世臣 or *gongzu* 公族). These should have served the state for a long time or be the relatives of the royal house, and the later Confucian framework assumes that they do not have the same special prerogative to remonstrate with the monarch. Their task is to remain loyal and discreet, avoiding conflicts with the tyrant while working swiftly to mitigate the worst consequences of the tyrant's misrule; and in principle, they

should not flee when the state is in danger. The third rank in the second tier is of the guest ministers and clansmen from other states (*Yixing zhi qing* 異姓之卿 or *jilü zhi chen* 羈旅之臣). People in this group have the "right" and responsibility to remonstrate with the monarch (if the monarch gives them wages as usual, see *Mengzi*, 2018, 4B3); however, if the monarch refuses to listen or ignores their basic welfare, they may abandon their posts and leave the state.

The lowest tier of three consists of the middle-to-bottom levels of political actors (cf. Yan 2021, 50–55): the middle-ranking ministers (or the great officers, *dafu* 大夫), the residents in the capital (*guoren* 國人), and the common people (*min* 民). The middle-ranking ministers sit further from the monarch than the senior ministers, so they should refrain from directly challenging the monarch's authority and help maintain order. Under tyrannical rule, they might keep silent for self-protection, abandon their posts, or leave the state, depending on the specific situation. For the residents in the capital,[32] especially those low-ranking officials and the lowest noble class (*shi* 士), they should likewise remain loyal and help preserve stability. Under tyrannical rule, they are permitted to leave the capital or welcome the removal of the tyrant when a righteous authority launches that process. In certain exceptional cases, they might follow the initiator of the removal and join the effort. The bottom rank consists of the common people. In principle, they would better not participate in any actions that directly challenge the monarch's authority. Under tyrannical rule, they might vote with their feet by fleeing and welcoming the removal of the tyrant. For these three lower ranks, it is not surprising or unexpected if they initiate a revolt when they find their circumstances extremely dire and intolerable; however, this may lead both sides to perish together (*tongguiyujin* 同歸於盡) due to the potential catastrophe triggered by misjudgement, weak leadership, the collapse of all meaningful order, and massacres.

Now, we can see that the whole hierarchical framework reconstructed from the Confucian corpus behind Shuwu's tragedy strongly supports Justin Tiwald's reinterpretation of Mencius' arguments on the RoR. Tiwald's new interpretation is not a mere "contemporary" understanding but a centuries-long Confucian political tradition. Both the classical texts and generational commentaries on a certain pre-Qin case support a framework monopolized by the ruling class rather than an open mechanism for grassroots leadership and popular uprisings. Furthermore, we can see that Tiwald's views on popular rebellion in particular (rebellion by the *min*) fit into a sophisticated and fine-grained account of how and under what circumstances people in the state can resist tyranny, with different requirements and prerogatives set out for each of the nine different ranks.

After reconstructing the hierarchical framework, a fundamental question emerges: which takes priority, chastening the tyrant or restoring order? According to the

32 For a narrowed meaning, distinguished from other upper ranks (cf. Hui 2018, 38–39).

Confucian corpus behind Shuwu's tragedy, restoring order seems to take precedence over chastening the tyrant. However, I do not think that the hierarchy of political responsibility prizes political order above all other values. According to the Confucian corpus, neither tolerating a tyrant nor achieving order through immoral or procedurally unjust means can be regarded as historically praiseworthy. I suggest that the hierarchy prizes clear and proper delineations of different roles and obligations so as to help regulate the political system. Consider that if all actors perform their designated affairs and duties adequately, the government will function as it should, and personal desires and ambitions will be disciplined and under the control of the legitimate highest authority (the Son of Heaven). This idea is consistent with Confucius' idea in *Analects* (2022, 8.14 and 14.26)—"A person who does not hold a specific position should not plan matters within the scope of that position (不在其位, 不謀其政)".

Even during the transfer of monarchical power, clear delineations of authority and responsibility at all levels of government can help avoid disruptive chaos and widespread loss of life. Here, I propose a hypothesis that Confucian scholars did not encourage commoners to engage in forcible actions and violent political struggles, perhaps because they wanted to minimize unnecessary casualties resulting from chaos and conflicts. According to the commentaries on Shuwu's tragedy, only the top leaders of the royal house and the court should lead efforts against tyranny and take the risk of sacrificing their own lives; for the other middle-to-bottom ranking individuals, self-preservation can be justified in accordance with the hierarchy of political responsibility.[33] I link this idea with the Confucian care for and protection of ordinary civilians—if the removal of a tyrant is clearly restricted to the inner circle of those most privileged, the common people will be less likely to be drawn into violent conflict and pay a bloody price (cf. El Amine 2015, 44–47).[34]

More importantly, Confucian scholars pursued an appropriate way to design the delineations of roles and obligations. A shared fundamental principle in the Confucian corpus is that the more politically privileged should take more responsibility. In other words, those who enjoy more benefits and advantages—as a member of the royal house or a top leader of the government—must carry out more duties

33 This idea is consistent with *Mengzi* (2018, 1A6)—Mencius expected that the one who "were not bloodthirsty, having no pleasure in massive killings (*bu shi sha* 不嗜殺)" would bring peace to the realm under Heaven. Here, Mencius did not propose a completely pacifist leader who refrains from engaging in killing entirely; he only objected to those political actions that resulted in undesired large death tolls.

34 A representative case is the Disorder of the Eight Princes (*Ba wang zhi luan* 八王之亂, 291–307). Early political struggles in 291 were limited to coups in the capital, so they did not cause widespread social unrest or large death tolls; however, a large number of local officials and nobles then were involved in late political struggles from 301 to 307, resulting in massive wars and brutal killings (cf. Dreyer 2009, 112–42).

for the whole community. This principle will continue calling on individuals with more resources to contribute to socio-political progress. Furthermore, I suggest modifying the principle to fit the contemporary context in at least two ways. First, as those ministers with kin relations or privileged status are not inherently "more capable" than the others, we may change the hierarchical framework from privilege-based to capability- or merit-based. The revised principle will be "the more capable should take more responsibility", and it can be connected with the theory of political meritocracy (cf. Bell 2016). Another approach will put more emphasis on the respect and care for and protection of ordinary civilians—state and political leadership should not sacrifice the common people to satisfy desires and ambitions beyond legality and moral ethics. Even for those actions that are carried out in the name of justice, individuals without compulsory political responsibility should have their right of "self-determination" and be able to refuse participation. By paying more attention to individual rights and reactions to the macro context and trends, the second approach may contribute to a more progressive and democratic Confucian political theory (cf. Angle 2012; Kim 2024; Tan 2004).

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Human *and* Natural: The Function of the Myriad Things (*Wanwu* 萬物) in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子

*Massimiliano LACERTOSA**

Abstract

This paper analyses the function of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, arguing that the text's conception of the "myriad things' transformation (*wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之化)" destabilises anthropocentrism and reconfigures the human-nature relationship. Through close analysis of key passages, I elucidate the ways in which the *Zhuangzi*'s non-hierarchical framing of *wanwu* subverts materialist paradigms that privilege human agency over the nonhuman world. Central to my thesis is the paradox that the absence of environmental preoccupations in the text enables its radical decentring of anthropocentrism. This aligns with decolonial critiques of the nature/culture binary, shifting ethical responsibility away from preservationist approaches towards refusal of self-harm through unobstructive action (*wuwei* 無為). Such attunement prevents injury both to the self and the relational continuum of *wanwu*, fostering adaptation to constant transformation. Consequently, the *Zhuangzi* offers a pluralistic framework for rethinking human-world relations beyond anthropocentric paradigms. It grounds ethics in participatory responsiveness to *wanwu*'s irreducible plurality, positioning adaptability—rather than domination—as the cornerstone of coexistence.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, nature, Chinese philosophy, Daoism, decolonisation

Človeško *in* naravno: funkcija desettisočih stvari (*wanwu* 萬物) v *Zhuangziju* 莊子

Izvleček

V tem članku avtor analizira funkcijo desettisočih stvari (*wanwu* 萬物) v *Zhuangziju* 莊子 in zagovarja tezo, da pojem »preobrazbe neštetih stvari« (*wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之化) v tem besedilu spodkopava antropocentrizem ter ponuja drugačno razmerje med človekom in naravo. Z natančno analizo ključnih odlomkov pokaže, kako nehierarhična zasnova *wanwu* v *Zhuangziju* negira materialistične paradigme, ki dajejo prednost človeškemu delovanju pred nečloveškim svetom. Osrednje izhodišče razprave je navidezno protislovje, ki se v *Zhuangziju* kaže v tem, da prav odsotnost okoljevarstvenih skrbi omogoča radikalno razsrediščenje antropocentrizma. To se sklada s postkolonialnimi kritikami binarne opozicije narava/kultura, saj preusmerja etično odgovornost od ohranjanja k zavrnitvi samopoškodovanja prek nedelovanja (*wuwei* 無為). Takšna uglašenost preprečuje poškodbo človeškega sebstva kot relacijskega kontinuuma *wanwu* in hkrati

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spodbuja fleksibilno prilagajanje nenehnim preobrazbam. V tem okviru *Zhuangzi* ponuja pluralistični okvir za ponovni razmislek o odnosih med človekom in svetom onkraj antropocentričnih paradigem. Tovrstno etiko utemeljuje v takšnem odzivanju na nerešljivo mnogoterost *wanwu*, ki temelji na zavesti dejstva, da smo vsi njegov del. Poudarja tudi, da je treba namesto prevlade kot temelj sobivanja postaviti prilagodljivost.

Ključne besede: antropocentrizem, narava, kitajska filozofija, daoizem, dekolonizacija

Introduction

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is generally regarded—along with the *Daodejing* 道德經—as the foundational text of Philosophical Daoism.[1] Before analysing the idea of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) in this important text, and before discussing how it helps to decentre the anthropocentric standpoint in relation to environmental ethics, it is paramount to consider the contemporary concept of nature and whether there is an equivalent in ancient China.

Although the idea of nature is a central concept in environmental ethics, "many theorists of value in nature give no definition of what they mean by 'nature' and 'natural'" (Brennan and Lo 2014, 121). Indeed, these terms can have different meanings in different contexts. Andrew Brennan and Y.S. Lo (2014, 118–21) consider how "nature" and "natural" can refer to (1) what conforms with natural laws; (2) what is "spontaneously self-originating and self-sustaining in accordance with biological principles of evolution and ecology"; and (3) what "is *not* influenced by, or the result of, reflection or rationality". As a consequence, "the term 'natural' is multiply ambiguous, and so any account of values in nature, or of the natural as a feature that adds value to something, must be treated with great care". Regardless of the specific meaning that one wants to consider, there is one common element that is worth underlining: in modern thought, the term "nature"

> only has meaning when set in opposition to human works, whether one chooses to call these 'culture,' 'society,' or 'history,' to use the language of philosophy and the social sciences, or 'anthropized space,' 'technical mediation,' or '*oikumene*,' to use a more specialized terminology. (Descola 2013 [2005], 8)

I shall come back to these problems in more detail later. For the moment it is necessary to consider the other side of the boundary.

1 The text is an anthology written around the fourth century BCE and edited by Guo Xiang 郭象 (died 312 CE). On the problem of authorship and chapter division see Graham (1979), Liu (1987; 1994) and Klein (2010). I will use Zhuangzi (without the article) as a conventional name to refer to the authors of the text. Although the term Daoism is problematic, I will not consider this issue in this context.

From the ancient Chinese perspective, we face a similar variety of meanings attached to different terms. Indeed, in classical Chinese there is no precise correspondence to the contemporary use of "nature". A term that can be considered as "nature" is *tian* 天, which literally means "sky" and is often misleadingly translated as "Heaven". Although *tian* had spiritual connotation in ancient China, during the late Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE) its meaning "tends to shift to an increasingly impersonal *tian* that denotes the regular operations of nature" (Ames and Hall 2003, 65). *Tian* is often used in conjunction with *di* 地 "earth". *Tiandi* 天地 literally means "sky and earth" and refers to everything that exists. This idea of nature, however, extends to the entire cosmos and is not confined to the natural environment experienced by humans.

Tian is also used in conjunction with *Dao* 道 (literally "way"). According to Ames and Hall (2003, 66), the expression *tiandao* 天道 "the way of *tian*" generalises the idea of natural activity. And yet, for them, "'nature' would be an inadequate translation here because *tian* as a correlative will not accommodate any kind of severe 'nature/nurture' dualism". We shall come back to the problem of the natural/artificial dichotomy.

Another term that can be considered as nature is *ziran* 自然, which literally means "so of itself" and refers to the spontaneous development of things. As Paul D'Ambrosio (2013, 411) has shown, however, the term is rarely used as a noun and it generally describes *how* things unfold in their specific tendencies.

Finally, *wanwu* 萬物 refers to everything that exists and can be connected to an idea of nature. The *Zhuangzi* (72/25/66-67) explains that the term *wanwu* (literally "ten thousand things") is a conventional form to express the countless number of things.[2] To comprehend the composition of this plurality, it is useful to consider how the *Zhuangzi* (48/19/9-10) defines the singular "thing" (*wu* 物) itself: "Anything that has a shape, an image, a sound, or a colour is a 'thing'". The text then provocatively questions what truly differentiates or grants priority to one thing over another, concluding that only superficial characteristics—form and colour—do so. This definition is radical, as it rejects any inherent hierarchy among things, which are differentiated only by contingent attributes. Consequently, the collective *wanwu* can be understood as a field of interrelated particulars. It is this concept of *wanwu*, and more precisely the process of "myriad things' transformation" (*wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之化) (*Zhuangzi* 9/4/33), that this paper will further explore.

Before moving in this direction, however, it is necessary to underline that all these Chinese terms only partially align with the contemporary conception of nature and their use in contemporary discussions of environmental ethics requires

2 The references from the *Zhuangzi* are from Hung (1947). Translations from the Chinese are my own if not otherwise stated.

considerable caveats. For this reason authors such as Paper (2001), Goldin (2005) and D'Ambrosio (2013) are suspicious of the possibility of finding solutions to contemporary environmental concerns in early Daoist texts.

I enter this debate by considering whether a non-anthropocentric vision of nature is possible and if the function of *wanwu* in the *Zhuangzi* can help in this direction. In this way, I tackle the problem at its root. As rightly stated by Karyn Lai (2003, 258):

> The issue of anthropocentricism has been at the centre of debates about the nature and scope of environmental ethics. A number of environmental ethicists see anthropocentricism as the basic problem in environmental ethics. They argue that to construct an environmental ethic based on human concerns is to beg the question about the need for environmental ethics to address the issue of human-centeredness in environmental thought.

The issue of anthropocentrism, however, is not confined to environmental ethics and, in this context, I consider it as a fundamental theoretical problem of ethics in general. Indeed, this debate carries profound colonial and decolonial implications when the social consequences of specific conceptions of humanity embedded within anthropocentric frameworks are revealed. Such conceptions historically legitimise hierarchical social orders by positioning certain groups as "more human" than others, thereby justifying exclusion and epistemic violence.

According to Eileen Crist and Helen Kopnina (2014, 388), one of the consequences of positioning "*anthropos* in the center" is the "material displacements of the other-than-(civilized)-human world" and this implies that not only wild nature and wildlife[3] but also "'inferior' people have been subjected (and continue to be subjected) to incremental and large-scale physical dislocations". This centring of the *anthropos* is epitomised by what Sylvia Wynter terms the "invention of Man" in Western modernity—specifically, Man (emerging in the Renaissance) and Man_2 (consolidated in the 18th century). According to Wynter (2003, 260–61),

> all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources […] these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.

Anthropocentrism, therefore, cannot be reduced to a concern of environmental ethics alone.[4] Instead, it requires a radical re-examination of humanity's ontolog-

3 This also raises important questions concerning the human-animal division. A full exploration of this issue, however, cannot be undertaken here. For a dedicated analysis, see Timofeeva (2018).

4 For an interesting consideration of how anthropocentrism is an "insufficient and misguided basis for normative ethics" see Attfield (2011, 30), who offers a detailed account of the recent debate on

ical foundations and what it means to be human. Zhuangzi's philosophy proves uniquely valuable in this regard. The subsequent analysis will explore these insights in depth.

The Myriad Things' Continuity of Change

In Chapter 2, Zhuangzi affirms that "the world and I are born together, the myriad things and I are continuous (*tiandi yu wo bing sheng, er wanwu yu wo wei yi* 天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一)" (5/2/52-53). There are several elements in this brief passage that need careful consideration. First of all, I would like to highlight the symmetrical structure. The *Zhuangzi* uses both *tiandi* and *wanwu* to express the simultaneous birth (*sheng* 生) with the world and continuity (*yi* 一) with the myriad things. In this sense, the text suggests an important relationship between the two parallel concepts of *tiandi* and *wanwu*.

It is interesting, however, that the *Zhuangzi* uses the idea of continuity (*yi* 一) to express this close relationship with everything in the world.[5] *Yi* literally means "one", but this does not seem to be the meaning of the passage. Certainly, it is not the "One" beyond the many so familiar to Western philosophers.[6] Indeed, the text immediately warns against conceiving of *yi* as "one" by arguing that the very act of articulating *yi* adds a determination to this oneness, which necessarily produces a plurality that cannot be confined to a single unity. Thus, the emphasis of the passage is more on the pluralistic relationship between the self (*wo* 我) and the rest of the myriad things than on the absolute unity between things. This means that the self is a distinguishable but integral part of *wanwu*.

We should be careful, however, to consider this self as an expanded self in the sense given by deep ecology. Although it is true that Arne Naess' idea of rejecting "the man-in-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*" (Naess 1973, 95) seems to resemble Zhuangzi's conception of *yi*, for Zhuangzi the point is not that "if we expand our sense of self, then so too our interests will expand to make reference to those with whom we are in community" (Diehm 2007, 4–5). For Zhuangzi it is not a matter of expanding the self but of reducing it so as to participate more directly in the constant transformation of everything (*wanwu zhi hua* 萬物之化).[7]

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anthropocentrism, environmental ethics and normative ethics.

5 On the idea of continuity in Chinese philosophy, see Tu Wei-Ming (1989).

6 For a detailed analysis of *yi* in this passage, see Lacertosa (2023, 121–22).

7 This is particularly evident in the well-known comment of Xunzi, who goes so far as to affirm that Zhuangzi dismisses humanity because he is blinded by nature (*tian*). Wong (2009, 570), however, clarifies that "the difference between Zhuangzi and Xunzi is not over Zhuangzi's complete dismissal of the importance of humanity, but over his perspective of humanity as occupying a far

Yet, what does it mean that the world and the self are born together? Zhuangzi was certainly aware that some things precede the emergence of a single instance of *tiandi* such as the self, so how can this belief in being born together with the world be sustained? To answer this question, we need to consider Zhuangzi's idea of change.

In the passage 4/2/35-36, Zhuangzi describes the perpetual metamorphosis of things by saying that

> Their dividing is formation, their formation is dissolution; all things [*fanwu* 凡物] whether forming or dissolving in reverting interchange and are deemed to be continuous. (Graham 1989 [1981], 53; translation slightly modified)
>
> 其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。凡物無成與毀，復通為一。

In another passage (58/22/12–13), the text reaffirms this idea of *wanwu*'s transformational continuity by stating that what one considers rotten may transform in a precious thing and vice versa.

In this perpetual transformation of things there is no need to assert the precedence of one entity over another. All exist in a state of mutually entailing correspondence, where dissolution and formation are inextricably linked. As Chen Guying (2008, 218) observes, the fragmented dissolution of a thing contributes to the emergence of a new form, which itself incorporates elements of its predecessor. Within this process, the self arises alongside the world, retaining within it traces of what has dissolved.

It becomes clear, then, that the *Zhuangzi* assigns no privileged position to humanity within this process. All things partake in perpetual metamorphosis, unbound by hierarchy. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Lacertosa 2019), this mutual correspondence does not imply homogenisation or equalisation—difference persists even as things interweave. What I wish to explore here, however, is whether we are justified in deeming this perspective "non-anthropocentric".[8]

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more modest place in the scheme of things than Xunzi envisions when he says that humanity forms a triad with Heaven [*tian*] and Earth [*di*]". On the differences and similarities between Daoism and deep ecology, see Birdwhistell (2001).

8 D'Ambrosio (2021, 15) uses the concept of anti-anthropocentrism to interpret the *Zhuangzi* and concludes that "to put one's own anti-anthropocentric and animalistic views into the *Zhuangzi* misrepresents the text's own concerns". Although I generally agree with D'Ambrosio's positions, I think that the concept of anti-anthropocentrism is misleading insofar as it presupposes a radical opposition to the anthropocentric perspective. The point, however, is not so much if the *Zhuangzi* opposes anthropocentrism but if it proposes an alternative perspective to it, as we shall see in more detail below. Nevertheless, D'Ambrosio offers an excellent account of the different interpretations in relation to Zhuangzi's supposed anti-anthropocentrism.

In dealing with the problem of anthropocentrism, we need to analyse two issues related to the dichotomy natural/artificial—what Simon James (2015, 113, 117) terms the "everything's natural" and "everything's human" objections. I will start with the first, the "everything's natural" objection, in the next section.

Everything Is Natural

The "everything's natural" objection affirms that:

> To contrast what is natural with what is human is to betray one's allegiance to an implausible variety of metaphysical dualism. This dualism is not exactly between nature and *humans*, but between nature and the soul- or mind-like *essence* of humans. The human body, on this conception, belongs to the category of nature, as do its various products, such as breath, saliva and faeces. The human mind, by contrast, is regarded as being non-natural. And the same is thought to hold true of the things we employ our minds to produce. So while saliva and faeces are held to belong to nature, bicycles, gas-fired barbeques and other artefacts are not. As Steven Vogel (2011: 93) points out, human–nature dualists tend to believe that 'When *thought* is employed in the production of something, the product is thereby rendered 'artificial' and not natural'. (James 2015, 113)

The "everything's natural" position opposes metaphysical dualism. Specifically, it opposes the idea—as we have seen above—that what is natural is not the product of rationality by arguing that human intellectual activity is as natural as any other element of the world. While this perspective has the advantage of placing humanity and nature on equal footing—neither being inherently superior nor justified in exploiting the other—it raises a critical problem: if everything is natural, then there is nothing that goes against nature and everything is allowable. This carries troubling ethical implications, not only for our treatment of nature but also for human relations. Does Zhuangzi's notion of continuity between the self and the world suggest that everything is natural?

If we consider how both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* value *ziran*, we would be tempted to say that Daoist thought proposes this position.[9] Especially if we

9 In relation to this issue, Eric Nelson (2021, 57) affirms that "[o]ne critique of the potential environmental significance of Daoism is that its way of relating to nature entails a variety of indifferent fatalism that demands accepting whatever is happening as natural". Then he asks: "Is it the case that Daoism is disinterested in and neutral to the world in this way or does it call for a more fundamental attunement in which one responds to and fosters the life of things while acknowledging

consider Chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*, where everything, including *Dao*, emulates (*fa* 法) *ziran*. This, however, would be an oversimplification. In one important passage, the *Zhuangzi* makes a crucial remark regarding the relation between humanity and *ziran*:

> Huizi said to Zhuangzi
>
> 'Can people really be without feelings?' [*wuqing* 無情]
>
> 'They can.' Zhuangzi replied. […] 'Judging "That's it, that's not" [*shifei* 是非] is what I mean by 'feelings'. What I mean by being without feelings is that people do not inwardly wound their persons by likes and dislikes, that they constantly go by the spontaneous [*ziran*] and do not add anything to the process of life.' (Graham 1989, 82)[10]
>
> 惠子謂莊子曰：「人故無情乎？」莊子曰：「然。…… 是非吾所謂情也。吾所謂無情者，言人之不以好惡內傷其身，常因自然而不益生也。」(14/5/55-57)

Here *ziran* does not represent an inherent human condition, but something that people need to choose. Although, in its general meaning, *ziran* eschews all sense of achievement on the part of an agent, for the *Zhuangzi* people can either inwardly wound their persons by likes and dislikes or go by *ziran*. Thus, the *Zhuangzi* puts the disputations emerging from affirmations and negations (*shifei* 是非)[11] that inwardly wound people in opposition to the spontaneous process of life. And this process of life is the constant transformation of things (*wanwu zhi hua*). In one important passage, the text describes this more precisely:

> The life of things is like a galloping rush, there is no movement without a change, there is no moment without a shift. What is to be done? What is not to be done? Everything will certainly transform by itself [*zhi hua* 自化].
>
> 物之生也若驟若馳，無動而不變，無時而不移。何為乎？何不為乎？夫固將自化。 (44/17/46-47)

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their transience and mortality?" Nelson rejects the former possibility in favour of the latter. For a different answer to this problem, see Kirkland (2001).

10 Graham's translation has been slightly modified here. Graham uses "the essentials of man" to translate *qing* 情, which obscures the link between *qing* and *haowu* 好惡 (likes and dislikes). For a detailed analysis of *qing*, see Puett (2004).

11 As we have seen in the previous quotation, Graham translates *shifei* as "That's it, that's not". A comprehensive analysis of the complex translation and philosophical significance of *shifei* in the *Zhuangzi* lies beyond the scope of this discussion; for a detailed treatment, see Lacertosa (2019).

The *Zhuangzi* presents humanity as fundamentally embedded within *wanwu*, while simultaneously recognising the capacity for human actions to disrupt natural processes of life. Crucially, however, such departures appear not to disrupt the self-generating cycle of transformation itself, which persists independently of human intervention. Rather, the consequences of such actions seem to rebound solely upon humanity. Should we therefore conclude that the *Zhuangzi* distinguishes between the spontaneous process of life and the artificial human disputations? Moreover, does the human-*wanwu* relationship generate an ethical dilemma that remains exclusively human—and thus, by definition, anthropocentric? This leads us necessarily to examine the counter-position: the "everything's human" objection.

Everything Is Human

The "everything's human" position argues that:

> What we take to be nature is always conditioned or mediated by the human world—by our culture and, more broadly, by the distinctly human forms of perception and categories of thought that shape our experience. (James 2015, 117)

Applying this position to the *Zhuangzi* suggests that the idea of continuity between humans and everything else is a social construct. Consequently, the *Zhuangzi* describes this relationship from the perspective of humanity, which undermines the notion that the text avoids an anthropocentric perspective.

The suspicion that the continuity between humans and the myriad things is a social construction is reinforced by the fact that the "continuity between humanity and *tian*" (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一) is a central concept in Chinese philosophy (Tang 1988, 128). According to Hou Wenhui (1997, 483) "the saying *tian ren he yi* appeared in the Sung Dynasty (960–1279), but as a concept it was already shaped before the Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.)". For him "its meanings recognize a relationship between humankind and nature as a whole, which argues for an identity and harmony between nature and man".

The question, therefore, is whether Zhuangzi advocates this idea of harmony from an anthropocentric perspective so as to avoid that people "inwardly wound their persons". Probably, but this would be only partially true. Indeed, Zhuangzi's philosophy avoids the binary of "everything's nature" and "everything's human", occupying a liminal space that destabilises both positions. It is this nuanced, decentring perspective that we must now examine.

Zhuangzi's Decentring Perspective

Although it is true that, in some passages, the *Zhuangzi* introduces a sharp contrast between natural and artificial, the text's overall theoretical approach questions the very possibility of a categorical human–nature dualism.

For instance, in one passage (44/17/51-52), the text states that "oxen and horses have four feet, this is what is meant by nature (*tian* 天); putting the headstalls on horses and piercing oxen's noses, this is what is meant by human". This clearly sets a separation between natural and artificial. Yet, in another passage (15/6/3-4), the *Zhuangzi* asks: "How do I know that what I call nature is not human and what I call human is not nature?" This shows that while the differentiation between natural and artificial is a common convention in the human perspective, this same perspective cannot categorically determine the distinction. In other words, this reveals the paradox wherein humanity's conventional natural/artificial dichotomy remains fundamentally undecidable from within human frameworks of knowledge. Thus, Zhuangzi undermines the possibility to know the position of humanity in relation to nature (being it centric or not) precisely because the conventional opposition between natural and artificial is a human perspective, and human activity can be conceived as both natural and artificial.

Examining Zhuangzi's discourse on affirmation and negation (*shifei*) reveals a critical tension: while explicitly recognising all positions as perspectivally determined, the text simultaneously interrogates the epistemological validity of perspectivism itself:

> What is It [*shi* 是] is also Other [*bi* 彼], what is Other is also It. There they say 'That's it, that's not' [*shifei* 是非] from one point of view, here we say 'That's it, that's not' from another point of view. Are there really It and Other [*you bi shi* 有彼是]? Or really no It and Other [*wu bi shi* 無彼是]? (Graham 1989, 53)
>
> 是亦彼也，彼亦是也。彼亦一是非，此亦一是非。果且有彼是乎哉？果且無彼是乎哉？ (4/2/29-30)

This passage shows how the *Zhuangzi* tends to undermine the value of contrasting positions that produce disputations. As we have seen, it is with this kind of disputations that people inwardly wound themselves. The *Zhuangzi* acknowledges this negative human agency and tries to undermine it. This is particularly evident in relation to language:

> Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think it different from the twitter of

> fledgelings, is there proof of the distinction? Or isn't there any proof? (Graham 1989, 53)
>
> 夫言非吹也。言者有言，其所言者特未定也。果有言邪？其未嘗有言邪？其以為異於鷇音，亦有辯乎，其無辯乎？ (4/2/23-25)

It is interesting that the *Zhuangzi* does not offer a precise solution to the problem. With its characteristic double rhetorical question, the text keeps the problem open. And this openness helps the *Zhuangzi* to find a position between the two objections—everything is natural versus everything is human—we have seen above. Indeed, the *Zhuangzi* does not reject the fact that humanity has its own perspective, but this does not mean that it is more valuable than the other perspectives within the myriad things.

Moreover, all these perspectives are embedded in the wider horizon of the transformation of the myriad things (*wanwu zhi hua*) and this decentres the anthropocentric position. While recognising the ethical implications of disputations from the human perspective, the *Zhuangzi* acknowledges that the myriad things transform themselves despite any human activity. This is quite different from positions such as the one held by Kant:

> If it thinks over the existence of the things in the world and the existence of the world itself, even the most common understanding cannot reject the judgment that all the many creatures, no matter how great the artistry of their arrangement and how manifold the purposive interconnections by which they are related to each other may be, indeed the whole of so many systems of them, which we incorrectly call worlds, would exist for nothing if there were not among them human beings (rational beings in general), i.e., the judgment that without human beings the whole of creation would be a mere desert, existing in vain and without a final end. (Kant 2000 [1790], 5:442)

Whilst for Kant the world without human beings would be a mere desert, for Zhuangzi the presence or absence of human beings would not alter the perpetual metamorphosis of *wanwu*. This means that even if Zhuangzi proposes a vision of the myriad things as a social construction, this does not result in a mere anthropocentric perspective. On the contrary, the anthropocentric perspective of human agency turns against itself and injures itself by adding distinctions to the process of life. The ethical problem, therefore, is within the human perspective insofar as it distinguishes itself from the wider context of the process of life. And although human actions are part of the perpetual transformation of the myriad things, they do not affect the overall balance of the transformative process.

In this sense, Goldin (2005, 76) is right to ask whether Daoism proposes its ideas "out of a conviction that other attitudes toward nature might threaten the environment". According to him:

> This is a crucial point, because if Daoist philosophers did not assert explicitly that their arguments might be applied to concerns of ecology or environmentalism, then promoting their work on the grounds that it might help us manage our environment represents a falsification of their ideas and a self-serving appropriation of the past for purposes grounded in the present. (Ibid.)

I think that Goldin is right in stressing the danger of falsification in dealing with Daoism. Indeed, for the *Zhuangzi* humans are not a threat to nature but to themselves.[12] This, however, does not mean that falsifications and appropriations are the necessary outcomes of learning from another tradition's worldview. Indeed, Goldin's own conclusion is more nuanced than a blanket prohibition. He ultimately concedes that while the *Zhuangzi* does not hold "all the answers to our environmental challenges", "we may still be inspired" by its ideal of harmony with a world viewed as "a network of interconnected systems, in which we play but one part of many" (ibid., 83). And yet I believe that more than a mere "inspiration", the *Zhuangzi*'s peculiar philosophical nature can provoke a fundamental shift in perspective away from anthropocentrism. Even if it did not address environmental concerns, its philosophy helps us shift the anthropocentric vision of nature; paradoxically, it is the absence of such preoccupations in the *Zhuangzi* that enables its philosophy to effectively provincialise the contemporary nature/culture dichotomy.

As Philippe Descola (2013, xviii) clearly stated

> the opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be. Not only does it make no sense to anyone except the Moderns, but moreover it appeared only at a late date in the course of the development of Western thought itself.

While modern Western thought has undoubtedly radicalised this binary, its historical roots demand closer examination—a task I shall undertake in the following section.

12 And this relates to the *Zhuangzi*'s historical time and its critique of Confucianism and Mohism which, unfortunately, I cannot consider in this context.

Avoiding the Dominion Mandate

In his influential article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", Lynn White (1967, 1205) states that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen". And continues by affirming that Christianity "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends". I argue that this critique extends substantively to the broader Judaeo-Christian tradition, wherein anthropocentric exceptionalism and instrumentalist ontologies of nature became systematically theologised. If we consider the passage of *Genesis* 1:26–28, it is clear that humanity receives a specific dominion mandate from God:

> Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'
>
> So God created humankind in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.
> God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' (Brettler, Newsom and Perkins 2010, 12–13)

The divine represents not merely the supreme authority, but the very foundation from which all authority derives. This theological framework explains the creation of humankind in the divine image—a concept inherently imbued with hierarchical implications over creation. Yet this ontological privilege proves insufficient; through explicit decree, the divine establishes humanity's pre-eminence among all creatures. The entire created order exists purposively for human benefit, constituting humanity as sovereign over creation.

Ronald Simkins (2014, 399) challenges this interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which reflects what he terms "a post-Cartesian reading of the Bible with the assumption that humankind is separate and distinct from the natural world". Simkins posits that the biblical worldview is fundamentally theocentric rather than anthropocentric, situating both humanity and nature as co-equal creations of God. While Simkins rightly cautions against reductive readings of scripture, one cannot disregard how such post-Cartesian interpretations emerged from the fundamental Creator-creation hierarchy that underpins the biblical texts themselves.

This theocentric hierarchical perspective gives to anthropocentrism an unquestionable external, universal authority. And, as perfectly stated by Walter Mignolo (2018, 164),

> the problem with universals is that, in aiming at the totality, they became totalitarian. What this means is that totalities are totalitarian if they succeed in overpowering or disavowing similar claims in other cosmologies. When that happened in the historical period we here describe as modern/colonial, a totalitarian totality provides a frame for coloniality of knowledge. *From being a local totality, Christian cosmology became a universal totality* (as redundant as this may sound).

Christoph Cox (1999, 199) synthesises the trajectory of Western metaphysics as a tradition wherein "true being serves as origin, aim, essence, and substance for the rest of existence". His analysis begins with the Platonic Forms—which provide both an "absolute standard" and "establishes a hierarchy of the more or less real that measures each entity according to its distance from true being"—ultimately concluding that, within this tradition, God has been

> synonymous with Being itself: at once creator, providential director, essence, substance, and end of all existence. […] Moreover, for modern rationalism, God is that which guarantees all knowledge (Descartes), sorts out better from worse and actual from merely possible worlds (Leibniz), exists as the sole substance, of which all else is expression or attribute (Spinoza), and serves as the ultimate unity and ground of all possible experience (Kant). (Ibid.)

The *Zhuangzi*'s emphasis on the ceaseless transformation and intrinsic interconnectedness of *wanwu* fundamentally negates the conceptual possibility of any external authority fulfilling dual problematic functions: first as an absolute metaphysical standard against which existence might be measured, and second as a theological justification for hierarchical domination over either nature or other beings. This philosophical position undermines the Platonic paradigm of ideal Forms that establish graded ontological value while also challenging Abrahamic conceptions of divinely ordained anthropocentrism—even if this dominion is only "a hope, not a reality" as Simkins (2014, 402) affirms in relation to the biblical worldview.

By adopting the perspective of *wanwu*, we gain access to a radically reconfigured vision of nature—one that neither divorces humanity from its environment nor privileges anthropocentric hierarchies. The *Zhuangzi* fundamentally posits all phenomena as mutually constitutive in their ceaseless transformations.

Significantly, when human actions interrupt the spontaneous unfolding of life, the primary consequences prove most deleterious for humanity itself. This philosophical framework offers vital conceptual resources for contemporary societies seeking to reimagine the relationship between humanity and the world. It is in this precise sense that the text offers a decisive, if paradoxical, insight for the contemporary reader: its profound relevance for decentring the human stems precisely from its absence of modern environmental preoccupations.

Conclusion

By provincialising the nature/culture dichotomy, the revolving transformations of the myriad things can reshape an understanding of nature based on the material appropriation of objects. This framework challenges materialist paradigms that position humans as the sole and absolute arbiters of value. Indeed, the non-hierarchical character of *wanwu* invalidates any mandate for human dominion. Since humanity exists within—not above—a mutually entailing dynamic of change, this shifts our anthropocentric view of nature toward the decentring perspective of the myriad things, revealing their irreducible plurality.

The problem, therefore, is not whether everything is nature or is human. Everything is both human *and* nature: the two perspectives cannot be separated and should not be in tension. From a decolonial approach, it is crucial to step out of this dichotomy and start recognising its parochialism as a historically contingent framework rather than universal truth. As Walter Mignolo (2018, 160) clearly explained, for many indigenous communities across Latin America and the Caribbean "the binary opposition *nature/culture* made no sense" and "there was no equivalent of these words". According to him "if there had been, it would mean something similar to 'it is the nature of our human organism that generates culture'".

This rejection of nature/culture binaries directly aligns with Zhuangzi's suggestion to "constantly go by the spontaneous" without adding "anything to the process of life". When embodied through unobstructive action (*wuwei* 無為),[13] such attunement prevents inward wounding of both self and the relational continuum of *wanwu*. Consequently, it fosters adaptive responsiveness to the world's metamorphosis: enabling transformation *with* circumstance rather than against it.

And if one learns to transform along with the myriad things and never consents to be one thing alone (*Zhuangzi* 51/20/6), then even the anthropocentric perspective

13 *Wuwei* literally means "non-action" or "doing nothing" but it is also often translated as "effortless action" or "noncoercive action". For a detailed analysis of this concept, see Lacertosa (2023, 91–98).

necessarily shifts towards a decentring horizon that acknowledges the continuous change of *wanwu*. Thus, the ethical responsibility towards the world does not stem from the idea of preserving it but from refusing to harm the part of it that one temporally embodies and inhabits with others and their myriad differences.

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Encountering the *Zhuangzi*: Adaptability and Emptiness in the Story of Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi

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Abstract

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 often uses its multicoloured characters and imaginative stories to make its points. So much so that one of these characters is, I wish to argue, a stand-in for the text of the *Zhuangzi* itself. Huzi 壺子, when he meets Jixian 季咸 through the intermediary of his student Liezi 列子, exhibits the kind of emptiness that characterizes the text. This emptiness pertains to his ability to change forms as he wishes, for he is never fixed into one singular shape. He represents the adaptable and flexible behaviour which enables one to use specific schemes of valuation with parsimony, when they are adapted to the context, and never to remain fixed on one single such scheme. Jixian and Liezi are, in my interpretation, two readers of the text who come at it from different yet fixed angles. Their backgrounds and reactions while reading the text teach us the ways one can deal with that emptiness. One could try, like Jixian, to apply one's own standards to the text, witness its resistance, and leave in frustration. Or one could, like Liezi, realize that the text's emptiness is an invitation to leave the text behind and to discard fixed and single-minded valuation schemes. In the end, this cautionary tale aptly represents the text's non-judgmental openness as well as its subtly subversive critique of the attitudes to learning and applying what one has learned prevalent in its time.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Huzi 壺子, adaptability, emptiness, Daoism

Srečanje z Zhuangzijem: prilagodljivost in praznina v zgodbi o Huziju, Jixianu in Lieziju

Izvleček

Zhuangzi 莊子svoje pisane like in domiselne zgodbe pogosto uporablja za ponazoritev svojih spoznanj. Trdim, da je tako celo v tolikšni meri, da eden izmed likov deluje kot nadomestek za samo besedilo *Zhuangzi*. Ko Huzi 壺子 prek svojega učenca Liezija 列子 sreča Jixiana 季咸, predstavlja vrsto praznine, ki zaznamuje celotno besedilo. Ta praznina se kaže v Huzijevi sposobnosti, da po želji spreminja svojo obliko, saj nikoli ni omejen na eno samo, določeno podobo. Predstavlja prilagodljivo in prožno vedênje,

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ki nam omogoča varčno oziroma preudarno uporabo določenih vrednostnih shem, kadar so ustrezne glede na kontekst, pri čemer nikoli nismo omejeni na eno samo shemo. V tem smislu Jixian in Liezi nastopata kot dva bralca *Zhuangzija*, ki k besedilu pristopata z različnih, toda določenih zornih kotov. Njuno ozadje in odzivi med branjem besedila nas učijo različnih načinov soočenja s to praznino. Bralec lahko, tako kot Jixian, na besedilo poskuša aplicirati lastne kriterije, naleti na odpor in v frustraciji odneha. Lahko pa tudi, tako kot Liezi, spozna, da je praznina besedila povabilo k preseganju samega besedila in opuščanju togih, enostranskih shem vrednotenja.

Navsezadnje ta opozorilna pripoved ustrezno ponazarja *Zhuangzijevo* neobsojajočo odprtost ter njegovo subtilno subverzivno kritiko tedanjih pristopov k učenju in uporabi pridobljenega znanja.

Ključne besede: *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Huzi 壺子, prilagodljivost, praznina, daoizem

This essay proposes a novel analysis of the penultimate story of the *Zhuangzi*'s 莊子 so-called "Inner Chapters" (*neipian* 內篇). I wish to claim that the encounter between Huzi 壺子, his disciple Liezi 列子, and the shamaness[1] Jixian 季咸 can be read as an instance of the text speaking about itself. Put simply, in this passage, Liezi and Jixian can be seen as two people encountering the *Zhuangzi*—which Huzi is a stand-in for. They both react in very different (albeit similarly confused) ways to what they find within the lines of Huzi's face. This paper will begin by presenting the story in its context, the "Yingdiwang 應帝王" ("Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers") chapter.[2] Some lines will be devoted to a historical account of the social role attributed to shamanesses, as I find this status to be of particular importance for my interpretation of the passage. I will introduce previous readings of the focal passage before presenting mine. For instance, I believe this interpretation to be complementary to that of others such as Defoort (2012) or Moeller (2016). In the view I propose, Huzi's emptiness and changing forms generate two related but dissimilar types of behaviour in the "readers" of the text. Jixian is a closed-minded person who fixes things—she can, after all, define with precision the moment someone will die. While encountering the text, she goes through a progression which begins with applying her own standards to the *Zhuangzi*. But as she progresses through it, she becomes increasingly confused and eventually decides that, unable to impose her own meaning on the text, she

1 The term "shamaness" poses a few problems in the Chinese context. However, so do other alternatives in English. Whatever way *wu* 巫 is translated, however, does not impact the overall point I am trying to make. See for instance Lai (2015) or Davis (2001) for their analyses of what the *wu* were and were not.

2 All translations of the *Zhuangzi* text are taken from Ziporyn's (2020) version unless stated otherwise. All references to the original text are from the Harvard-Yenching Zhuangzi Yinde, which can be accessed on https://ctext.org/zhuangzi.

may as well stop reading it. Liezi, for his part, begins as someone flaunting his *dao* 道, which is only a tiny portion of what Huzi has to offer to him. But as the meetings between his master and the shamaness progress and reach their climactic end, he realizes that he has never even started to learn anything. He is originally eager to learn (possibly for the "wrong" reasons) but understands, after a while, the futility of this endeavour. The eventual shift in his attitude to education is mirrored by his changed behaviour. I will end this paper with some comments on the significance I believe this passage, read in such a way, has for the text of the *Zhuangzi*. It can be seen as a cautionary tale for readers who have just gone through the "Inner Chapters", an exposition of possible ways to read the text and of their shortcomings. Thus, I understand the story of Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi as a kind of gentle nudge away from fixating ways of reading the *Zhuangzi* that the text left there for us to enjoy.

The Story Itself

The encounter between Jixian and Huzi is recorded in the seventh chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the "Yingdiwang", but also in the second section of the *Liezi* 列子, the "Huangdi" (黃帝) chapter, in very similar wording. There is however significant evidence that the editor of the *Liezi* was working with a copy of a *Zhuangzi* source—probably the same or a similar version to the one Guo Xiang 郭象 edited (Littlejohn 2011, 32). This confrontation is also mentioned in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, but its later composition and the short amount of time devoted to their meeting indicates once again that the *Zhuangzi*'s version is the original one. It will therefore be the focus of my attention.

The story begins with Liezi hearing of a shamaness from Zheng 鄭 named Jixian. She "could discern whether people would live or die […] knew how long their lives would be and what turns their fortunes would take, giving the exact year, month, week and date for each event like some kind of god [*shen* 神]" (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/15-16). Liezi, who had been studying under Huzi, is captivated by her, and tells his master that he found someone whose *dao* was superior to the one he had been taught so far. Hearing this, Huzi criticizes his student for his foolishness and asks him to bring the shamaness along so that she may practice her art of physiognomy on him. She does, and after the first time, sees only death within the master. After coming a second time, she detects liveliness in him. The third instance throws her in the grasp of confusion and uncertainty, and before the fourth can even take place, she flees. Every time, Huzi showed her something different of himself. After witnessing this, Liezi "realized he had not yet begun to learn. He returned to his home and did not emerge for three years […] letting all the chiselled carvings of his character return to an unhewn blockishness"

(Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 21/7/30). We will need to come back in more detail to some aspects of this story as the argument progresses. But before this, I wish to quickly introduce a feature of the historical background of this conversation, namely, the oft-ignored profession of Jixian, and why it matters.

The Role of Shamanesses in Ancient China

The role of shamanesses (*wu* 巫) in ancient China shifted mightily over the centuries that span the Shang 商 and Zhou 周dynasties and end in the establishment of the Han 漢. It should be noted from the start that this term was mostly applied to women. Lin Fu-shih (2008, 397) mentions a commentary of the *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of Zhou*) by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 which states that men who the gods would "descend into" were called *xi* 覡, whereas such women were named *wu* 巫.[3] In fact, "most mediums in Bronze Age China were female" (Schafer 1967, 59), and one of their primary roles was, notably in the arid expanses of the north, to summon rain. Other tasks, and this is especially salient in Jixian's case, included fortune-telling. This function was taken so seriously that it was often they who were offered for sacrificial burning if a drought could not be alleviated through their work (ibid.).

Before the Warring States (*zhanguo* 戰國) period, shamanesses and shamans were particularly central to the practice of governance (Boileau 2002). They "were a crucial part of every state court; in fact, scholars of ancient China agree that the king himself was actually head shaman" (Chang 1983, 45). Now, the reason for this standing is a transformation of the way communicating with the spirits was envisaged by Shang and Zhou society. Li Zehou puts it this way: this period corresponds to a moment when Chinese society transitioned "from [the point of view of] 'everyone being shaman and historian' (*jia wei wu shi* 家為巫史) to [that of the] 'severance of communication between earth and heaven' (*jue ditian tong* 絕地天通)" (Li 2018, 15). That is to say, shamanesses progressively became the privileged intermediates between the human and the spiritual realms, the visible and the invisible. This evolution happened in a cultural context in which the separation "between the living and deceased, between human and spirit was never fully and clearly drawn" and where these "two realms were mutually interactive" (ibid., 14). Shamanesses, through dances and ceremonies, had access to spirits and could thereby communicate human desires and questions to them, providing the rest of the community or clan with the answers of the ancestors.[4] Not only

3 This explains why, despite most English translations using the pronoun "he" for Jixian, I believe this character is a woman.

4 Li reminds us that "ancestors were people, and once dead they became spirits, or half divine and still living in a sense" (Li 2018, 14). These spirits could protect the clan and had an influence over events in the world of the living, which partly explains the devotion with which they were revered.

that, but they also managed the connection and the integration of these two parts of the world—which were not seen as neatly separate, as mentioned earlier—and thus justified their position of power. The *wu* were part of a bureaucracy of officials whose role spanned divination, prayer, supplication, etc.

However, the Warring States period saw their influence decrease significantly. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the reasons for this shift, and significant work has already been done on this topic.[5] This marginalization is, however, nuanced by the integration of shamanistic influences in later forms of governance, such as ritual ceremonies. Shamanesses may have well gone from eminent members of a bureaucracy to being associated with pariahs and outcasts, but their codes and practices were nonetheless incorporated, albeit in new forms, into the Western Han governmental structure (Lagerway 2019, 9). Therefore, when reading the encounter between Huzi and Jixian, it is important to bear in mind that the latter is not simply a village witch or a countryside wise woman with a few tricks up her sleeve. She is, at the time when the *Zhuangzi* was composed, a member of a receding tradition whose influence was nonetheless still felt within society at large. This status is important to understand both her relationship with Huzi and the way in which her interactions with him are depicted.

Previous Interpretations of the Story

Exegetical engagement with this passage is not new. Guo Xiang, as well as numerous medieval and modern Chinese commentators, have proposed interpretations of the purported message of this episode. However, as Moeller points out, "interpretations of this narrative have paid special attention to the poetic and rather obscure self-descriptions of Huzi's changed countenance", and portrayed the story as "primarily concerned with the presentation of different forms or stages of spiritual and physiological cultivation" (Moeller 2016, 382).

A great example of alternative engagement with the text is Carine Defoort's (2012) paper on what she calls "Instruction Dialogues". She does not follow the aforementioned tendency to see in the story a narrative of self-cultivation and instead emphasizes its description of the relationship between master and student. In it, we are reminded of the shifting nature of the masters. She also evokes the importance of the fictional nature of this encounter, as well as the *emptiness* of the master figure.

Hans-Georg Moeller (2016) also understands the passage as a didactic tale, but as a parodic one. In his interpretation, Liezi is a "fool" and a buffoon, Jixian a hack whose incompetence and self-assured manners are met with ridicule, and Huzi a jester who teases out "the stupidity and preposterousness of Liezi and Jixian"

5 See for instance Li (2018) and Lagerway (2019).

(ibid., 385). Huzi is, under this interpretation, an example of a successful practitioner of "genuine pretending" who "acts as a mask-changer: he enacts shifting roles with great skill without personally adopting any of them" (ibid., 388).

David Machek goes a different route. His understanding is that Huzi is skilled at "restructuring [his] unstructured self into various roles and identities" (Machek 2016, 61)61. He is not, contrary to what Moeller would argue, donning different masks, but instead gives us a way of showing oneself, indeed one's "true internal self" (ibid., 56)56 to one's interlocutor.

Be that as it may, I wish to propose another alternative, one that is in some ways compatible—and indeed can be fruitfully articulated—with previous interpretations of the text.

Encountering the *Zhuangzi* by Meeting Huzi

By now, it is almost a *cliché* to point out that many of the *Zhuangzi*'s points are made through storytelling. However, there are good reasons why this aspect of the text has been pointed out so often. Jixian, Huzi, and Liezi are not simply characters. They all stand for something—or possibly someone—the *Zhuangzi* wishes to deal with. My claim is that we can understand these three characters in the following way: (1) Huzi as a stand-in for the text of the *Zhuangzi*; and (2) Jixian and Liezi as representing two types of people encountering and being befuddled by the text, albeit in different ways. To justify this claim, a closer presentation of the three members of the interaction is needed, starting with the first one.

Huzi's role in the story is given by his name. "Master Calabash" or "Master Gourd" is—and this is crucial—hollow, i.e. *empty*. This metaphor is important, since "only as an empty vessel, devoid of conventional values and attitudes, can a person store elements of the Heavenly *dao*" (Lai 2015, 108). But Huzi is not only a vessel because he is a proficient teacher whose unavailability towards his student is a symbol of the provocativeness and appeal of his teaching, as Defoort (2012, 468) proposes, because this feature of his (understood as a stand-in for the *Zhuangzi*) is also applicable to the text itself. The *Zhuangzi* is "empty". That is not to say, of course, that its words are devoid of all content. On the contrary, they offer a multitude of alternatives and possibilities. But none of them are *fixed*: that is the meaning of emptiness in this context. The authors never propose one singular and optimal way to follow *dao*, do not give *the dao* that must be adhered to.[6] Instead, the text proposes multiple ideas and alternatives, always encouraging its

6 Though it is broadly accepted that the "Inner Chapters" are the work of one individual thinker, I pluralize "authors" to allow for the multiplicity of voices (whether it be writers' or editors') in the *Zhuangzi* to come to the fore.

readers to follow *dao* a certain way at a certain point in time and space, but once the situation does not require this specific *modus operandi*, one may simply let it go and behave differently. This will become even more salient in the last section of this paper.

In contrast, it is because of Liezi's fullness, i.e. his fixity, that he is so readable by Jixian. "Huzi explains that Lie's physiognomy can be easily read by the shaman because it mirrors everything that can be found in Lie's heart-mind" (Iwanowska 2017, 38). And what is Liezi's *xin* 心 ("heart-mind") filled with? A specific way to follow *dao* that he goes by permanently, thinking it to be ultimate and applicable to everyone. Huzi even tells his student that he uses "the Course [*dao*] to browbeat the world, insisting that they believe in it, and that is why this [woman] can get a grasp of you and read your fortune on your face" (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/18-19). Flaunting and sure that the way *he thinks* he was taught is correct, Liezi misses this central point of the *Zhuangzi* about adaptability which Huzi goes on to manifest: emptiness enables one to follow *dao* more closely and effectively, and that can only be done by only provisionally following any given method. Such emptiness is the reason why, contrary to Liezi's case, Jixian is unable to successfully analyse Huzi's physiognomy. She cannot fix anything about him definitively, for there is no such "thing" within him.

This emptiness-*qua*-unfixatedness is central to the *Zhuangzi*, and Huzi is a perfect symbol of this core idea: there is not one way to follow *dao*, but many. The many forms that Huzi takes throughout the passage could even arguably be understood as reflecting this multiplicity. It is not only because of its composite nature, but primarily due to the points made by various parts of the *Zhuangzi* on distinctions, perspectives, and the like, that one can always come out of the text with something different. Of course, the fact that a single text can be interpreted in numerous alternative ways is not idiosyncratic to the *Zhuangzi*. But, and herein lies the Zhuangzian specificity, its authors embrace this multiplicity of interpretations: it is a feature of engaging with the text. The text "wants" the readers to come out of it with a renewed appreciation for other perspectives and for going along with this variety.

Of course, the *Zhuangzi* does criticize others, for instance in the famous passage about Confucians and Mohists in the "Qiwulun" (齊物論) ("Equalizing Assessments of Things") chapter.[7] What the *Zhuangzi* chastises is precisely the alleged fixation on one's own way of following *dao* that the members of

7 "But courses *qua* courses get concealed behind the small formations that they themselves succeed in shaping, and speech *qua* speech gets concealed behind the garlands of honour it itself brings on. Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other denies and denying what the other affirms." (Zhuangzi 14; 4/2/25-26)

these two schools exhibit in their debates. The authors of the text may have an appreciation for some points made by the *ru* 儒 and the *mo* 墨, just as they may appreciate Peng's broad perspective when it reaches the highest skies at the beginning of the *Zhuangzi*. But they are also very aware that this bird's-eye view does not encompass all the details of the world. That its perspective is not ultimate, or even necessarily the broadest. And if it were, it would still remain that: one perspective amongst many. When Huzi castigates Liezi for flaunting his specific way of following *dao* to the world, it is exactly for this reason: he has read into Huzi's teaching only a singular, single-minded interpretation instead of remaining open to other alternatives. But before dealing with Huzi's student, let us present his "contradictor" in more depth.

Jixian: the "Old School"

The first character introduced by the story, Jixian, is a *shenwu* 神巫, which indicates that she deals with spirits. And this is the first of many problems that she faces. Her role as an interpreter between humans and spirits means that she provides people with interpretations of certain phenomena—be they "natural" events or the cracks on a turtle's shell—for human purposes.[8] She is tasked with giving a social meaning to that which, at first sight, is devoid of it. Now, one may argue that this is running the risk of applying modern and post-modern forms of rationality to a context where other such forms were appropriate. People did indeed believe it was a fact that spirits could communicate with humans and influence their plight. Jixian's role as an intermediary used to be seen as crucial to the wellbeing of the community. But that only creates another, related problem. The dynamic which Li Zehou describes (from "everyone being shaman and historian" to the "severance of communication between Earth and Heaven") is something that the *Zhuangzi* would arguably decry. An important reason for this is that such a separation creates a rift within the unity of the *wanwu* 萬物. As mentioned earlier, the delineation between human and spiritual realms was indeed blurred. But we need to remember here that the *Zhuangzi* goes against the unqualified separation of the "ten-thousand things" into specific, fixed sets of "this" and "that", of *bi* 彼 and *ci* 此. This does not mean that no separation can ever be relevant or useful. Simply, these distinctions must be understood as fluctuating, momentary, and ephemeral.

8 There is no single word in classical Chinese that "nature" or "natural" would be a fully adequate translation of. That is due to the way the human place within the *wanwu* was conceived (at least in Daoism and the traditions that inspired it): as one amongst ten thousand, and not, as was and is the case elsewhere, as a master over a non-human, wild natural world. This question requires more nuance than the space here allows, and others have dealt with the topic of "nature" in early Chinese thought at length. See for instance Chai (2018).

The special status that was bestowed upon the shamanesses, one which was the symbol of their privileged access to the *shen*, pertains to a much more fixed separation. It is not just a social one—those who may make demands on the *shen* on behalf of the community *versus* those who may not—and I do not wish to claim that this is where the brunt of the *Zhuangzi*'s critique lies. More importantly for the authors of the text, the problem would be the unwarranted gulf between different members of the collective *wanwu*. As blurry as the dividing line may be between humans and spirits, the shamanesses' role rendered the relationship between them more mediated. And this role of intermediate, which had become exclusively theirs, meant the institutionalization of a specific set of "this" and "that", of acceptable practices, of proper ways to make requests, of roles, etc.

Another way fixity is introduced in the passage is through the description that is given of Jixian. She can define with precision the moment of someone's death, thereby determining that person's fate. But it is made clear that this "skill" is both far from infallible and dependent on the other person's being already clogged with fixity. Other parts of the *Zhuangzi* do evoke the idea of a natural or allotted lifespan, and the objective of living it in its entirety. But this somewhat "fated" longevity is often shortened by being subjected to fixed valuation schemes.[9] Clearly, this does not fit what Jixian is doing. She is in fact introducing an incredible degree of fixity into the lives of the people she analyses, and the shamanesses' role in divination also comes to mind here. Her interpretation of certain phenomena leads her to draw assured conclusions on the time of someone's passing. Until she meets someone too empty of definite content for her to read: then, her skill is proven to be limited. Jixian does not claim to do such ordaining, of course. Defoort rightly points out that Jixian "cannot influence the course of events" (Defoort 2012, 473). But she does take credit when, after her second visit, Huzi seems to be reinvigorated. Her ego, as pointed out by Moeller, is a part of her problems.

The decision taken by the authors of the text to make her a *wu* is not an anodyne one. As established earlier, her profession was, until quite recently at the time of the *Zhuangzi*'s composition, a key part of Zhou governance. She is a symbol of the past, but not the kind of mythical golden age of virtue described, for instance, in the so-called "Primitivist" chapters. Instead, Jixian is a representative of the moment in Chinese history where, according to the *Zhuangzi*, people and more specifically "sages" started to impose human interpretations over everything. Jixian's role is to make demands on behalf of humans. Li Zehou argues that one of the central aspects of shamanism in early China was the proactive requests made to the spirits. "The fortune and prosperity of the people was imagined to occur through the functioning, influence, coercion, and even control or governance of

9 See for instance the useful trees who fail to fully live out their natural lifespans in the "Renjianshi" (人間世) chapter.

the spirits and natural forces by the ritual ceremony" (Li 2018, 21). Their spiritual activity was far from passive. On the contrary, it was purposeful, proactive, and hands-on. It was not just a matter of communicating human wishes to the spirits. Shamanesses, through their rituals, *made* the spirits answer and act. And, as Ivanhoe points out, one of

> the most interesting and distinctive aspects of early Daoism is its rejection of the value of direct, magical control over Nature […] Liezi is presented as someone who is naively enthralled with the more practical or *purposive* abilities that accrue to one who has attained some type of control over Nature" (Ivanhoe 2011, 139–40; emphasis in original).

Where does this leave us with regard to my interpretation of Jixian's role within the passage? I wish to argue that she represents the kind of closed-minded person who ossifies and congeals all possibilities into a single one, discarding all alternatives. She sets everything in stone and comes to Huzi (that is, the text) with this frame of mind. Here, I wish to focus not on the progression of the transformations that she sees Huzi undergo—although they are important—but rather on that of her reactions to them, and in fact to what she finds inside of him, i.e. the text.

At first, she sees death, as usual. After all, this is a business she is an expert in. She believes she can read Huzi by analysing certain fixed facts about him and does not yet understand that there are no such facts in the empty "master". In my analysis, this would be her first encounter with the *Zhuangzi*. She reads it like she would any other text, expecting to see fixity, set ideas, and definite *shifei* 是非 distinctions, that is, stable "rights" and "wrongs".[10] There may be a few pleasant stories in the text, but, in her mind, all of its contents can absolutely be fixed, like the rest of the *wanwu*. For her, there is nothing particularly obscure about the *Zhuangzi*.

When she comes again, Huzi is "recovering, there are healthy signs of life! [She] could see his blockage moving into balance" (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/22-23). She attributes that to her visit the previous day, thereby showing that she still has in mind the potency of her analysis. Two things have changed, however: instead of knowing quite precisely when he will die, Huzi will live; and she does not say until when. The reaffirmation of her skill is therefore accompanied by a first step back in her ability to discern precisely Huzi's form and destiny. According to my reading, this would be the moment when she discovers the liveliness of the *Zhuangzi*—what Guo Xiang called its "overabundant blossoms" and "brimming

10 Much can be said about what *shifei* actually means, and whether "right" and "wrong" are not too loose of a translation, but this issue goes beyond the scope of my essay. For an insightful discussions of this topic as it pertains to the *Zhuangzi*, see Fraser (2015).

richness of flavor" (Lynn 2022, 566).[11] But at this point, she is imposing and applying her own ideas on the text. It is starting to make sense, but only because she comes at it with a *chengxin* 成心 filled with set ideas of her own. Indeed, this could be the signification of her arguing that it is thanks to their encounter that Huzi is feeling better and that his wet ashes have been dried and set aflame. Now of course, it is impossible to come to the text without one's own *shifei* distinctions. And this confrontation between different valuation schemes and sets of ideas is a great feature of any intellectual encounter. But instead of letting them dissolve into the sea of possibilities and alternatives, Jixian keeps her *shifei* distinctions close to her heart-mind. She does not want to let go of this fixity and therefore engages with the text within her own framework, not the *Zhuangzi*'s. Huzi remarks that she "must have seen in me the incipient pulsion that can develop into all [she] regards as good" (Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 20/7/24-25).

The third time she comes back and "reads" the text, she is confused.[12] She tells Liezi "[your] master is an incoherent mess, I have no way to read his face" (Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 20/7/24-25). The expression she uses, *buqi* 不齊, can also be translated as "uneven", "unsettled", or "unstable". And that can indeed be said of the *Zhuangzi*. The text, notably due to the differing voices of its multiple authors, presents ideas which are sometimes contradictory, sometimes responding to and criticizing each other. But most importantly, as mentioned earlier, it does not propose *the* way to follow *dao*. It makes a series of such ways accessible and acceptable, using a specific set of values and ideas when appropriate all the while permanently abiding by none. Importantly, as Defoort reminds us, on "[the] third day [Jixian] is troubled, but attributes this to his patient: Calabash is out of balance, but the shaman promises to return as soon as this is resolved" (Defoort 2012, 466). Jixian realizes during this third encounter that interacting with the text with a fixed mindset will not do. It resists ossification through a multitude of alternatives, and she sees this richness as a "mess". This is symptomatic of a closed-minded person whose conservatism blinds them to the possibilities afforded to them by different points of view. She could arguably be compared to the frog in the well from the "Qiushui〈秋水〉" ("Autumn Waters") chapter: unable to fathom other possibilities because of the narrowness of her perspective, she is confused and worried.[13]

Finally, before even the fourth meeting with Huzi, she flees. Was it out of fear? In a bout of anger, like Moeller suggests? Whatever the case may be—the text

11 There is a possibility that the preface these quotes are taken from and attributed to Guo Xiang may not have been written by him. I wish to remain neutral on this topic, but for the sake of simplicity, will consider Guo Xiang to have penned it.

12 I wish to clarify that although it is sometimes also translated as "to read" in the context of Jixian's physiognomic analyses, the word *xiang* 相 cannot be applied to the reading of a text.

13 I wish to thank David Chai for this very helpful comparison.

only says that she loses herself and flees before having settled down [立未定，自失而走]. My reading has it this way: after having attempted to impose her own meaning onto the text and realizing this to be a lost cause, she decides to remain within her certitudes. She closes the book and does not pick it up again. Instead of indulging in the potential that was opened to her by the *Zhuangzi*, she decides to stay within the boundaries. Huzi attempted to show her the "unbegun-to-emerge-from-my-source [以未始出吾宗], where I and [she] both together are a vacuity […] admitting of no understanding of who is who and what is what" (Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 21/7/28-29). The vacuity (Ziporyn's translation of *xu* 虛) that she saw is the emptiness mentioned above. It is the possibility of resting on the *daoshu* 道樞 (the "axis" or "hinge" of *dao*), and to be adaptable in one's practices, using a certain *shifei* scheme when adequate and another one when the situation requires it. She cannot accept this, of course, so she leaves. She is a disgruntled reader fed up with what she perceives to be some kind of unfixed, meaningless gibberish. Her fixed ways do not fit what the *Zhuangzi* has to offer, and the *shen* she used (also for the purposes of determining Huzi's fate) cannot help her here.

So in the end, who is Jixian? In my reading, she is exactly who the text tells us she is right from the start: a *wu*, with all of the attendant implications this entails. She is outdated but retains the certainty that the old role of her profession is not obsolete—this is why I used the term conservatism earlier. She is the "old school". The representative of a dying system. Now that Warring States society is replacing her with other experts and shifting away from its formerly wide-ranging use of shamanistic practices, she scoffs at the present and the future. And herein lies a possible reason why Liezi was not able to catch up with her: her time is done. She is the one dying, and her growing irrelevance banishes her from the story before it even ends.

Before going on to tackle Liezi's role in the story, I wish to point out a caveat to this reading of mine. "Daoism" as it coalesced into a structured movement is rooted in the shamanistic traditions (notably those of the state of Chu 楚) that preceded its arising as one of China's preeminent schools of thought *and* religions. As Lin puts it, "[most] students of the origins of Daoism see it as having built on the foundations of shamanism, or at the very least consider many of Daoism's techniques, rituals, and beliefs as deriving from the shamanistic tradition" (Lin 2010, 276). Isabelle Robinet describes the influence that shamanism had in the formation of later Daoist concepts—which are sometimes adaptations of practices previously undertaken by the *wu*. More pointedly for the *Zhuangzi*, she writes that it is "possible and even probable that Zhuangzi is only the visible member of a once widespread movement that has left few traces", the *Chuci* 楚辭 ("Songs of Chu"), which "are the product of the 'shamanism' of the south of China" (Robinet 1997, 35). So much so that some poems amongst the *Chuci* "allude to practices characteristic of later Taoism: the appearance of gods; mystical journeys of the

soul in distant, mythical countries, which recall those of Zhuangzi and Liezi […] and feeing on cosmic effluvia, to which Zhuangzi referred and which have names that will be the same in certain Taoist texts" (ibid., 36). Moreover, references to these origins may be found elsewhere than in the text's mentions of the *wu*. For instance, the *Dazongshi* mentions a series of sages who "got *dao*". Amongst them, the "Queen Mother of the West" (*Xiwangmu* 西王母), a central member of the shamanistic tradition, is placed in parallel with other figures such as Fuxi 伏犧 or the Yellow Emperor.[14] She "got it and thereby took her seat on Mt. Shaoguang—none knows her beginning or her end" (Zhuangzi 2020, 57; 16/6/34).

It would therefore be incorrect to see the *Zhuangzi*'s critique of Jixian as a wholesale rejection. And, without getting too much ahead of ourselves, I propose in the last section of this paper that the text's assessment is subtler than simply describing Jixian (or Liezi) as "wrong". However, that critique remains, and is a first reason why I do not subscribe to the idea that Jixian is in fact a representant of a dying proto-Daoist tradition being pushed aside by the growing influence of the Confucian class of officials and scholars. Even though this alternative also provides a historical explanation for her disappearance before the end of the story, I do not believe this fits the story neatly. Of course, a first counterpoint lies in remembering that, when the "Inner Chapters" were written, there was no notion of Daoism as a unified tradition. And even after it had taken shape, centuries after the *Zhuangzi*'s composition, although many Daoist practices descended in direct line from shamanistic and *Chuci* traditions, practitioners and priests insisted that this heritage was inexistent or irrelevant (Robinet 1997, 36). In their 2nd century CE struggle against popular religion, the Celestial Masters (*Tianshi* 天師), "[used] old practices to their advantage [and] assumed an exorcistic role that connected them once more, *despite claims to the contrary*, to the ancient *wu* shamans" (ibid., 64; my emphasis).

Another reason why I argue that the text does not view the *wu* as this venerable class of inspirators is that in the one other instance the term appears in the "Inner Chapters", they are made to look foolish again.[15] The authors of the "Renjianshi" (人間世) ("In the Human World") write that "[in] the expiation ceremony, cows with white spots, pigs with upturned snouts, and humans with haemorrhoids are considered unfit to be offered as sacrifices to the river god. All shamans [*wu* 巫] know this, and thus they regard these as creatures of bad fortune. But this is exactly why the Spiritlike Person [*shenren* 神人] regards them as creatures of very

14 See, for instance, Despeux (1990) for an account of the importance of the *Xiwangmu* for Daoism. The fact that she is another woman does not elude me, and Despeux's work is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of women in Chinese religious groups throughout history.

15 The term appears only once more in the whole text, in the "Tianyun" (天運) ("The Spinning of the Heavens") chapter, in a possible reference to Jixian. This very limited presence in the entire text further limits the idea that the *Zhuangzi* is particularly deferential towards the shamanesses.

good fortune indeed!" (Zhuangzi 2020, 42; 12/4/81-83). Here, shamanesses are seen as imposing socially accepted meanings on things that they wish they could use for sacrificial purposes, but do not because of some arbitrary features said things possess. The cows, pigs, and humans would be better off being left alone, and in fact *are* thanks to the hasty judgment of the shamanesses who consider them unworthy of being sacrificed. That someone being disvalued leads to their preservation is a recurring theme in the *Zhuangzi*, and in this case it is the shamanesses who are the object of the text's critique.

If I were to integrate the legacy of the *wu* on the *Zhuangzi* with my reading of this passage, I would suggest that, though this influence is present, the ways the *Zhuangzi* proposes to tread on *Dao* are more apt and adaptable. The authors go beyond these origins, which also contain misguided principles, such as this idea of control over and fixed application of standards to the rest of the *wanwu*. The *Zhuangzi* could in fact be using Jixian as a background to present its new, rising, radical alternative. It proposes a new way to deal with and articulate ourselves within the *wanwu* that is already leaving its forebears behind.

Liezi: The "New School"

Jixian may be the one who is obviously castigated by the story, but Liezi is not outdone in that respect. Moeller perceptively reminds us that it "has been frequently noted that in both of [his] appearances in the 'Inner Chapters', Liezi is depicted somewhat critically as 'misled by the glamour of magic', to use the words of A. C. Graham […], or in other words he represents a flawed Daoist practitioner" (Moeller 2016, 381). He further presents Huzi's student as a silly fellow who reacts too quickly to the news of his master's impending doom. However, Moeller argues that his reaction to this episode is to give up "studying the Daoist arts altogether" and to turn into "a caricature of a Confucian" (ibid., 384). I do not believe this to be what is at play here, and in fact wish to propose the opposite.

One of Liezi's roles in the story is that of an intermediary. It is he who introduces the shamaness to his teacher, he who is first bedazzled by her and listens to her descriptions of his master's health, and he as well who Huzi tells about his various forms and shapeshifting. It is also not mentioned whether he is present or not during the attempts at reading physiognomy that the shamaness led. He does not speak much—although his words are as "full" as they are few—and yet we can glean a wealth of information from his reactions. Liezi gets to know, thanks to his teacher, what Jixian misses out on. Now what he is told is poetic, mysterious, and quite inscrutable. But he can learn, nonetheless. The way that is done is one of the topics of Defoort's paper. However, I wish, like I did with Jixian, to focus on *who* Liezi represents as a student.

He is a representative, not of the "old school" of the shamanesses, but of the "new school", that of the *shi* 士 ("official-scholar" or "warriors"), of those who present themselves as sages and educated by other sages, who offer their services to the numerous rulers of pre-Qin China.[16] He is an overly keen student who wishes to learn from Huzi and then apply this teaching to the problems of the world. The historical Confucius' practice of educating disciples for them to then spread his principles in the courts of princes and dukes comes to mind when one considers how Liezi seems to conceive of the education he is getting. Thinking he has already gotten something out of the text, he practices the *dao* he believes Huzi was teaching him without realizing that he still has much to learn, since his understanding remains shallow. Speaking of his *dao*, his master tells him: "I have only finished showing you its outward ornament, not yet its inner reality. Have you really mastered this Course?" (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/18). We should remember that it is through this fullness, which is derived from Liezi's usage and practice of *dao*, that Jixian is able to read him. We do not know whether Jixian did indeed analyse Liezi's physiognomy, but it is made clear that he went to see her—and thereby became "intoxicated" (*zui* 醉) with her. As it were, the text presents Liezi as wearing his heart-mind on his sleeve for everyone to see, including the expert *wu*.

Understood this way and in my interpretation, his approach to the text is at first glance similar to Jixian's. His unwieldy *dao*, which he "browbeats" the world with, is the result of his fixating engagement with the text. Instead of understanding the text's questioning of *shifei* and *bici* distinctions in themselves, he just thinks of the *Zhuangzi* as offering him a new, improved set of *shifei* and *bici* to live his life by. An alternative to other masters, to be sure, but one as fixed and inflexible as theirs. Again, having such a scheme at any given time may be unavoidable. Guo Xiang, in his introduction to the "Qiwulun", says as much: "To affirm that one is a 'this one' [*shi*] and deny that one is a 'that one' [*bi*], to praise oneself and to vilify the other, no one ever fails to behave like this" (夫自是而非彼，美己而恶人，物莫不皆然) (Lynn 2022, 19). Guo Xiang is here pointing out the problem that every person is keen to see their own valuation scheme as the only valid one, or at least as the most valid one. Liezi acts like this with the *dao* that he thinks he has learned from Huzi, which is but a fragment of the substance that his master actually has to transmit. His scheme of values does not shift, is not able to evolve and adapt to fluctuating circumstances.

These themes may remind us of another story from the "Inner Chapters", namely, the dialogue between Yan Hui and Confucius that begins the "Renjianshi"

16 It is important to note that the historical evidence on the existence of Lie Yukou 列御寇 (Liezi's name as given in the *Zhuangzi*) is inconclusive. Although it is never said that he served in a court or was a *shi* himself, the fact that he may be entirely fabricated by the authors of the *Zhuangzi* could justify the rather flexible use of this character.

chapter. In it, Yan Hui asks for advice on how to deal with the ruler of Wei, who has become tyrannical. Confucius urges his student to be cautious, then a long conversation about how and whether one should have an influence on rulers ensues. This passage has numerous similarities with the story we have been dealing with so far. For instance, parallels can be drawn between the relationship linking Huzi and Liezi on the one hand and that of Confucius and Yan Hui on the other.

Firstly, and most obviously, they are both moments of teaching. Even though Confucius gives much more pointed advice than Huzi does, their reasonings are similar. In both cases, the emptiness of the masters—their lack of settling on any given set of standards—is at the heart of the story. In the case of Confucius, this is done so implicitly through one of the most central ideas introduced in that story: the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋). What this fasting pertains to is beyond the scope of this essay, but one of its results is the "vacuity" that Ziporyn translates *xu* as. After fasting one's heart-mind, the "vital energy is then a vacuity, a waiting for the presence of whatever thing may come. The Course alone is the gathering of this vacuity. This vacuity is the fasting of the mind" (Zhuangzi 2020, 37; 9/4/27-28). And the reason why Yan Hui should pursue this emptiness is because he is behaving very much in the same way as Liezi, akin to a scholar-official. He tells his master of a few techniques and manipulations he is thinking of employing to influence the ruler without putting himself in harm's way.

But each time, Confucius tells him that this would not do. That his "high-handed display of regulating words about humankindness and responsible conduct in the face of such a tyrant would just be a way of showing off [his own] beauty at the expense of [the ruler's] ugliness" (Zhuangzi 2020, 35; 8/4/7-8). That if he were to "cling without [himself] transforming, externally accommodating but internally impervious to critique" (Zhuangzi 2020, 36; 9/4/17), that would lead to trouble. And most importantly, Confucius points out that Yan Hui is still treating his heart-mind as his "teacher and master" (Zhuangzi 2020, 36; 9/4/24). Fasting his heart-mind would instead enable him to effectuate real change all the while remaining safe from the sort of harm that having a name (*ming* 名) creates. As Yan Hui puts it after getting Confucius' point, "when I am not yet able to make something happen in the actual world, I regard myself as this person named Hui. But just when something is actually made to happen there, this Hui has not yet begun to exist" (Zhuangzi 2020, 37; 9/4/28-29). Through emptying himself, Yan Hui could get rid of his fixations and of the objectives they lead him to pursue, instead remaining safe and effective.

We are not told if Yan Hui follows his master's advice. Liezi, for his part, eventually goes beyond his behaviour. Moeller argues that the realization that he had not even started to learn anything is the final humorous twist in the tale:

> As the ultimate simpleton, Liezi lives out his years in blissful ignorance and unwittingly adopts a 'primitivist' Daoist way of life out of ignorance. Ironically, he could only become a Daoist after he gave up trying what he could never learn. […] Only in his retirement, and only after distancing himself from Daoist cultivation ambitions and training efforts, is he able to coincidentally—or perhaps "naturally" (*ziran* 自然)—partake in a Daoist experience. (Moeller 2016, 385)

But in my interpretation, Liezi's behaviour is actually the opposite of what Moeller suggests. He does not go from "failed" Daoist practitioner to Confucian caricature who nonetheless adopts a Daoist primitivist lifestyle. The movement goes the other way around: he goes from a Confucian attitude towards learning and acting to applying the advice of Huzi-*Zhuangzi*. He begins as an inflexible Confucian student who applies what he thinks is his master's *dao* to the world. But when he realizes that he had not yet begun to learn anything, he does not redouble his efforts but instead leaves his master behind. That is, in my interpretation, he *stops reading* the *Zhuangzi*.

This may remind one of a passage in the "Tiandao" (天道) ("Heaven's Course") chapter, namely Wheelwright Bian's statement to Duke Huan that what he is reading (a book whose authors are dead) "is no more than the dregs and dust of the ancients" (Zhuangzi 2020, 116; 36/13/70). What Bian practices requires responsiveness and adaptability, and he cannot explain it in words, nor can he teach it to his son. This attitude to education as something which the student does not acquire *directly* from their master is prevalent in the *Zhuangzi*. And it is at play in Liezi's decision to go home. After witnessing the exchanges between Jixian and Huzi, Liezi, in a sense, "begins to *lose his self*" (Iwanowska 2017, 37; emphasis in original). This self is the distinction-making self which resolutely adopts one single scheme of valuation. In his commentary on Liezi's behaviour, Guo Xiang claims that he "forgot all distinctions between noble and base", that he "rejected gorgeous elaboration and adopted unadorned simplicity", and that he "allowed all others to live out their natural lives to the end" (Lynn 2022, 173). This last point is a significant change from the person who used to want to impose his views on the world. He realizes the futility of his previous behaviour and stops using the fixed *shifei* schemes he mistakenly attributed to his master's *dao*. But in a society as patriarchal as Warring States China, serving one's wife goes beyond a reversal of roles. I do not, however, wish to suggest any proto-feminism in this passage.[17]

17 This being said, there is much within the *Zhuangzi* that can and should be used for feminist purposes. See for example Ha (2016)it explores alternative paths to equality suggested in the Daoist wisdom tradition. Zhuangzi's subversive wisdom, characterized by radical pluralism based on the respect for difference and otherness, and by an alternative identity politics based on interdependence and mutual transformation between things, provides an alternative to the collectivism rooted in the

In fact, Liezi does not reverse the roles. He destroys them by not giving them currency. The teacher who is not a teacher taught him to be a husband who is not a husband married to a wife who is not a wife.[18]

Liezi originally behaves like a scholar who wishes to learn from specific masters of the hundred schools (*baijia* 百家). He begins the story as a representative of the "new school", of the system of governance that had emerged throughout the Warring States period. He conceived of himself, misguidedly, as needing to be someone's disciple before going on to tackle the world with his master's teachings as a weapon. His fullness is shared by Confucian scholars, albeit in different ways (for their own fixed *Dao* are probably quite different regardless of their shared fixity). But he does dot leave the frame like Jixian does. Beyond the idea that, being from the "new school", he is much more current and modern than her even at the beginning of the story, there is a change in him which the shamaness does not undergo. Both her and his fixed self are silly and injudicious. But when both of them were offered a third way, beyond the old and the new, a third way which was indeed made up of ten thousand ways, she remained within her own realm, whereas he discarded the realm entirely.

Role In the Text

While this may all be satisfactory, the significance of this interpretation beyond textual analysis has not yet been fully fleshed out, and that is the purpose of this last section.

As mentioned earlier, this story is the penultimate one of the *Zhuangzi*'s "Inner Chapters". If we accept the broadly canonical idea that these seven chapters represent the words actually written by Zhuang Zhou 莊周, the Huzi passage can be seen to serve as a conclusion to what has just been read.[19] Not in the sense of a

Confucian tradition and to the individualism rooted in modern Western thought, both of which reflect hierarchical worldviews that create the dichotomy of the subject/self/human and the object/other/nature and marginalize "the Other," including women.","container-title":"QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia","language":"en","source":"Zotero","title":"Alternative Paths to Equality in the Zhuangzi: an Asian Feminist Perspective","volume":"1","author":[{"family":"Ha","given":"SungAe"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2016"]]},"citation-key":"haAlternativePathsEquality2016a"},"suppress-author":true}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} .

18 This is reminiscent of *Analects* (12.11), where Confucian role ethics takes its most obvious expression. Confucius argues that good government requires the gentleman to behave as such, the minister as such, the father as such, and the child as such. The *Zhuangzi*, in my reading, completely short-circuits this recommendation.

19 We do not need to accept this delineation of the text. As a matter of fact, it has been the subject of contention for quite some time now, some contributors to the debate being Liu (1994), Graham

final, logical step that the entire text has been leading up to thus far, but instead as an occasion for the reader to reflect on what has been proposed in the previous chapters. And in fact, my reading makes this passage particularly apt at providing such an opportunity. Having gone through the seven chapters, one may fall prey to behaving a little bit like Liezi: taking their points without fully grasping them, applying them without adaptability or nuance, ossifying the text's recommendations. The authors of the text's chapters, whether "Inner", "Outer", or "Miscellaneous", are aware of this tendency to almost blindly follow the points made by "masters", and that is indeed one of the reasons for the emphasis that they put on teaching, learning, and emptiness. But the story of Huzi is a cautionary tale against this possible outcome. A sort of manual to understand what would happen if the text were to be read in the way either Jixian or Liezi do at first. It is also a reminder that this book too is doomed to become the "dregs and dust of the ancients", and that it will inevitably need to be left behind for the reader to go further—the way Liezi leaves Huzi behind. It may remind one of the last passage from the "Waiwu" (外物) ("External things") chapter.

> A fish trap is there for the fish. When you get the fish, you forget the trap. A snare is there for the rabbits. When you get the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you get the intent, you forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him? (Zhuangzi 2020, 224; 75/26/48-49).

Along with the clearly humorous tone of this passage, we can detect the sort of idea also at play in Liezi's decision to leave Huzi. That decision, which paradoxically enables him to learn more and renders his practices more adaptable and less fixed, is at the heart of the *Zhuangzi*'s understanding of itself as a text. Sooner or later, it must be abandoned in favour of actually, effectively practicing what it proposes.

Of course, this is not the *final* story of the "Inner Chapters". That honour goes to the famous tale of Shu 儵, Hu 忽, and Hundun 渾沌. However, the murder of Hundun by the two well-meaning but foolish kings can be read in a very similar

(2003), and Klein (2010; 2022)that they already formed a coherent unit in the Warring States, and that they came from a single hand. After reviewing what is known about the early history of the Zhuangzi text, various arguments that have been made in support of early, coherent inner chapters, are examined. Taking the Shiji portrait of the Zhuangzi as the starting point, it is shown that Sima Qian's description and use of the Zhuangzi already gives us reason to question the importance, or even existence, of the inner chapters in the Western Han. It is then shown that pre-Han and Han references to Zhuang Zhou, and parallels with the Zhuangzi text, do not necessarily even require (or support. I do not think that this changes the substance of the point that I am trying to make. Even if the "Yingdiwang" chapter was not written by Zhuang Zhou, the story of Huzi can still be seen as the cautionary tale I describe below.

fashion. What Shu and Hu do is to impose onto Hundun standards that they think are universally applicable, such as the need to repay (*bao* 報) their host for his "bounteous virtue" (*de* 德), as Ziporyn translates it, but most importantly that one should have seven holes to see, hear, eat, and breathe (Zhuangzi 2020, 72; 21/7/33-35). There are many interpretations for this passage.[20] A common thread that runs through them is that the superimposition of standards, ideas, practices on Hundun is a form of violence that leads to this character's demise. That also applies to the *Zhuangzi*. The text would suffer from having ideas forcibly superimposed onto itself, *even its own ideas*, which would thus be used in ways that run counter to the authors' recommendations. In this way, Shu and Hu can be compared to Jixian, who also comes at what she encounters with her own preconceptions and does not deviate from them. But in her case, it is not Huzi who "dies", as it were, but herself.

Finally, this cautionary tale is also in itself another instance of the text's refusal to give its reader a single way to adhere to *dao* or a single set of standards. Understood as such a story, the tale of Huzi still does not tell us what the best or most effective way to read the *Zhuangzi* is. If it had done so, we would be facing the same problems I mentioned earlier. But no, instead it presents possible attitudes towards itself, shows alternatives and what they may lead to without offering a single obvious judgment of value on either the shamaness or the overkeen student. They may be foolish and fixed, but they are not depicted as being "wrong". Through a poetic and at times humorous passage, the text gently nudges us away from ossifying, fixating ways of considering it without ever telling us exactly how we should read it – as there is no single proper way to do so. This is not a fault but an intrinsic feature of a text that found in emptiness the way to always resist absolutism.

Conclusion

The *Zhuangzi*'s wealth is to be found within the ever-shifting fluctuation of its words. It gives us a quest to find ever more varied possibilities for distinction and *shifei* alternatives. How we respond to that quest can be read as one of the topics of the encounter between Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi. I started by offering a quick introduction to the story and then went on to provide its historical background. The shamanesses were shown to be members of a disappearing caste of government officials, and this status comes into play in the subsequent description I gave of Jixian's role in the tale. I then introduced a few examples of previous

20 Examples of engagement with that passage include Girardot (1983) and Moeller (2017) amongst many others. Possible interpretations may see it as a social satire, a tragedy, a cosmogonical statement about the universe, all of these possibilities and none of them.

engagements with this passage, notably Defoort' and Moeller's articles, arguing that my reading was at least in some ways compatible with and building upon some of the points that they made. I then presented my own theory, arguing that Huzi can be seen as a representation of the *Zhuangzi*, whereas Jixian and Liezi are two people coming at the text from different angles and with different attitudes. Huzi's emptiness is a feature he shares with the text, and it enables him to always propose alternatives: he teaches a multiplicity of ways to follow *dao*, not *the dao*. Jixian is the representative of the "old school", of the way things were dealt with before the Warring States period and all its changes took over. She comes at this text full of certainties, applies her own distinctions and set of values to it and, when she cannot fully master and understand it, she leaves it to the side and disappears, like the world she belongs to. Liezi also has set ideas, but he got them from the *Zhuangzi* itself. Instead of understanding the fluidity of *shifei* distinctions, he switches from one fixed valuation scheme to another, not understanding the depth of the *Zhuangzi*'s critique of valuation. But he then starts to learn to use the text properly, and eventually not to use it at all. He discards his past fixity and the arguably Confucian attitude he had to education in order to live his life of simplicity. This tale, at the end of the "Yingdiwang" chapter, at the conclusion of the "Inner Chapters", pushes the reader to reflect on themselves, all the while speaking *of* itself. It is a brilliant exercise in fourth-wall trickery, and a fantastic reminder that the *Zhuangzi* always encourages us to rest a while on the axis of *dao*.

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OTHER TOPICS

Eduard von Hartmann, Pessimism, and the Europeanization of Buddhism

*Eric S. NELSON**

Abstract

Eduard von Hartmann was one of the most influential public philosophers of his era, known primarily through his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. A conservative nationalist in politics, he positioned himself as a cultural and religious reformer and modernist advocate of a "religion of the future" of self-redemption (autosoterism), one that reconciled pessimism and a panpneumatic impersonal unconscious with rationality and individual responsibility. This paper traces how Buddhism served as a primary albeit imperfect exemplar in his thought, how his ethical and symbolic interpretative strategy, based on the unconscious, drew him into proximity and conflict with esoteric spiritist discourses, and how this context informed his *Daodejing* interpretation. German Idealism disclosed the unity of reason, will, and nature, while Buddhist teachings demonstrated the world's fundamentally contradictory and illusory character through nothingness (emptiness), *nirvāṇa*, and objective illusionism and phenomenalism. Hartmann's secularized moral and symbolic adaptation of Buddhism entailed a resigned yet heroic embrace of suffering life rather than what he deemed ascetic and quietist acquiescence. His hermeneutics reveal his modernizing vision of Buddhism as an exemplary model (if suitably reformed to accentuate a heroic response to suffering and karma) for the future.

Keywords: Buddhism, nihilism, panpsychism, pessimism, the unconscious

Eduard von Hartmann, pesimizem in evropeizacija budizma

Izvleček

Eduard von Hartmann je bil eden najvplivnejših javnih filozofov svojega časa, znan predvsem po svojem delu *Filozofija nezavednega*. Četudi je bil v političnem pogledu konservativni nacionalist, se je predstavljal kot kulturni in verski reformator ter modernistični zagovornik »religije prihodnosti« in samoodrešitve (avtosoterizma), ki naj bi povezala pesimizem ter panpnevmatistično brezosebno nezavedno z racionalnostjo in individualno odgovornostjo. Prispevek sledi vlogi, ki jo je v njegovem mišljenju igral budizem kot glavni, četudi nikakor ne popoln vzor. Avtor prikaže, na kakšen način je bila Hartmannova etična in simbolna strategija interpretacij utemeljena na pojmu nezavednega ter kako se je približevala ezoteričnim duhovnim diskurzom in se hkrati od njih oddaljevala.

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Pojasnjuje, kako je ta kontekst vplival na njegovo razlago *Daodejinga*. Nemški idealizem je razkril enotnost razuma, volje in narave, medtem ko so budistični nauki pokazali, da je svet v svojem bistvu protisloven in iluzoren, kar se izraža skozi nič (praznino), nirvano ter objektivni iluzionizem in fenomenalizem. Hartmannova sekularizirana moralna in simbolna priredba budizma je pomenila resignirano, toda junaško sprejetje trpečega življenja namesto tistega, kar je sam imel za asketsko in kvietistično vdajo. Njegova hermenevtika razkriva modernizirano vizijo budizma. V tem okviru pokaže, da lahko budizem postane vzorčni model za prihodnost, če je le ustrezno reformiran, da poudari junaški odziv na trpljenje in karmo.

Ključne besede: budizem, nihilizem, panpsihizem, pesimizem, nezavedno

Introduction

Eduard von Hartmann (1842–1906) was considered one of the most influential popular or non-academic philosophers of his era (Wundt 1877, 505). He was an injured Prussian military officer who became a philosophical author after completing a PhD in philosophy at the University of Rostock in 1867. A proponent of a heroic, active, and impersonal eudaemonic pessimism—with the recognition of the preponderance of suffering in life—and an empirically based, inductively attained panpsychism (the simultaneity of mind and matter), he is best known for his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, first published in 1869 (Hartmann 1878). This work went through numerous editions and translations during his lifetime. His work was a familiar source for Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, Rudolf Steiner and esoteric spiritist intellectuals, Richard Wilhelm and interpreters of Indian and Chinese philosophy, as well as Japanese philosophers such as Inoue Tetsujirō 井上 哲次郎, who knew him and studied his philosophy in Berlin.[1]

Ernst Bloch described Hartmann's philosophy as "Royal Prussian Buddhism" (Bloch 1969, 203). A political conservative who embraced a "patriotic" assimilationist politics of the nation-state and the newly unified German Empire (which occurred under Bismark from 1866–1871), and a critic of liberal and social democratic optimism, Hartmann positioned himself as a realistic reformer and modernist in favour of cultural, religious, and scientific progress.[2] He advocated a transformed

1 See Brandell (1979, 93), Sherry (2010, 33–34), Steiner (1960), and Schulzer (2019, 223–25).

2 In 1906, Rudolf Steiner described Hartmann's conservativism about politics and socialism and his strong sense of reality as philistinish yet mostly healthy (Steiner 1960, 261). Hartmann praised "conservativism of disposition", i.e. the loyalty and continuity of the will, in his 1879 *Phenomenology of Ethical Consciousness*, while maintaining that it has a tendency toward mechanical stagnation and that it should be only one moment in addition to critique and autonomous moral value (Hartmann 1879, 255, 260). Georg Lukács considered him a modernist variation on mundane reactionary liberal bourgeois thought (Lukács 1962, 278, 609). Hartmann can be classified as a proponent of communitarian virtue ethics, with Kantian autonomy at its heart, and as a modernist rather than an anti-modernist conservative.

philosophy that reconciled the impulses of the unconscious with self-conscious reason and the philosophical primacy of the unconscious with modern scientific (empirical, inductive) rationality (Hartmann 1878). He described his method as arriving at "speculative results according to the inductive scientific method" (ibid., 11).

Hartmann signaled Kant out as the first and archetypal modern pessimist, since Kant excluded individual eudaemonic happiness and rewards while emphasizing autonomy as social responsibility for the sake of public action and historical progress (Hartmann 1880, 1–64). He argued that Kant's practical postulate of personal immortality did not contradict this explanation, since it was introduced to conform to the existing political and religious authorities and remained secondary to moral autonomy and duty.[3] Hartmann categorized his position and Kant's as a synthesis of eudaemonic pessimism and historical optimism, whereas Hegel was an optimist and Schopenhauer a pessimist about both happiness and historical development. Hartmann consequently rejected Schopenhauer's asceticism and disengaged quietism for an "active" individual responsibility, a sense of redemptive solidarity with humanity as a whole, and a world developmental process in his essay "Is Pessimism Without Consolation? (Hartmann 1875a, 150–51). He formulated similar criticisms of the limits of historical Buddhist teachings. His sources were mostly translated South Asian texts and modern European accounts. His "reformed" or Europeanized Buddhism accentuated active public and political responsibility along with momentary instants of insight into and redemption from the suffering of the world (*Weltschmerz*).

The pessimist philosopher Philipp Mainländer maintained that Hartmann's philosophy of autonomy without individuality is "hard, cold, and unfeeling like stone", lacking the warmth of divine consolation by denying "salvation to the individual" (Mainländer 1894, 633). Rejecting the idealistic and romantic focus on individual consciousness, and its ideas of individual salvation, Hartmann unfolded a philosophy of a collective impersonal unconscious that structured all of material, organic, and intellectual nature. This inherently embodied and worldly unconscious not only names a pantheistic soul of the world, which is still too dualistic, but is the world. He characterized his own thought as a new form of "panpneumatism of the unconscious" (i.e., all things have unconscious spirit [*Geist*]) and as a pessimism that embraces action or, in more eclectic terms, as reconciling through the unconscious Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy of the will, Schelling's philosophy of nature, Hegel's developmental notion of spirit, and the latest scientific theories.[4]

3 Schopenhauer already advocated a secularizing pessimistic interpretation of Kant who he argued added religious postulates for ordinary understanding, the Prussian political authorities, and as a symbolism. On Kant as the "father of pessimism", see Hartmann (1880, 1–64).

4 Hartmann unified Hegel's spirit, Schelling's nature, and Schopenhauer's will by identifying a shared pantheistic moment and a tacit universal unconscious. Mainländer described him as having

Between Buddhism and German Idealism

This present contribution to the genealogy of "European Buddhism", an expression popularized by Friedrich Nietzsche to name the ultimate form of nihilism (the destruction of all meaning and value),[5] outlines: (1) how Buddhism served as a primary albeit imperfect exemplar—in need of renewal to overcome its quietism and individualism while heightening its negative, atheistic-pantheistic understanding of redemption—of his new philosophy and post-theistic "religion of the future" that realized autosoterism (self-redemption through one's own efforts) instead of heterosoterism (redemption through dependency on another or external power); (2) how his approach drew him into contact and controversies with European esoteric literati who were initially sympathetic with his philosophy as a potential ally against Darwinism and materialism; and (3) how this context shaped his 1870 monistic interpretation of Reinhold von Plänckner's German translation of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Plänckner 1870). The present paper excavates the ways in which Hartmann's interpretations of Buddhism and Daoism are entangled with his conception of unconscious nature and his negative dialectical strategies that drew from Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer.

Hartmann is frequently classified as a "late idealist", even though he interpreted his own project as overcoming the conceptualist constructivism of the idealist subject in transcendental realism (i.e., the correlational reality of the external world) and the universality of the unconscious as the unitary reality of nature and reason, and matter and mind.[6] In opposition to materialist, empiricist, and Darwinian naturalism, he sought to "naturalize" philosophy in a different sense and place it on an empirical basis insofar as nature and life signified the unfolding development and expression of the collective unconscious.[7] Hartmann's reason can only slowly and incompletely realize itself against the prerational dynamics of the unconscious that cannot be escaped.

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many masters, the key one being "the romantic Schelling" (Mainländer 1894, 573). Bloch and Lukács maintained that he followed Schelling's sense of primordial nature more than Hegel's spirit. Lukács further identified Hartmann as the pivotal link in the rehabilitation of Schelling. On Hartmann's critical or eclectic adaptation of Hegel, see Hartmann (1869; 1870), Bloch (1962, 397–98) and Lukács (1962, 18, 172).

5 See Nietzsche (1980, vol. 12, 126, 131) and Nelson (2025).

6 On the categorization of Hartmann's philosophy and the pessimism-controversy, compare Plümacher (1881; 1884), Taubert (1873) and Beiser (2016).

7 Hartmann's philosophy shares a few overlapping family resemblances with those of Schopenhauer, Mainländer, and Nietzsche. Mainländer maintained the priority of the individual unconscious and will against Hartmann's impersonal unconscious (Mainländer 1894, 572). Nietzsche dismissed him as a philistine, a self-deceptive fool, and "unconscious Jesuit" (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 1, 313–24) and no doubt included him in the category of nihilistic "European Buddhism" (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 12, 126, 131). On their interpretations of Buddhism, see Nelson (2025).

He sought to defend the core while transcending the limits of classical German idealism revealed by modern empirical science and pessimist philosophy. Idealism disclosed the conceptual unity of the world as reason, will, and nature, and yet early "genuine" Buddhist teachings demonstrated the world's fundamentally contradictory and illusory character through nothingness (emptiness), *nirvāṇa*, and the objective "illusionism" of complete phenomenalism in which all objects are dissolved into appearances without essence or qualities. "Absolute illusionism", an unintended consequence of Kant's critical philosophy in the modern European context that German idealism failed to overcome, portends the "madness of a world-appearing nothingness".[8] He thereby linked the latest modern philosophical tendencies with what he deemed "esoteric" and "original" Buddhist philosophy that prioritized suffering and karma rather than salvation.[9] He identified the Theravāda *Pāḷi Canon* with "original" "esoteric" Buddhism, which represented a pessimistic philosophy of suffering and karma in contrast to what he described as the later "exoteric" Buddhist idea of redemption that included Mahāyāna teachings and practices. His interpretive strategy made Buddhist philosophy not only modern but futural, treacherous but also potentially curative for contemporary Europe.

As already specified in Schopenhauer, *nirvāṇa* can only signify a relative, qualified nothingness (*nihil relativum*).[10] Although Indian Buddhism can fall into positing an incoherent absolute nothingness (*nihil absolutum*), or the merely abstract negation of being criticized in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Hartmann's concrete immanent negation must remain within and inexorably interwoven with the activity, struggle, and suffering of existence (Hartmann 1878, 365, 389; 1885a, 171–78). Immanent critique cannot be merely abstractly or formally negative and thus only external; it is negativity working through the positivity of content (Hartmann 1875a, 54). In Hartmann's version of "negative dialectics", absolute nothingness is rejected as yet another illusive positivity. It is self-contradictory, because its meaning can only be relational and contrastive. Even if *nirvāṇa* does not sufficiently exclude its optimistic heteronomous appropriation, as occurred for Hartmann in "exoteric" popular Buddhist visions of individual salvation, the intrinsic negativity of *nirvāṇa* entails its radicality and comprehensiveness.

It is consequently the Buddha and Schopenhauer, and not Hegel, who more fully disclosed the contradictoriness of the human condition: acting and willing are

8 "Der Wahnsinn des eine Welt scheinenden Nichts gähnt uns an" (Hartmann 1871, 29). Without mentioning Hartmann, Wilhelm Dilthey argued that Fichte's dissolution of Kantian causality led from idealism to phenomenalism and illusionism (Dilthey 1990, 303).

9 Note that Philipp Mainländer adopted Hartmann's categorization of Buddhist teachings in his *Philosophy of Redemption* (Mainländer 1894).

10 On Schopenhauer's interpretation of *nirvāṇa*, relative conditional nothingness, and Buddhism, see Nelson (2022).

intrinsically entangled with suffering, yet they moderate and improve the reality of suffering, and consciousness realizes the consolation and redemption of the whole through temporarily achieved speculative moments of spirit (art, religion, philosophy).

This historical developmental model was clearly drawn from Hegel, with the qualification that it leads through negation—which, as in Hegel, implies concretization—to a heroic resigned activity, without passive quietism, instead of absolute spirit. Hartmann's noticeable use of the Hegelian language of the developmental world-process and spirit was mocked in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*.[11] Nietzsche did not mention their differences. Hartmann's negative conception of absolute spirit fused Hegelian negation, while abandoning the affirmative moment in Hegel's dialectic, with Schopenhauer's negativity that suspended desire and the will. In Hartmann's vision of active autonomous redemption in an impersonal absolute, there is no being, ego, will, nor passiveness or suffering. Despite his arguments for the development of the unconscious into consciousness and the ultimate reconciliation of nature and spirit, as best expressed by Schelling, and his refusal to abandon idealist reason and empirical science, Georg Lukács and other critics accused Hartmann of absolutizing and divinizing the irrational with his notion of the unconscious. According to Lukács, in his *Destruction of Reason*, Hartmann broke with Hegel's conception of reason and modernized the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling and romanticism, bridging the way to 20th-century vitalism, irrationalism, and fascism, along with Nietzsche (Lukács 1962). However, Hartmann's stated project was to moderate the speculative claims and modernize the critical rationality of Kant and German idealism in response to its positivistic, vitalistic, and orthodox and liberal theological opponents. Drawing on Indian philosophy became integral to his mission to renew German culture and philosophy, a possibility that Nietzsche rejected, perhaps with Hartmann in mind, in favour of the exemplarity of archaic Greece in the *Untimely Meditations*.

According to Hartmann, unlike modern German idealism's "lack of courage" to realize its own radical implications, only early genuine Buddhism (as he conceived it) had the courage to fully embrace absolute illusionism and its consequences.[12] The Buddhist logic of four-fold negation (*catuṣkoṭi*) indicates that the negation of the negation entails radical negativity, one that suspends both appearance and essence, rather than Hegel's positive affirmation (Hartmann 1868, 3). Hartmann argued that:

> Buddhism is more than subjective idealism or absolute idealism; it is absolute illusionism, i.e., it claims that there is no true being at all, and

11 See Nietzsche (1980, vol. 1, 313–24). Mainländer and Nietzsche both reasserted the primacy of the will against Hartmann's overly Hegelian rehabilitation of reason.

12 Hartmann (1888a, 48), also compare Hartmann (1882, 325) and Mainländer (1894, 33).

> that all apparent being is semblance without any essence, i.e., pure illusion. Since semblance, as semblance, cannot be denied, this system involves the assumption that it is possible for nothingness to assume the semblance of being, and the task is to free itself from this semblance. (Hartmann 1868, 2)

The most complete expression of Buddhism is neither affirmation nor negation but the suspension of both. The illusionism expressed in early Buddhist and modern European phenomenalist discourses could only be resolved through the transformation of abstract idealism (which privileged the subject over the object) into a concrete or transcendental realism that gave both subject and object their respective correlational rights. Without both sides of the correlation, there would be no suffering world nor its active, heroic overcoming. Hartmann interpreted the Buddhist *dharma*, based on translations of Pāli and Sanskrit sources, in a modernizing way as primarily moral, psychological, and symbolic, sublating south Asian discourses in his own philosophical model.[13] He concluded that the Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition entailed a heroic or activist embrace of suffering and fateful karmic life rather than the ascetic mortification and quietist acquiescence into which Indian philosophies had for him historically decayed.

Hartmann's ethical and symbolic hermeneutics of religious life, based on his understanding of religion as prereflective philosophy and the, to use his own expression, panpneumatic (i.e., all is spirit) monistic unity of all things in unconscious nature, drew him into contact and conflict with esoteric spiritist discourses, in particular theosophy (Hartmann 1885b; 1891; 1898). Esoteric spiritist intellectuals were initially sympathetic to his philosophy, foreshadowing the later intersection of esotericism and Carl Jung's psychology of the unconscious, until he publicly criticized esoteric and spiritist occultism as a form of egoistic and individualistic eudaimonism that lacks moral value and as an overly literal misinterpretation of what should be understood as a symbolism of the impersonal forces of the collective unconscious.[14]

Idealist Consciousness and the Panpneumatic Unconscious

Hartmann's term panpneumatism is based on the idea that all is one and all is spirit (*Geist*), and spirit and nature name the same one reality. It is a variety of panpsychism that maintains that every material state has a limited passive form

13 On 19th-century German interpretations of Buddhism, see Dumoulin (1981, 457–70). On the potential and pitfalls of transcultural sublation, see Rošker (2024).

14 Note that expressions such as esoteric, mystical, spiritist, and occult were used positively by supporters (e.g., Steiner) and negatively by critics (e.g., Hartmann) during this period.

and degree of consciousness. In 19th-century German speaking intellectual discourses, panpsychism was widely considered a simpler explanatory thesis than idealism, materialism, and mind-matter dualism to answer the decisive issue of how consciousness and physical and organic systems were mutually dependent. Either everything or nothing had consciousness.

Panpsychism shaped European explanations of the "psycho-physical" (*nama-rupa*) aggregates that formed human existence in the discourses of the Buddha found in the *Pāḷi Canon*. However, the mutuality of consciousness and psycho-physicality is a meditative and analytical category in Pāḷi sources that was not speculatively construed as the intrinsic nature of things.[15] German panpsychism pursued the holistic interconnections and structures between humans, things, and the cosmos, which Hartmann called spirit, and interpreted itself as sharing deep affinities with orthodox and heterodox Indian philosophies, particularly positive Vedānta and negative Buddhism, as sources for European regeneration (see Hartmann 1874). Hartmann's panpsychism was more negative and dialectical. The phenomenological development and immanent critique of (1) abstract, passive monism and (2) active, practical theism leads to (3) the "concrete monism" that preserves the activity, autonomous individuality, and multiplicity of theism while recognizing with Indian discourses that all can only be one (Hartmann 1882, 625–26). As suffering can neither be reduced to a mere illusion (as in abstract monism) nor to the redemptive suffering of one being (as in Christian theism and "exoteric Buddhism"), only concrete monism can fully appreciate the reality of the suffering, tragic individual who accepts and embraces the impersonal whole (ibid., 615).

Hartmann's use of dialectic, phenomenology, and immanent critique is clearly indebted to Hegel, while he stressed the moments of negativity, concretization, and becoming against the moments of reconciliation, affirmation, and the absolute. In Hartmann's proposed revision of Hegel's philosophy, he objected to Hegel's "panlogism" (the prioritization of the concept and conceptual system), his deficient sense of nature (as lessor than spirit), and his bifurcation of nature and history (Hartmann 1870, 398–99). Hartmann's works attempted to reconcile nature, construed as unconscious, with Hegel's developmental philosophy of spirit as consciousness coming to self-consciousness. Whereas numerous 19th-century panpsychists rejected Hegel's prioritization of spirit, seeing it as devaluing nature, Hartmann integrated Hegelian spirit into a philosophy that recognized the unity and reciprocity of nature and spirit in a universal unconscious in which Schopenhauer's will and Hegel's reason can no longer be distinguished.[16] He reconstructed Hegel's concepts of spirit and reason in light of Schopenhauer's concept of the will and Schelling's philosophy of elemental nature. One objective

15 For instance, "dependent on psycho-physicality, there is consciousness, and dependent on consciousness, there is psycho- physicality" (Holder 2006, 29).

16 On Hegel, Hartmann, and panpsychism, see Nelson (2023b).

was to overcome human alienation from nature by embracing humans as participants in the living networks of nature and by understanding nature as constituted through dynamic systematic wholes that developed from simple to complex systems (Hartmann 1869).

German panpsychic discourses were also concerned with the ethical status and sensitivity of animals and plants. To consider the case of vegetative life, in his 1848 work *Nanna: On the Souls of Plants*, Gustav Fechner advocated the need for a deeper acknowledgment of the life of plants based on panpsychic considerations regarding their inner sensitive life. Hartmann's essay "Flower-Luxury" (*Der Blumenluxus*), penned a few decades later, depicted with horror the grotesque, merely decorative uses of dead butterflies and flowers. The sensitivity of insects and plants illustrated the manifestation of a shared unconscious panpneumatic life as did the purposiveness expressed in inorganic and organic systems. The recognition of the sensitive life of plants entails the need to enjoy them in their own living environments, such as gardens and parks, and utilize them with moderation and respect (Hartmann 1888b, 106–12). However, these arguments did not lead Hartmann to advocate abstention, which he considered too ascetic.

In earlier essays in the same volume, Hartmann rejected vegetarianism and advocated the responsible use of animals and plants that minimized harm and affliction. He held that vegetarianism and any sweeping abolition of using other forms of animal and vegetative life, which he associated with the ascetic and passive side of Indian culture, was too morally demanding for ordinary people. Still, recognizing the significance of Indian ethical norms, he supported a more ethical and sensitive form of using animals and plants that gave them a moral status that demanded minimizing harm and suffering. His analysis intersected with his reflections on an ethics of nature. The panpsychic appreciation of the spiritual life of plants in Fechner and Hartmann helped stimulate the early development of bioethics by Fritz Jahr in the 1920s (Jahr 2013; Nelson 2023b).

The Buddhism of the Past and of the Future

The Philosophy of the Unconscious was one of the most discussed works of its era, in which Hartmann tempered the radical claims and consequences of Schopenhauer's pessimism just as Nietzsche later intensified them. His project sought to reconcile the "asocial" individualistic pessimism of Schopenhauer and Buddhism—which included a sense of the suffering of animals and plants—with an empirical and inductive justification of organicist-vitalist natural philosophy and a renewal of social-historical confidence in national reform and progress (Hartmann 1878). Notwithstanding his rejection of religious heteronomy, and his suspicions that other-worldly Christianity had stagnated and no longer motivated

the populace, religion is socially necessary as the affective and symbolic embodiment of the philosophy of a people. Further reform and progress required a new non-theistic "religion of the future" drawn more from Buddhism than Christianity or other religions (Hartmann 1874). Early autosoteric Buddhist teachings taught redemption through working through the suffering, karmic self in contrast to heteronomous redemption from some external power. Hartmann perceived the core of "original", "genuine" Buddhism to be a form of self-power that abandoned the desire for individual happiness and salvation. Unfortunately, he showed no familiarity with East Asian Buddhist debates concerning "self-power" (*zili* 自力) and "other-power" (*tali* 他力) associated with Chan 禅 and Pure Land (*jingtu* 淨土) teachings.[17] Nor did he perceive the complexity of this question in the Buddhist teachings that he classified as "exoteric" and heterosoteric.

Hartmann's controversial 1874 work *The Self-Decomposition of Christianity and the Religion of the Future* was denounced by defenders of theism. Orthodox theistic detractors directly identified Buddhism with modern European thought, especially the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Hartmann, without sufficient differentiation: "The Germans Feuerbach, Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, the Frenchman Comte, the American Emerson, with hosts of others, have all imbibed more or less of this sweet poison and taken as kindly as any Asiatic to this Buddhist opiate" (Eitel 1884, 3); "The atheism and pessimism of Buddhism were the ripened fruits of that root of bitterness. In quite recent times a system very similar to Buddhism has appeared in Germany, and been advocated by Schopenhauer, Von Hartmann, and numerous other writers" (Flint 1879, 291). More sympathetic readers depicted Hartmann as a "prophet" of a new, reformed Buddhism (Haffner 1881, 1046).

How did Hartmann become a representative of European Buddhism? He voiced a unique European account of Buddhist nothingness that is distinct from its reconstruction in Schopenhauer and its rejection in Hegel or Nietzsche.[18] In his 1874 book, Hartmann interpreted Buddhism as a "pure atheism" in which the world becomes a mere appearance of nothingness. It negates the "metaphysical God" as the substance of the world and the essence of appearances (Hartmann 1874, 105). However, this description did not lead him to depict Buddhism as a nihilistic cult of meaningless nothingness. Buddhist philosophy need not necessarily entail mere atheism and phenomenalist illusionism, as it also indicated a transformative response to a predicament discovered in ancient India and rediscovered in modern Europe.

Prioritizing the dialectical moment of negativity, atheism is an avenue to the true religiosity of pantheism and dialectical negation leads to a genuine sense

17 On pessimism, self-power, and other-power, see Nelson (2022, 86).

18 Note that I differentiate these interpretations in detail in Nelson (2022) and Nelson (2025).

that all is one for Hartmann. Buddhism is a "practical atheism" that was not "irreligious" in denying the priority of God and the gods (Hartmann 1885a, 203; 1882, 354). Buddhism principally concerns the suffering contradictoriness of the world and its negation as a suspension in upholding an impersonal practical attitude. Real contradictoriness within the actual world should not be conflated with logical contradiction, since the former provides reasons for pessimism, and the latter operates as the grounds for negation and critique. Contrary to Hegelian optimism, there is no absolute or positive reconciliation or redemption, nor can nothingness itself be transformed into another positive or absolute. Hegel's mediated absolute, according to Bloch, sinks into a pre-worldly "archaic nirvana" in Hartmann (Bloch 1962, 397).[19] Despite Bloch's appreciation for Hartmann's dialectical process philosophy that he expressed elsewhere, and his recognition of its critical-utopian function in Schopenhauer, he missed the pivotal role of negativity in Hartmann's interpretation of *nirvāṇa*, criticizing it as an indeterminate and abstract primordial ground akin to Schelling's nature or the abstract nothing rejected by Hegel. However, according to Hartmann's inversion of Hegel, the negativity and nothingness of positivity and being are the most concrete.

Hartmann grasped Buddhist *nirvāṇa* as the necessary consequence of pessimism, and thus as therapeutic rather than as mere static or abstract nothingness. It is the realistic recognition of nothingness. For Hartmann pessimism signifies the contradictoriness and pain that humans must recognize in order to act and improve themselves. All beings partake in and respond to the same suffering world, they find their freedom, as indicated in Buddhism and Christianity, in the denial of life (Hartmann 1878, 372–73). The freedom of nothingness is nothing else than a will that desires and wills nothing (Hartmann 1869, 29). The will should be freely resigned, as in Buddhism, while remaining actively engaged in practical life without fear or anxiety, which Buddhism has to his mind inadequately expressed.

Pessimism, if properly understood without the quietist errors present in Buddhism and Schopenhauer, discloses the conditions of active practical life (Hartmann 1875a, 110). Whereas Christianity must assume theodicy and an optimistic world-goal, Buddhism explicitly utilized pessimism to justify the highest historical (albeit imperfect) exemplar of morality and a practical life-stance. Notwithstanding the dangers of mere atheism and phenomenalism, which it shared with modern scientism, he concluded that "regarding ethics, we have more to borrow from Buddhism than from Christianity" (Hartmann 1874, 118).

19 Bloch described "Hartmann's nirvana" as nothingness conceived of as the primal origin and end of things (Bloch 1969, 201, 203). It signifies the "primordial condition of the unconscious existing prior to the world. Hartmann hypostatized the unconscious from its psychic occurrence into the impersonal essence of the world itself" (ibid., 103).

Despite the affinities between their affectively based moralities in attitudes of love and compassion (Hartmann 1879, 168), it is the impersonal comportment and sympathy of Buddhism rather than Christianity, with its personal God and egotistical concern for salvation, which best approximates the monistic and pessimistic ethics and religion needed to renew Europe. Although Hegel had argued that only in Christianity are all free in contrast to Asiatic despotism where only one person is free (Hegel 1995, 100), Hartmann's analysis led to a different conclusion. Monotheistic regions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have a better sense of historical and evolutionary optimism, but they fall—to varying degrees—into individualistic eudaemonic optimism. Christ's suffering remained exemplary for Hartmann, yet it was submerged in Christian optimism and egoism regarding an individual afterlife. As Hartmann's wife and advocate Agnes Taubert clarified, the optimistic consolation of the afterlife must be abandoned in returning to the immanent and pessimistic this-worldliness that has demonstrated its "tremendous religious power in Brahmanism, Buddhism, and original Christianity."[20]

Hartmann concluded that the suffering and redemption of the one son of God in Christianity must be replaced with the suffering and (conditional, negational) redemption of all beings. In another work, which predates Max Weber's problematic of modern disenchantment, Hartmann determined that an impersonal, negative eudaemonic pessimism is pivotal to continuing progress (developmental optimism) without destroying the affective bonds of the religious and the ethical life of nations (Hartmann 1871, 114–15). Buddhist pessimism, although lacking an adequate historical sensibility, corrects its radical atheism and empty illusionism. Its "esoteric" (i.e., its genuine philosophical) teachings are embodied in its affective religious community and imaginary; they are subsumed in various "exoteric" practices and beliefs that Hartmann judged to be distant from early karmic Buddhism. Although his emphasis on individual action without egoism for the sake of communal and spiritual development might appear closer to some readings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Hartmann portrayed his position as a reformation of historical Buddhism, informed by classical German philosophy, which overcame its ostensive individualism and quietist passivity.

Hartmann's history of philosophy agreed with Schopenhauer more than Hegel on the inclusion of Indian philosophy. At the same time, he remained committed to a weakened Hegelian developmental history of reason becoming progressively more historically concrete and complex without any ultimate *telos* or positive absolute, which had undermined Hegel's philosophy. He remarked that Schopenhauer's great service was the modern European retrieval of Vedānta and Buddhist philosophy, "restoring its dreamy subjective idealism, its pessimism (far superior in depth to that of Christianity), and the Buddhist ethics and

20 Taubert (1873, 144); compare also Hartmann (1882) and Plümacher (1884).

teaching of nirvana" (Hartmann 1874, 111). In contrast to Bloch's interpretation of Hartmann's *nirvāṇa* as a falling away from Hegel's absolute back to the darkness of Schelling's nature (Bloch 1962, 397), its truth is disclosed through its very negativity:

> Nirvana is precisely defined in countless places as the negation of all that existence and being-in-itself that this world (Samsara) presents to our experience. Nirvana is, first, the Not [*das Nicht*] of all existence; second, the Not of all thinking, feeling, and willing; and third, the Not of any essence underlying existence and consciousness. (Hartmann 1885, 175)

The different senses of nothingness in Hartmann should be noted here. First, simple phenomenalist nothingness, which afflicts modern Europe as well as ancient India, posits an extreme that destroys the structural unity and meaningfulness of the world born of the dreaming unconscious. The dreaming unconscious substance or subject of the world manifests itself in the multiplicity of the world, as things emerge from and return to it. Ernst Bloch noted that there are two dimensions to the unconscious: the "no-longer-conscious" of forgetting and repression, exposed especially in Freudian psychanalysis, and the "not-yet" or "still-not-conscious" of anticipation and radical possibility. Hartmann reified rather than opened up the latency and transformative power of the "not-yet" with his primal nothingness (Bloch 1969, 99–103, 197–203).

Second, the nothingness of *nirvāṇa* indicates an ethical disposition and tranquillity in the midst of the existential realities of misfortune, suffering, and death. Its "not" or negation is a therapeutic suspension without any affirmative positivity or transcendence, despite optimistic misinterpretations that misconstrue relative negational nothingness as a positive absolute nothingness.[21] His analysis no doubt has European presuppositions, yet it intersects with aspects of Theravāda and Madhyamaka teachings of emptiness as meditative emptying and logical negation that undoes the compulsion to reify being and affirmation.[22] As glimpsed in Buddhist ethics, if not in its moments of ascetic acquiescence criticized by Hartmann and Nietzsche, the disposition of *nirvāṇa* demands heroic and active behaviour for the welfare and progress of the nation and humanity. It requires overcoming the quietism that afflicted historical varieties of Buddhism and pessimism that overly restricted human activity and flourishing in confrontation with the suffering world.

21 In contrast to Bloch's assessment, which stressed the dogmatic positivity of Schelling's nature and Hartmann's nothingness, its dialectical negativity is accentuated by Hartmann (1885a, 178–79).

22 On the priority of emptiness and negation in the Madhyamaka philosophies of Nāgārjuna and Sengzhao 僧肇, for instance, see Nelson (2023a).

Buddhism in Hartmann's Dispute with Esoteric Spiritism and Theosophy

This pessimistic and organicist life-philosopher, criticized as a mere epigone and transitional irrationalist by Lukács (Lukács 1962), revealed throughout his works a commitment to a modernist conception of scientific rationality in a wider form than the positivism and materialism that dominated his era. He continued to demarcate science from religion and worldview, as evident in his use and defence of empirical science as well as his objections to modern esoteric spiritist interpretations of spiritual life and Indian philosophy.[23] In a series of books and popular pieces, Hartmann reiterated his critique of occultism in general and theosophy in particular. First, it weakens ethical life and solidarity through its individualistic eudaemonic pursuit of the afterlife and its fatalistic, quietist conception of retributive karma. Karma is misused to justify inaction in response to suffering, an issue explored in Ichikawa Hakugen 市川白弦 and recent Japanese critical Buddhism. Second, while it helps to stimulate the investigation of paranormal empirical phenomena and expand our sense and conception of reality, such physical and psychological empirical inquiry cannot be satisfied by occult systems (Hartmann 1898, 23–24). Because of their conflicting interpretations of Indian philosophies, their meaning plays a pivotal role in the dispute between Hartmann and the theosophists. Note that here he should not be confused with Franz Hartmann, a theosophist and occultist active in publishing about Indian and Chinese philosophy during this same period.

As shown in this contribution, Hartmann upheld a modernistic rationalizing and secularizing Europeanization of the Buddhist *dharma* as a psychological and symbolic system (which prefigured later Jungian interpretive strategies) and as an exemplary practical model for (if not the final form of, as it required reform and renewal through threads from German idealism) a panpneumatic (impersonal and non-theistic) yet activist and autonomous "religion of the future". In Schopenhauer as in Hartmann, religion was understood as a popularized symbolic expression of philosophy, and "pantheism" (that is, the identity of God and nature) was understood conditionally as a religious image for a higher conceptual truth of the immanent or internal non-dualistic unity of all things.[24] Hartmann's ethical, psychological, and symbolic interpretation of religion—based on his view of religion as a form of preconscious philosophy and his concept of the unconscious oneness of nature—led him into contact and conflict with contemporary esoteric, spiritist, and occult discourses and their adaptation of Indian philosophies (Hartmann 1885b; 1891; 1898).

23 Note that Hartmann's "esoteric" Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Christianity signified their early genuine philosophical teachings while he disputed "esoteric" as spiritist secret teachings.

24 Both Schopenhauer and Hartmann used the expression "pantheism" to express the ultimate unity of things, though they at times quibbled with the inclusion of "theism" in it.

Theosophists and esoteric spiritists were initially sympathetic to Hartmann's psychological-symbolic explanation of religious expressions, as they would later be in a parallel manner with Jung's symbolism in the 20th-century. An elemental and universal unconscious suggested new ways to discuss the universality of the supernatural within the natural. However, Hartmann repeatedly and publicly rejected popular spiritist discourses, as an optimistic enthusiastic dream of magically conquering and dominating the inexorable forces of nature and life, including their adaptation of Buddhist and other Indian philosophies. In contrast, and in continuity with Schopenhauer, he maintained a modernizing and secularizing hermeneutics of Buddhism and other global religious philosophies as symbolic and ethical systems that overly literal readings naively undermined.

Hartmann's interpretation of the Buddhist *dharma* is primarily as an ethical way of life, whereas theosophy stressed the laws of punitive karma and reincarnation. Hartmann's critique of the theosophist Alfred Percy Sinnett's "Esoteric Buddhism" (Hartmann 1885a, 179–206) addressed modern European esoteric "secret teachings", and not Indian mysticism or tantric or Vajrayana "esoteric Buddhism". Theosophy failed to perceive the pivotal role of negation and negativity in Buddhist teachings and how the redemption of *nirvāṇa* is negative and indirect rather than a positive and direct "gnosis" or mystical intuition. Anticipating Freud's writings on civilization and religion more than Jung's optimism on this point, mystical gnosis consists of a feeling of absorbed immersion and the reign of fantasy and dream, full of magical and supernatural powers, unchecked by empirical reality and moral responsibility (Hartmann 1885a, 179–80).

Hartmann's point differs from the intuitionism and irrationalism commonly ascribed to him. In this debate, he specifically contested the spiritist prioritization of the "positivity" of unmediated intuition and its rejection of the discursive and conceptual intellectuality and mediation of all perception. Kant proposed the intellectuality of perception in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hegel demonstrated the mediation of sense-certainty and sense-perception in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. An unmediated empirical or spiritual given or truth is an abstract illusion. Religion cannot circumvent the constitutive conditions of perception and cognition, nor can it ignore empirically and rationally based analysis of the unconscious by fleeing into the reification of a positive absolute. But the fundamental difference between Hartmann and theosophy, or the secret doctrine as its adherents called it, concerned the primacy of negativity vis-à-vis the fixated and limited positivity that leads mysticism into self-contradiction (ibid., 202):

> But while Buddhism and the Sankhya doctrine are pure pessimism, knowing only a negative salvation and only a temporary contrastive pleasure of the redeemed, the Secret Doctrine, with Vedanta philosophy, assumes, in addition to contrastive pleasure, a positive bliss of union with Brahma… (Ibid., 201)

In contrast to the later image of a right-wing Schellingian mystic, Hartmann favoured the cool, dry analytic detachment he attributed to Buddhism to the enthusiastic intuitive absorption he ascribed to mysticism and occultism. In response, theosophist intellectuals challenged Hartmann's philosophy as misguided and incomplete, while appropriating its anti-materialism. Its founder, Helena Blavatsky, attributed "agnostic despair" to Schopenhauer and Hartmann. Moreover, their pessimism insufficiently broke with modern materialism and scientism. She rejected their explanations of karma, *nirvāṇa*, and *mokṣa* as merely negative and intellectualistic.[25] Even when Blavatsky accepted Hartmann's critique of mechanistic Darwinism, he remained a "purely negative thinker" who failed to recognize that the unconscious was in fact the "Cosmic Logos of Occultism" (Blavatsky 1893, 685).[26]

Tensions remained with subsequent theosophical intellectuals. Most notably, Rudolf Steiner praised Hartmann's work while rejecting its perceived limitations in his earlier academic and later anthroposophical writings. The young Steiner developed his concept of individual freedom in critical dialogue with Hartmann's pessimism and impersonal unconscious. He dedicated his 1892 *Truth and Knowledge: Prelude to a Philosophy of Freedom* to Hartmann and was disappointed by his reserved response. The young Steiner remarked elsewhere that Goethe's natural-scientific worldview "must be reconciled with the most significant scientific phenomenon of our time, with the views of Ed. von Hartmann. This thinker's philosophy of the unconscious is a work of the greatest historical significance" (Steiner 1926, 173).

During his publication of the theosophical journal *Lucifer-Gnosis*, Steiner still praised Hartmann's character and the relatively expansive scope of his philosophy, while criticizing his inability to understand Sinnett's book and his stereotyped prejudices against spiritual research and the esoteric and mystical reciprocity of nature and spirit.[27] Later, Steiner explained the fates of Hartmann, Nietzsche, and other historical figures through karmic reincarnation.

Hartmann's Monistic *Daodejing*

Under the influence of the newly emergent understanding of mysticism as religious experience, and the popularity of theosophy and esoteric spiritism, in 1870 the aristocratic literati Viktor von Strauss and Reinhold von Plänckner published

25 Blavatsky (1893, 165, 318) and Blavatsky (1897, 398–400). Karma signifies the results of character across one life for Schopenhauer and Hartmann, and the law of retribution across many lives in theosophy.

26 Hartmann rejected Darwin's theory of natural selection for organicist and vitalistic teleological reasons. He favored a developmental-teleological account of the evolution of the unconscious, without an ultimate purpose or absolute *telos*, in Hartmann (1875b).

27 See Steiner's 1906 obituary of Hartmann in *Lucifer-Gnosis* (Steiner 1960, 245–61).

the first two German translations of the *Daodejing*. Both editions are in part responses to the 1842 French translation produced by Stanislas Julien, which Plänckner claimed motivated him to learn Chinese to produce this alternative rendition. A military officer who engaged in astronomical and classical Chinese studies, Plänckner sought affinities and links between monotheism and classical Chinese thought, publishing German translations of the *Daodejing*, the *Daxue* 大學, and the *Zhongyong* 中庸.

Hartmann's practice of intercultural hermeneutics can be further illustrated by his 1870 essay on the *Daodejing*, in which he expressed its kinship with the monistic pantheism of Spinoza and Hegel. In the late 19th-century German-speaking world, the image of China was shaped by a hybrid mixture of Orientalist enthusiasm, colonial ambitions, and anxieties about the "yellow menace"—an image popularized in Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm II—endangering "occidental civilization". The concept of religious lived experience (*Erlebnis*), developed earlier in the century by Friedrich Schleiermacher as a category that characterized Christianity as the highest expression of the intersection between individual interiority and God's infinity, was extended into a global concept of the scientific study of religious, mythical, and mystical experience.

As examined earlier, Hartmann proposed a post-theistic self-redemptive religion of the future along with an impersonal eudaemonic pessimism. He wrote of the new translation of the *Daodejing* in relation to pessimism, the unconscious, and religious experience. Hartmann's strategy of interconnecting religious lived experience, the universality of the unconscious, and the pre-cognitive psychological formation of the symbolic gave a "modern form" to ancient teachings that expanded but did not contradict natural science and cultural modernity.

Hartmann understood the *Daodejing* as a work that united mystical-contemplative interiority with a cosmic monism or pantheism: the unity of the human and divine, of Heaven and Earth, is immanently present here below. It does not need recourse to the figure of Christ or any concept of sin, punishment, and (unconditional, non-contrastive) redemption (Hartmann 1875a, 175–76). Purified perception is not unmediated positive intuition. It embraces the whole through the negation of the merely sensuously real and its desires and passions. The negational not or the nothing (*wu* 無) are pivotal to genuine concrete monism in contrast to its abstract forms. In addition, the Daoist cycle of nature, of birth and death, is not a form of mere mechanical naturalism in Hartmann's account. Using Hegel's categories, the *Dao* of earth or nature that can be named is only *Dao* in its externalization; it is not the eternal monistic *Dao* in which the particular and the whole are mutually intuited and embraced in love (ibid., 177).

Regarding the ethics of the *Daodejing*, it teaches calm and composed reticence in practical activity without passive quietism or ascetic mortification. Beginning

with the king, whose exemplary virtue is a model for others, love is the highest virtue as it extends from the local to the cosmic. Hartmann contrasts this noble and altruistic social ethics with the limited self-interested materialism of the masses (ibid., 180–81). Daoism does not imply relying on the spontaneity of the people, as in German anarchistic interpretations two decades later (such as the Hart brothers or Martin Buber), but instead motivating and directing them through virtue that aims at the good. Nature, the society, and the good are necessarily developmental and hierarchical for Hartmann.

The ethics and politics of the *Daodejing* are described as an impersonal world-embracing love (virtue, *de* 德) and tolerance (apparently *wuwei* 無為), since "the words and actions of people should be as unrestricted as possible" and the people should "act of their own accord" (ibid., 181). Hartmann, a supporter of activist idealism and the Bismarckian state, criticized the *Daodejing* in this spirit for being overly idealistic concerning the realities of politics and war as well as not appreciating the necessary military, political, and economic activity of the state.

Hartmann rejected Plänckner's theistic explications of the text such as *Dao* signifying a personal creator. He argued that it is textually inconsistent, since chapters 25 and 52 express one impersonal monistic reality: *Dao* "is the eternal womb of becoming, the root of existence" (ibid., 172). Whereas Plänckner found personal immortality in the *Daodejing*, Hartmann claimed that there is only an impersonal cosmic cycle of life and death without either a personal afterlife or reincarnation (ibid., 173). To this extent, as active and impersonal, Daoism is superior to Christianity and Buddhism that can fall into the illusory quest for individual salvation (ibid., 173, 182). Nonetheless, despite this initial enthusiasm, Daoism did not appear in Hartmann's subsequent works. Christianity and Buddhism—with their dramas of suffering and altruistic love and their perils of false positivity and individual transcendence—remained his principal exemplars.

Conclusion

Echoing, to some extent, interpretations of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as emptying and negating without reversion to substantialization or affirmation, Hartmann defined genuine Buddhism as accepting nothingness without substantializing it as absolute or positive. At the same time, neither authentic Buddhism nor pessimism should entail quietist acquiescence or nihilistic annihilation, but rather, through the path of negation, composed practical activity in the midst of the contradictoriness and suffering of existence.[28] Rooted in the negation of suffering (*duḥkha*), the Buddhist ethics of impersonal altruistic love (loving-kindness, generosity,

28 The identification of Buddhism, pessimism, and ascetic quietism continued in later philosophers (such as, with the addition of "bourgeois resignation", Lukács 1962, 68, 267).

and compassion) of the other is its genuine core. The suffering of the world demands acting in solidarity with others for Hartmann. Compassion and ethics do not emerge from an abstract negation or nothingness, but from the immanent self-generated negation of the positivity or reality of suffering and unjust life. *Nirvāṇa* therefore expresses a negative ethics. It consists of a negation as a suspension and an altered comportment within the suffering of life. In Hartmann's negational philosophy, the pessimistic recognition of the constitutive fact of suffering, as realized by the Buddha, is vital to responding to it and leading an engaged and meaningful life. The real question is one of disposition and character in the face of the contradictoriness of reality with its undeniable misery, injustice, and death that constitutes the truth of pessimism.

In contrast to the ostensive passive quietist facets of Buddhism, as he construed it, this reality required a heroic and tragic sense of conflict and struggle given the inevitability of death. His thought differs from Hegel in denying the moment of dialectical reconciliation, and from Max Stirner and Nietzsche (who he considered a plagiarist of Stirner) in rejecting their egoism and individualism. The active struggle for well-being and progress (eudaimonism) requires heroic pessimism as its condition and is best approached negatively. Anticipating the later revival of virtue ethics, Hartmann differentiated his own qualified eudaimonism from hedonism and utilitarianism, its reductive optimistic forms that lack an adequate sense of loyalty, courage, community, and character in the midst of the struggles of life. However, unlike varieties of the modern revival of virtue ethics, Hartmann emphasized the Kantian cultivation of autonomy and an impersonal universalizing disposition. This attitude was historically best expressed for him in Buddhist and Kantian ethics due to their atheistic religiosity and repudiation of individual happiness for the sake of all.

Hartmann's influence began to wane before his death, and today his "Prussian Buddhism" is mostly forgotten. Despite this, his interpretive strategies presaged and informed the agenda for early 20th-century interpretations of cross-cultural religious and mystical experiences. This agenda remained operative in the writings of Richard Wilhelm and Carl Jung, who drew inspiration from Hartmann's philosophy of the unconscious and developed their own versions of symbolic interpretation—notably with the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (*Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi* 太乙金華宗旨)—grounded on an interpretation of unconscious structures and forces.

Given the continuing popularity of secularized symbolic interpretations of global religions and philosophies, particularly through the works of Wilhelm and Jung, it is worth revisiting Hartmann's earlier model of grounding symbolism in the forces of a collective unconscious. In his case, the psychological-symbolic model expresses an endeavor to expand cultural and scientific modernity without breaking with it. In this context, and in contrast to the Chinese and "mystical" sources

preferred by Wilhelm and Jung, translated Theravāda Buddhist sources served an exemplary role in Hartmann's works due to their perceived modernity, rationality, and Protestant-like minimalism and simplicity. Such hermeneutical interests, which are not *a priori* correct or incorrect, are not unfamiliar in modernizing readings of Theravāda, Madhyamaka, or Chan/Zen Buddhism. Likewise, Buddhist discourses and practices are more complexly mediated than narratives that oppose autosoteric self- and heterosoteric other-power suggest.

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ASIAN STUDIES IN SLOVENIA

Mo Di in pacifistični humanizem univerzalne ljubezni

*Jana S. ROŠKER**

Izvleček

Prvi in najznamenitejši predstavnik moistične šole, filozof Mo Di 墨翟 (479–390 pr. n. št.), je v svojih teoretskih zasnovah prevzel ter priredil številne ideje konfucijanske doktrine, čeprav sta bili obe šoli po letu 350 pr. n. št. zelo kritični druga do druge. Obe filozofski šoli sta izšli iz kulturnega in političnega konteksta države Lu, kjer je tradicija pacifizma že od samega nastanka idejnih diskurzov naprej poudarjala moralni imperativ človečnosti, empatije in obsodbe agresivnih vojn. Kljub poznejšemu razhajanju sta oba ustanovitelja in najpomembnejša predstavnika teh dveh šol, torej Mo Di in Konfucij, cenila etično vladanje, utemeljeno na zaslugah in moralni kompetenci; vendar pa je Mo Dijev pacifizem oblikovan veliko bolj sistematično in radikalno kot Konfucijev. Pričujoči esej preučuje njegovo idejo *feigong* 非攻 (»proti napadalni vojni«), ki predstavlja eno najzgodnejših in najizrecnejših zavrnitev agresivne vojaške ekspanzije v klasični kitajski filozofiji.

Ključne besede: Mo Di, moistična šola, pacifizem, »univerzalna ljubezen«, »nepristranska skrb«, »proti napadalni vojni«

Mo Di and the Pacifist Humanism of Universal Love

Abstract

The first and most renowned representative of the Mohist school, the philosopher Mo Di 墨翟 (479–390 BCE), adopted and adapted numerous ideas from the Confucian doctrine in his theoretical framework, even though the two schools became highly critical of each other after 350 BCE. Both philosophical traditions arose from the cultural and political context of the state of Lu, where a pacifist tradition had, from the very beginning of intellectual discourse, emphasized the moral imperative of humanity, empathy, and the condemnation of aggressive wars. Despite their later divergence, the founders and leading figures of these two schools—Mo Di and Confucius—both valued ethical governance grounded in merit and moral competence. Mo Di's pacifism, however, is formulated far more systematically and radically than that of Confucius. This essay examines his concept of *feigong* 非攻 ("against offensive war"), which represents one of the earliest and most explicit rejections of aggressive military expansion in classical Chinese philosophy.

Keywords: Mo Di, Mohist school, pacifism, "universal love," "impartial care," "against offensive war"

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Ozadje, recepcija in pomen za sodobnost

Mo Di 墨翟 (ok. 479–390 pr. n. št.), znan tudi kot Mozi (Mojster Mo, 墨子), je bil ustanovitelj moistične šole (oz. moizma, 墨家), enega osrednjih intelektualnih gibanj zgodnje kitajske misli v obdobju vojskujočih se držav.

Moizem sicer nikoli ni dosegel trajne prevlade ali ortodoksije, vrhunec svojega vpliva pa je doživel v 4. in 3. stoletju pr. n. št. – v tem obdobju se z nobeno drugo filozofsko šolo niso ukvarjali širše.

Na njegov ugled kažejo tudi sodobni kritiki: Mencij 孟子je potožil, da »besede Mo Dija 墨翟杨朱 in Yanga Zhuja 杨朱 polnijo svet« (Wang 2023, 298), medtem ko se je Xunzi 荀子 precej trudil, da bi ovrgel moistične ekonomske ideje.

Čeprav je v konfucijansko osredinjenih zgodovinah kitajske misli pogosto marginaliziran, je moizem postavil velik del temeljev zgodnje kitajske epistemologije, logike, politične teorije in etike. Njegove ideje so bile ključen spodbujevalni dejavnik za poznejše mislece – vključno z Mencijem, Xunzijem, daoisti in legalisti –, ki so bodisi prevzeli moistične koncepte bodisi razvili lastna stališča kot neposreden odziv nanje.

Zgovoren pokazatelj ugleda moistov je verjetno dejstvo, da so jih kritiki pogosto združevali s konfucijanci (*ru jia* 儒家) pod skupnim imenom *Ru-Mo* 儒墨. Obe šoli sta bili namreč v enaki meri posvečeni iskanju moralnih idealov, kot sta *ren* 仁 (človečnost) in *yi* 义 (pravičnost). Toda predstavniki konfucijanske doktrine so moistom najbolj zamerili vzpostavljanje in razvijanje njihovega osrednjega koncepta, ki je temeljil na ideji vsestranske moralne skrbi oz. naklonjenosti in so ga izrazili s terminom »univerzalna ljubezen« (*jian'ai* 兼爱).

Vpliv te zamere je viden v Mencijevi argumentaciji, naravnani proti razširitvi »naravne« vzajemne naklonjenosti družinskih članov na vse ljudi, in postane še bolj očiten v poznejših besedilih. In vendar se vse do poznega obdobja vojskujočih se držav tudi v konfucijanskih delih še vedno pojavljajo moistično navdihnjeni izrazi, povezani s humanizmom in ljubeznijo ter skrbjo do sočloveka. V dinastiji Han 汉 (206–220 pr. n. št.) je konfucijanski učenjak Gongsun Hong 公孙弘 celo odkrito opredelil *ren* 仁 (tj. konfucijansko »človečnost«) v izrazito moističnih terminih, kot na primer »širjenje koristi in odstranjevanje škode, vseobsegajoča skrb brez pristranskosti«.

Tako kot Konfucij se je tudi Mo Di rodil in živel v državi Lu in naj bi izhajal iz nižjih družbenih slojev; morda je bil izurjen kot obrtnik ali vojaški inženir. Ta obrtniška, z razvojem ročnih in fizičnih veščin povezana izobrazba se odraža tudi v praktični ter tehnični usmerjenosti moistične filozofije. V odzivu na obrednost konfucijanstva in na moralni relativizem nastajajočega političnega realizma je Mo Di razvil celovit sistem mišljenja, osredotočen na koristnost, meritokracijo ter univerzalna moralna načela.

Moistična šola je poudarjala stroge etične norme ter zagovarjala doktrine, kot so nepristranska skrb in naklonjenost do vseh ljudi, obsodba napadalne vojne in spoštovanje moralno ozaveščenih ljudi. Kreposti, ki so jih zagovarjali predstavniki te šole, so bile utemeljene v njihovem prepričanju v obstoj objektivnih moralnih standardov, ki so bili dostopni prek razuma in opazovanja. Za razliko od številnih šol tistega obdobja je moizem močno poudarjal družbeni red, varčnost in pragmatično vladanje, pri čemer je svoje argumente pogosto predstavljal v jasnih, z argumenti utemeljenih besedilih, ki so bila konkretna in niso vsebovala nikakršnih aforističnih ali poetičnih elementov. Moisti so razvili tudi zgodnjo obliko logike in epistemologije ter na ta način pomembno prispevali k tehnični in znanstveni misli. Kljub razmeroma zgodnjemu zatonu te šole, do katerega je prišlo po združitvi Kitajske pod prevlado dinastije Qin 秦, si je moistična šola v kitajski idejni tradiciji pridobila sloves ene najbolj sistematičnih in družbeno angažiranih tradicij klasične kitajske filozofije.

V obdobju dinastije Han je ta zelo zanimiva in posebna filozofska šola skoraj povsem izginila. Kljub temu so posamezni izobraženci poznejših obdobij, kot je konfucijanski dvorni ideolog Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, vedno znova prevzemali določene moistične ideje ter jih poskušali vključiti v lastne sisteme etike in kozmologije.

V času kulturne prenove, ki jo je sprožilo gibanje četrtega maja v Republiki Kitajski, je moizem za nekaj časa pritegnil večje zanimanje t. i. novih intelektualcev, ki so v njem videli kitajsko različico krščanstva. Danes pa je, kot je bilo že omenjeno, moizem na Kitajskem pomemben predvsem zaradi svojih epistemoloških in logičnih temeljev. Te so izgradili t. i. pozni moisti (*houqi Mojia* 後期墨家), tj. učenci in nasledniki Mo Dija, pa tudi predstavniki šole imen oz. nomenalistov (*Ming jia* 名家). Teorije poznih moistov so zbrane v osrednjem kanonu moistične šole *Mozi* 墨子 (zlasti v poglavjih 40–45). Šlo je za filozofe, ki sicer niso bili neposredni mojstrovi učenci, vendar so sprejeli bistvene vidike njegove doktrine. Najpomembnejši med njimi so bili Xiang Fuzi 項夫子, Xiang Lizi 項李子 in Deng Lingzi 鄧陵子. Vsak od njih je zastopal ali obravnaval različne vidike Mo Dijevih teorij. Ustanovili so tri šole, ki so bile večinoma v medsebojnem sporu, pri čemer se je vsaka razglašala za edino pravo naslednico mojstrovih naukov. Tako lahko v *Han Feiziju* 韩非子 preberemo naslednji komentar:

> Po smrti Mojstra Mozija so ostale šole Xiang Lija, Xiang Fuja in Deng Linga. Tako se je po Konfuciju in Mo Diju konfucijanska šola razdelila na osem, moistična pa na tri tokove. Njihove usmeritve so bile različne in pogosto vzajemno nasprotujoče si, pa vendar je vsaka zase trdila, da je edina prava naslednica konfucijanstva ali moizma. (Han Feizi n. d., »Xian xue«, 1)

自墨子之死也, 有相里氏之墨, 有相夫氏之墨, 有鄧陵氏之墨, 故孔墨之後, 儒分為八, 墨離為三, 取捨相反不同, 而皆謂真孔墨.

Mo Di in moistična šola sta – morda prav zaradi že omenjenega vpliva na novo politično levico v 19. in 20. stoletju – na Zahodu najpogosteje znana po svoji etiki, ki se v kitajskem kontekstu pogosto zdi nekoliko idiosinkratična. Glavni predstavnik šole Mo Di je bil zelo pomemben tudi kot eden od pionirjev specifične kitajske epistemologije. V svojih jezikoslovnih študijah, v katerih je izhajal iz domneve o odsotnosti jasne razlike med resničnostjo in njenim jezikovnim poimenovanjem, je razvil specifičen sistem kitajske logike.

Enako pomembno pa je njegovo radikalno etično nasprotovanje vojni. Mo Dijeva doktrina *feigong* 非攻 (»proti napadalnemu vojskovanju«) ni bila le politično stališče, temveč hkrati tudi idejni temelj njegove moralne filozofije. Vojaško agresijo je obsojal kot krivično, nerazumno in nasprotujočo blaginji ljudstva, pri čemer je poudarjal vrednote miru, družbenega reda in univerzalnih moralnih obveznosti. V tej luči je njegova etika izrazito praktično usmerjena v zmanjševanje človeškega trpljenja z nepristranskim vladanjem in moralno doslednostjo. Takšna zavezanost pacifizmu, ki je tesno povezana z doktrino *jian'ai* (»univerzalna ljubezen« oz. »nepristranska skrb«), je v nasprotju z bolj hierarhično in na ritualu zasnovano konfucijansko etiko, s katero moizem deli tako zgodovinski kontekst kot številna pojmovna izhodišča. Primerjava obeh šol nam zato lahko razkrije tako pomembna prekrivanja kot ostre razlike v njunih pristopih k morali, družbi in vladanju.

Etična razhajanja v konfucijanski in moistični misli

Moistični in konfucijanski učenjaki so izšli iz kulturnega ter političnega konteksta države Lu, kjer je tradicija pacifizma poudarjala moralno zadržanost, obsodbo krivičnega nasilja in ideal vladanja, utemeljenega na etični vrlini, ne na prisili moči. Ta tradicija je spodbujala prepričanje, da je treba družbeno harmonijo doseči z empatijo, človečnim vedenjem in kultivacijo moralnega značaja, ne pa s silo ali dominacijo. Obe šoli sta izražali izrecen interes za teorijo države in politike ter sta bili v kitajski družbi približno enako vplivni vsaj do 3. stoletja pr. n. št.

Toda četudi sta obe zagovarjali humanizem, sta vendarle izhajali iz različnih pojmovnih temeljev: Konfucijeva človečnost (*ren* 仁) je utemeljena v družbi, medtem ko je Mo Dijev pojem univerzalne ljubezni oz. nepristranske skrbi (*jian'ai*) odvisen od božanske ideje Neba (*Tian* 天) in ima izrazito religiozen značaj.[1]

1 Eno najbolj znanih kritik moistične šole in Mo Dija kot njenega utemeljitelja je mogoče najti pri klasičnem konfucijancu Menciju, ki ideje tega filozofa (skupaj z idejami izjemno protiortodoksnega Yang Zhuja 杨朱) ostro zavrača kot heretične misli, ki so daleč od sočlovečnosti (*ren*), saj

Mo Di je bil prepričan, da Nebo kot vrhovno božanstvo ljudem ponuja tak pojem pravičnosti, ki se lahko uresničuje le skozi radikalno in vseprisotno ljubezen med vsemi ljudmi.

Filozofsko gledano so bile moistične predstave o aktivnem in vplivnem Nebu seveda popolnoma nezdružljive s konfucijansko doktrino, ki je bila v tem pogledu precej fatalistična; njena predanost usodi se odraža v konceptu *ming* 命, tj. v usodi oz. v objektivnem določilu posameznikovega življenja. Moisti so menili, da ima vsak človek pravico in dolžnost, da postane gospodar svoje lastne usode, četudi je vsakdo po svoji naravi podrejen moralnim omejitvam »volje Neba« (*tian ming* 天命). Iz tega božanskega odloka naj bi ljudje črpali aktivno energijo za vse svoje dejavnosti.

V tem kontekstu so moisti uvedli pojem, ki je bil drugim tradicionalnim kitajskim ideologijam povsem tuj: gre za pojem koristi (*li* 利), ki je povezan s strogo zavezanostjo načelu utilitarizma. Utemeljili so tudi načeli zmernosti (*jie* 節) in varčnosti (*jian* 儉), ki bi morala po njihovem mnenju postati ena najpomembnejših družbenih norm, zlasti glede na razširjeno bedo ter revščino med najširšimi sloji prebivalstva. Moisti so verjeli, da je vse, česar ljudje ne potrebujejo za preživetje, odvečno ali celo škodljivo, in to tudi za višje sloje. Tudi v tem pogledu so bili v sporu z zagovorniki konfucijanske doktrine, ki je vedno poudarjala pomembnost obredov: moisti so, denimo, izrecno zavračali drage in dolgotrajne konfucijanske pogrebe, saj naj bi po nepotrebnem zmanjševali produktivno moč prebivalstva, ostro pa so kritizirali tudi vse razkošje, lepa in draga oblačila ter nakit, prenajedanje z dobro hrano in celo glasbo, ki je v konfucijanskem obredju igrala ključno vlogo.

Tako v klasičnem moističnem delu *Mojster Mo* (*Mozi* 墨子), ki povzema nauke Mo Dija in njegovih naslednikov, najdemo célo poglavje, ki zelo podrobno razlaga neuporabnost in škodljivost vse glasbe (glej »Fei yue«, Mozi VIII n. d.). Poglavje se začne s pojasnilom razlogov, zaradi katerih naj bi bila glasba škodljiva za človeštvo:

> Zato tisto, kar Mojster Mozi kritizira pri glasbi, ni to, da zvoki velikih zvonov, zvenečih bobnov, lutnje in citer, panovske piščali in orglic ne bi bili prijetni; niti to, da izrezljani in okrašeni vzorci na inštrumentih ne bi bili lepi; niti to, da okusi pečenega in žganega mesa ne bi bili okusni; niti to, da visoki stolpi, prostorni paviljoni in odmaknjene

zagovarjajo bodisi egoizem (Yang Zhu) bodisi nediferencirano ljubezen do vseh v enaki meri (Mo Di) (Chang 2021, 204). Tovrstna kritika Yang Zhuja in Mo Dija je v poznejših virih postala ustaljen retorični vzorec, s katerim so konfucijanski učenjaki oblikovali podobo pogumnega, moralnega človeka v nasprotju z njegovimi nevarnimi in problematičnimi nasprotniki. Mencij je predstavljal prvega, Yang in Mo Di pa slednje. Vsekakor je bila takšna upodobitev obeh filozofov v vsebinskem pogledu zelo skopa in negativna (Defoort 2020, 242).

> rezidence ne bi bili udobni za bivanje. Četudi telo pozna njihovo udobje, usta njihovo sladkost, oči njihovo lepoto in ušesa njihovo radost, pa vendar vemo, če jih presojamo objektivno, da vse to ne ustreza prizadevanjem modrih kraljev. In ko vse to presojamo od spodaj, torej z vidika družbe, kaj lahko sprevidimo, nič od tega ne koristi množici ljudstva. Zato Mojster Mozi pravi: ‚Ustvarjati in izvajati glasbo – to ni prav.' (Mozi s. d., VIII: 1)

> 是故子墨子之所以非樂者，非以大鍾、鳴鼓、琴瑟、竽笙之聲，以為不樂也；非以刻鏤華文章之色，以為不美也；非以犓豢煎炙之味，以為不甘也；非以高臺厚榭邃野之居，以為不安也。雖身知其安也，口知其甘也，目知其美也，耳知其樂也，然上考之不中聖王之事，下度之不中萬民之利。是故子墨子曰：「為樂，非也。」

V konfucijanstvu pa je bila prav glasba eden bistvenih elementov državnih obredov ter je zato vedno igrala zelo pomembno vlogo kot eden osrednjih dejavnikov »pravilne« socializacije in kultivacije osebnosti, ki posameznika vodita k človečnosti (*ren* 仁) in mu omogočata, da prispeva k harmoniji celotne družbe.

Čeprav imata konfucijanstvo in moizem skupne korenine v tradiciji države Lu, se močno razhajata tudi v pogledih na duhove, prikazni in demone. Konfucijanstvo je do takih verovanj pristopalo z obrednim spoštovanjem, vendar je ohranjalo predvsem agnostično držo, medtem ko je moizem izhajal iz vere v njihov resnični obstoj in v njih videl neke vrste moralne razsodnike, ki podpirajo etično vedenje ter odvračajo od prestopkov.

Za razliko od konfucijanskih klasikov moistična besedila vsebujejo številne opise različnih duhov in demonov. Mo Di je v preprostih daritvah in češčenju teh bitij videl zelo priročno orodje za vzgojo ljudi v spoštovanju in poslušnosti.

> Od tod dalje se je svet zapletel v nemir. Zakaj je temu tako? Vse to izvira iz zmedenosti ljudi glede razlikovanja med tem, ali duhovi in bogovi obstajajo ali ne, ter iz nerazumevanja dejstva, da lahko ti duhovi nagrajujejo vredne in kaznujejo nasilneže. Če bi zdaj vse ljudi pod Nebom pripravili do tega, da bi skupno verjeli, da duhovi in bogovi zmorejo nagraditi vredne ter kaznovati nasilne, bi bil svet zagotovo urejen. (Mozi VIII s. d., Ming gui xia: 1)

> 由此始，是以天下亂。此其故何以然也？則皆以疑惑鬼神之有與無之別，不明乎鬼神之能賞賢而罰暴也。今若使天下之人，偕若信鬼神之能賞賢而罰暴也，則夫天下豈亂哉！

Poleg tega je treba duhove spoštovati, kajti z nezemeljskimi pojavi se ni dobro poigravati. Včasih pa med vrsticami v *Mojstru Moju* najdemo tudi namig, da takšno čaščenje ni prav nič škodljivo – četudi duhovi morda sploh ne obstajajo.

Toda verjetno je najgloblje etično razhajanje med konfucijanstvom in moizmom najti v njunih – zelo različnih – pojmovanjih ljubezni. Medtem ko konfucijanstvo postavlja v ospredje človečnost (*ren* 仁) kot hierarhično, na družbenih vlogah temelječo naklonjenost, ki se širi od družine navzven, moizem ta model zavrača in namesto njega vzpostavlja doktrino univerzalne ljubezni oz. nepristranske skrbi (*jian'ai*), ki vztraja pri moralnem načelu, po katerem mora biti skrb za vse posameznike, ne glede na sorodstvo ali družbeni položaj, enaka.

Mo Dijev pacifizem

Kanonično delo *Mozi* je zbirka razprav, ki se osredotočajo predvsem na etiko in epistemologijo, hkrati pa vključujejo predznanstvene teorije iz matematike, fizike, mehanike in optike. Kljub širokemu razponu tem je njegov avtor Mo Di najbolj znan po svoji etični in pacifistični filozofiji.

Mo Di je v moralnih naukih dajal prednost introspekciji, samorefleksiji in pristnosti pred ritualno okrepljeno poslušnostjo. Opazil je, da je stiska ljudi tista, ki jih lahko marsikaj nauči in obogati njihovo izkustvo; z razmislekom o lastnih izkušnjah pa lahko človek doseže pristno samospoznanje, ki presega površni konformizem. To stremljenje po pristnosti je Mo Dija vodilo k zagovarjanju asketskega življenja in samoomejevanja ter k zavračanju tako materialnih kot tudi duhovnih presežkov.

Mo Dijev sistem je zanimiv tudi z vidika kontrastivne študije zahodnih in starokitajskih idejnih sistemov. Njegov nauk, zlasti ideološka osnova njegove etike, ki determinira položaj človeka v družbi in naravi, v marsikaterem pogledu spominja na krščanstvo. Tudi če upoštevamo dejstvo, da se je renesančni humanizem razvil kot upor proti dogmatizmu krščanske sholastike, ki je človeka postavila v ozadje v razmerju do Boga in mu odrekala avtonomijo, Mo Dija ne moremo uvrstiti med filozofe, ki bi zagovarjali podobno dogmatično obliko religioznosti. Danes se skoraj vsi teoretiki in teoretičarke strinjajo v tem, da je Mo Di razvil samosvojo različico kitajskega humanizma, ki je v marsičem podobna določenim oblikam sodobnega krščanskega humanizma.

Moistična etika je oblika konsekvencializma, ki presoja moralnost dejanj, politik in sodb izključno glede na njihove posledice. Še zlasti Mo Di je vselej izrecno poudarjal, da se vrednost vsakega človeškega dejanja meri po njegovem prispevku h koristi vseh članov družbe.

Mo Di je vojskovanje obsojal ne le kot napako, ki izhaja iz pretirano pragmatičnih politik vlade, temveč kot moralno grozodejstvo, ki povzroča trpljenje nedolžnih in razkraja etični red družbe. Trdil je, da noben vladar ne bi smel začeti vojne zaradi ozemeljskih pridobitev, prestiža ali maščevanja, temveč bi bilo treba vse vire usmeriti v blaginjo ljudstva. Medtem ko je bila konfucijanska etika utemeljena na obrednosti in vrednotah družinske skupnosti, je bila Mo Dijeva etika univerzalistična, saj je bilo v ospredju njegovih naukov načelo *jian'ai*, torej načelo »univerzalne ljubezni« oz. »nepristranske skrbi«. Tovrstna načela so tvorila osnovo za kritiko vseh praks, ki dajejo prednost ozkim lojalnostim pred potrebami širše človeške skupnosti. To je po Mo Dijevem mnenju še posebej veljalo za vojskovanje in agresivne, napadalne vojne. Njegova zavrnitev tovrstnih spopadov je bila zato neločljivo povezana z njegovo širšo vizijo pravične družbe, ki jo vodijo nepristranska moralna načela ter v kateri vladarji zasedajo položaje po meri svoje kompetentnosti in blagohotnosti.

V središču Mo Dijeve misli je torej obsodba agresivnega vojskovanja, saj je njegov idejni sistem kot celota usmerjen neposredno proti ekspanzionističnim vladnim politikam obdobja vojskujočih se držav. Takšne strategije Mo Di kritizira na dveh ravneh: prvič, zaradi njihovih praktičnih posledic, saj novačenja vojakov hromijo agrarno gospodarstvo; in drugič, zaradi njihove inherentne nemoralnosti, saj agresijo izenačuje z državno sankcioniranim ropom in umorom.

Mozi v tem pogledu izpostavlja očitno protislovje določenih utečenih praks, ki se kažejo v tem, da eni in isti vladarji zločine doma kaznujejo, medtem ko jih na meddržavni ravni tudi sami izvršujejo. Vzrok za to pripisuje pomanjkanju »univerzalne ljubezni«, zaradi katere vladarji drugih ne dojemajo kot moralno enakovredne. Mo Dijev konsekvencialistični argument je osnovan na predpostavki, po kateri bi odpoved agresiji iz univerzalne ljubezni prinesla vzajemno korist za vse države.

Stabilizacija družbenega reda in kultivacija kreposti *ren* (človečnosti) torej zahtevata izvajanje prakse nepristranske skrbi. To pomeni, da je treba izkazovati skrb za dobrobit drugih, tj. skrb za ohranjanje njihovih življenj, družin in skupnosti v enaki meri, kot jo gojimo do svojih bližnjih soljudi; zato bi moral, po Mo Dijevem mnenju, vsak posameznik, vsaka posameznica v svojem ravnanju dosledno izhajati iz težnje po tem, da doseže korist ne zgolj zase, temveč tudi za druge. Na tej etični podlagi ostro obsoja vsakovrstno vojaško agresijo. Takšno ravnanje je po *Moziju* moralno neopravičljivo iz istega razloga, kot sta neopravičljiva tatvina ali umor. Vsi tovrstni zločini so plod zasledovanja sebičnih prednosti posameznika ali posameznice, ki se ne ozira na to, da njegovo ali njeno ravnanje škoduje soljudem, torej Drugemu. Takšna ravnanja so obsojanja vredna, saj ne prinašajo nikakršne dejanske koristi družbi, Nebu in niti duhovom.

Sodobne interpretacije in vpliv

Zaradi svoje posebnosti in zanimivosti je moizem v 20. in 21. stoletju ponovno stopil v središče interesa akademskih analiz. Mo Dijevo filozofijo je nadgradil že Sun Jat-sen 孙中山, ki je svoj koncept kitajske demokracije utemeljil v moističnem idealu »univerzalne ljubezni«. Nekaj desetletij pozneje so v Ljudski republiki Kitajski marksistični teoretiki poskušati Mo Dija rehabilitirati tudi kot »filozofa ljudstva«, pri čemer so v ospredje postavili njegovo racionalno-empirično metodologijo in tudi njegovo poreklo iz nižjih slojev, ki je bilo v skladu s takrat prevladujočimi »proletarskimi« vrednotami.

Moizem je včasih razumljen kot nauk, ki je naprednejši od konfucijanstva, toda hkrati tudi bolj omejen. Moisti so delovali kot radikalni politični reformatorji, ki so si prizadevali koristiti ljudstvi in istočasno nasprotovati vladajoči ortodoksiji. Še posebej so bili kritični do razsipne aristokracije, ki so jo kritizirali kot nepravično »gospodo sveta«.

Njihov pojem »univerzalne ljubezni« je temeljil na bolj vključujočem modelu človeške skupnosti, kot je bil tisti, ki ga je vzpostavilo konfucijanstvo. Moisti so zato vztrajali pri tem, da je treba moralno skrb razširiti na vse ljudi. Zagovorniki konfucijanstva so tovrstna načela ostro kritizirali ter trdili, da pomenijo zavrnitev družinske lojalnosti, ki je osnova družbenega reda, in da obstajajo neizpodbitni dokazi za dejstvo, da so se zagnani moisti pogosto odmikali od konvencionalnih družinskih struktur, s čimer so zavestno razkrajali osnovno omrežje družbenega reda.

Kljub temu znanstvenice in znanstveniki še danes razpravljajo o dejanski radikalnosti »univerzalne ljubezni«, še posebej zato, ker so bili nekateri (manj radikalni) vidiki te doktrine pozneje vključeni v osrednje struje kitajskih miselnosti.

Moisti so k razvoju kitajskih filozofij prispevali več prelomnih dognanj: med drugim so razvili prve etične in politične teorije kitajske antike ter ustvarili najzgodnejšo obliko konsekvencializma v zgodovini. Toda čeprav so poskušali utemeljiti nepristranski, objektivno upravičen moralni kodeks, jim to ni v celoti uspelo. Vendar ostajajo tako njihovi uvidi kot njihovi neuspehi še do danes filozofsko pomembni. Njihova etična teorija ima opazne pomanjkljivosti, ki se kažejo v pogostem idealizmu, nepopolni razjasnitvi ločnice med napadalno in obrambno vojno, itd. A te pomanjkljivosti bi verjetno lahko odpravili, ne da bi zaradi tega razdrli osrednje ogrodje svojega etičnega sistema.

V času vztrajnih konfliktov, neenake porazdelitve virov in okrepljenega nacionalizma Mo Dijeva pacifistična filozofija ponuja presenetljivo sodoben okvir za mir. Njegova misel ni pomembna zgolj zaradi idealizma, ki ga vključuje, temveč tudi in predvsem zaradi pragmatično utemeljenega in globoko racionalnega nasprotovanja vojni.

Mo Dijevih naukov ne moremo zreducirati na pasivne prošnje za mir, saj ponujajo močan, racionalno utemeljen moralni izziv sami logiki osvajanja. Njegovo osrednje načelo »nepristranske skrbi« oz. »univerzalne ljubezni« je, da se mora naša moralna skrb razširiti onkraj družine, plemena ali naroda in zajeti vse človeštvo. V današnjem prepletenem svetu, kjer so izzivi, kot so podnebne spremembe, pandemije, neenakosti in gospodarska nestabilnost, globalni, torej v svetu, kjer smo na vsakem koraku soočeni z nevarnostjo uničevalnih vojn, je Mo Dijev poziv k razširjenemu in poglobljenemu moralnemu kodeksu še toliko bolj nujen. Naših skupnih, globalnih problemov namreč nikakor ne moremo reševati brez zavedanja dejstva, da smo vsi skupaj v istem čolnu, niti brez občutka skupne usode in vzajemne koristi.

Poleg tega je, kot smo videli, Mo Dijev pacifizem konsekvencialističen. Vojni je nasprotoval zaradi njenih uničujočih materialnih posledic: zaradi razdejanja gospodarstev, potrate virov in neizmernega trpljenja, ki ga militarizacija povzroča navadnim ljudem. Ta pragmatični argument je nadvse odmeven, saj zagotavlja utilitaristično kritiko vojaške porabe sredstev, ki bi jo sicer lahko usmerili v odpravljanje revščine, zdravstveno varstvo in izobraževanje.

Na koncu velja poudariti tudi dejstvo, da je *Mozijev* pomen prav v tem, da ponuja brezčasen, torej univerzalno veljaven načrt za svetovni mir. Mo Di trdi, da varnosti nikoli ne bomo dosegli s premočjo nasilnih strategij, temveč prej z osredotočanjem na vzajemno korist in sodelovanje. V svetu, ki se trenutno spopada prav s temi vprašanji, ostaja njegova filozofija prepričljiv poziv k temu, da naj ljudje težnje k hegemoniji končno nadomestimo s prakso univerzalne skrbi.

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