Philosophy Pizza: On the Possibility of Trans-Cultural Pizzas and/or Philosophy

*Dimitra AMARANTIDOU*, **Paul J. D’AMBROSIO**

Abstract

The history of pizza is shrouded in mystery. Competing interpretations of the exact origin, development, and even etymology are as diverse as pizzas themselves. What is certain, however, is that from various types of flatbread meals popular among soldiers and poor workers emerged some standards. Certain experts were then able to refine the process and carefully combine ingredients. The key to this tradition, as well as its popularity around the world, is found in the core elements developed by such *pizzaiolos*. But this has all changed, and contemporary pizza is no longer topped with whatever just happens to be available, as in the flatbreads of old. Nor does it have to adhere to the standards set forth by experts on taste. Today there are Hawaiian, chocolate, and even fruit pizzas. There are pizzas with cauliflower crust, smashed chicken “bread” and pizzas topped with 24 karat gold. And perhaps most importantly, customized pizzas—pizzas that are designed by the consumer with no regard for anything but their own momentary desires. We think this represents a twofold problem, in terms of both approach and of carrying on tradition, and also think comparative philosophy is just like pizza.

In this paper we will thus address these problems through proposing a conception of the trans-cultural that is linked to the art of pizza. Moreover, we expand the scope of diversification to include methodology. Based on methodological insights derived from Chinese tradition and contemporary Chinese scholarship, we argue that comparative philosophy as an art (*poiesis*) could be a welcome alternative which involves: respect for authority (tradition), trust in tested methods and recipes as conditions for creativity and originality, recognition of the philosophical import of style (form is content) and the significance of inspiration and mastery of skills.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, trans-cultural philosophy, Chinese philosophy, methodology, diversity

* Dimitra AMARANTIDOU, Shanghai Normal University. Email address: amarantidoud@126.com
** Paul J. D’AMBROSIO, East China Normal University. Email address: pauljdambrosio@hotmail.com
Pica filozofije: o možnostih transkulturnih pic in/ali filozofije

Izvleček

Zgodovina pice je ovita v skrivnosti. Nasprotujoče si razlage točnega izvora, razvoja in etimologije besede pica so tako številčne kot vrste pic. Gotovo pa je, da so se iz različnih tipov obrokov iz nizkega testa, ki so bili priljubljeni med vojaki in revnimi delavci, razvili določeni standardi. Določeni strokovnjaki so bili tako zmožni dodelati proces njene izdelave in razljivo izbrati njene sestavine. Tisto, kar je bilo ključno za razvoj te tradicije in njeno popularnost vsepdvsem po svetu, lahko najdemo v osrednjih gradnikih, ki so jih razvili takšni pizzaioli. Toda vse to se je tudi spremenilo; tako sodobne pice ne oblagamo več z vsemi sestavinami, ki jih imamo trenutno na voljo v kuhinji, kot so to počeli v preteklosti. Prav tako danasni pici ni treba slediti standardom, ki jih podajajo strokovnjaki na področju okusov. Danes imamo pice, kot so havajska, čokoladna in celo sadna. Obstajajo pice s skorjo iz cvetače, »kruh« z zmečkanim piščancem in pice, obložene s 24-karatnim zlatom; in morda najpomembnejše, pice po izbiri stranke – pice, ki jih zasnujejo stranke, ne zanašajo se na nič drugega kot na svoje trenutne želje. Menimo, da to predstavlja dvojni problem, tako v smislu pristopa kot nadaljevanja tradicije, ter da je primerjalna filozofija prav takšna kot pica.

V članku bova obravnavala te probleme s predlogom koncepta transkulturnosti, ki je povezan z umetnostjo izdelovanja pice. Poleg tega bova razširila okvir diverzifikacije, in sicer tako, da ta vključuje tudi metodologijo. Na osnovi metodoloških uvidov, ki sva jih pridobili iz kitajske tradicije in sodobnih kitajskih študij, zagovarja stališče, da je lahko primerjalna filozofija kot umetnost (poiesis) dobrodošla alternativa, ki vključuje: spoštovanje avtoritete (tradicija), zaupanje v preizkušene metode in recepte kot pogoje ustvarjalnosti in izvirdnosti, prepoznavo filozofskega pomena stila (forma je vsebina) in pomembnosti inspiracije ter obvladovanje določenih veščin.

Ključne besede: primerjalna filozofija, transkulturna filozofija, kitajska filozofija, metodologija, različnost

Introduction

For an appetizer let’s have trust, something that is missing in much academic philosophy. Its lack is most conspicuous in the reading and writing of academic papers. If it is true that “what you say is how you say it”, then it is equally true that “what you read is how you read it”. Nowadays the trend is to approach academic philosophy in a way that is narrow and imaginative mainly in terms of thinking up “worst-case scenarios”. Journals themselves systematically undermine trust. The much touted standards of “blind”, “double blind”, and “triple blind” not only foster overly critical evaluation, but also purposively reject even the possibility of “trust” between readers and authors. This is strange in a discipline which, when dealing
with primary texts, prides itself on being acutely attuned to history and context (who speaks to whom). There are other paradoxical attitudes on trust. At conferences trust is irrelevant or undermined. The Q&A sections are often dominated by the air of supposed objectivity of second-order evaluation. We often hear about how elements of a presentation “could be made clearer”, “might be problematic for some listeners” or how others “would misunderstand what is being said”. In both journals and conferences second-order evaluations replace actual engagement.

We think that trust is important in any endeavour in learning, and academia should be a space for cultivating trust, as we learn best from those we trust. We should trust our readers, and we should trust that our readers trust us in return. Accordingly, we should acknowledge that we cannot and should not explain everything. Here we put this into practice. We are thus not apologetic that this paper does not appreciate nuances and abounds with generalizations—it speaks to orientations, emphases, and overarching trends. We are also never speaking absolutely. There are countless counter examples to everything we say and certainly more problems than any reader can reasonably address. We trust that our readers will not read with the intention to find objections, however, and will instead feel free to add the caveat “very generally speaking” as much as they wish.

This paper is an attempt to rethink “diversification” and “inclusivity” by expanding their scope to include methodology. Recognizing the need to step back from our operative assumptions about appropriate philosophical study, we propose trusting the authority of the Chinese philosophical tradition and contemporary Chinese scholarship to inform our research attitudes and help us challenge the assumed infallibility of our academic norms. For this purpose, we reimagine comparative philosophy as the art of making pizza. Comparative philosophy thus conceived captures our understanding of philosophy as poiesis: as the art of making something that did not exist before, nevertheless heavily reliant on existing materials and tested methods. This is how we understand trans-cultural philosophy, or at least one orientation along which we think it is currently developing, and we hope it continues. Based on methodological insights derived from the Chinese philosophical tradition, this paper takes “going with tradition” and “listening to the texts” as the conditions of creativity, and accords an important role to style, inspiration, and the mastery of skill in philosophical study.

Authority: Trust the pizzaiolo

Traditional Chinese philosophical thought developed in a way that is quite distinct from the major trends in Western philosophy. For thousands of years
the main form of transmission and contribution made in Chinese thought was through commentaries, which can have a specious relation to the primary texts. Sometimes they are clearly an attempt to explain or elucidate major points, and can also provide important annotations to sentences or notes on the meaning and pronunciation of particular words, or information on particular characters and historical figures that have proven invaluable to the text’s transmission. Indeed, many early Chinese classics would be all but unreadable without commentaries. Aside from this purely annotative function, what is known as “shu 疏”, there are also explanations, or “zhu 注”, which can take two major forms. Sometimes they simply seek to explain what the text says. The commentary to the *Analects* compiled by He Yan 何宴 (d. 249) is a good example of this. It is normally not referenced for philosophical content because it does little but paraphrase the text and provide background to figures, traditions, and rituals without venturing an interpretation of its own. This type of *zhu* is philosophically “dry”. Others include simple explanations, but also provide robust philosophical reflections. Sometimes they are read as more or less in line with the “original meaning” of the text—at least one could argue that they attempt to do so. Much of what is found in Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249) and Heshang Gong’s 河上公 (d. 150? BCE) respective commentaries to the *Laozi* 老子 can be read this way. Though at times they greatly differ from one another, scholars can argue that they are simply explaining what they think the text says. Another type of *zhu* is also found here. There are comments where commentators display their own philosophical prowess—they are less commenting on the text than writing their own ideas and letting the authority of the text lend credence to them. There are places in Wang Bi and Heshang Gong that are like this, and even more prominently much of Guo Xiang’s 郭象 (d. 312) commentary to the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is written this way; just as much of Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (d. 1200) work is clearly more centered on his own thought than what he might have thought the so-called “four classics” “originally meant”.

Whether or not they ostensibly offer a new interpretation and clearly diverge from what we might call “the original meaning” of the text, commentaries display their unique contributions and become sources of authority in their own right. There are times where the commentator (creatively) adapts traditional ideas, which had proven efficacious in various circumstances and through different time periods, to present issues and conditions. There are also times when the commentator simply wanted to lend their own philosophical thought the authority of an established text or a “master” (*zi* 子). (One common joke about Guo Xiang’s commentary to the *Zhuangzi* in China is that there should be versions where his work is in larger front and the *Zhaungzi* is in smaller front. In other words, Guo Xiang uses the *Zhuangzi* as a commentary to *his* thought.) There are also plenty of texts that
attribute ideas to famous persons or texts, and yet there is little evidence that they are in good faith. We also find that certain portions of received texts were sometimes corrupted, major terms were altered, sections added, and arguments reversed, based on the thought of some commentator, editor, or scribe. In any case, commentaries that are deemed authoritative are treated as indispensable to any new interpretation or new “corrected meaning” (zheng yi 正義) of a text.

Thus, in the majority of present-day Chinese-language monographs on a classic there is a section on the “authenticity” of the text that precedes the philosophical discussion. In this section the author must describe what portion of the text they find relatively cogent, what they ascribe to one or more core author(s), and what portions they think were added later, or are for whatever reasons “inauthentic” and therefore irrelevant. In other words, a great deal of work must be done to pull out those sections where some thinker tried to add their own ideas into texts through various forms of transmission or through making references as a way of giving authoritative weight.

This reverence for authority clarifies a few problematic aspects of studying Chinese philosophical thought today. For example, many Western scholars have difficulty understanding that commentators are not always simply commenting. Sometimes the commentators’ obvious “misreadings” of texts are merely their attempts to make a new point plain. (Wang Bi’s commentary to Chapter 5 of the Laozi is an excellent example.) Similarly, reading commentaries as mere “comments” vastly underestimates their value, purpose, and place in the development of philosophical thought in China. Fully appreciating this point helps us realize the importance of authority in this tradition.

It should be noted that authority is not respected “just because”. Authoritative sources are taken seriously, referenced, and respected because they are models that have proved effective, they provide relatively stabilizing norms, and connect us not only with others, but also with the past. Adapting them, or even giving them up or going against them is allowable, but we should always proceed with the utmost caution. The first step is to take them seriously, and live with and through them as much as possible. In contemporary Chinese academia the same attitude persists, and, as we will discuss below, this puts Chinese academics at a severe disadvantage.

In the West we generally have the opposite type of model. Thinkers normally begin their books by challenging the work of others and set themselves the task of solving problems with unprecedented conclusions. The very history of Western philosophy is often described as a series of reactions to the work of predecessors in a quest for “truth”. We thus tend to understand the development of thought in terms of dissonance rather than resonance. Aristotle is easier to pin down when
he is placed at the antipode of Platonism. In learning environments, students are praised as sharp critical thinkers when they prove their teachers wrong and propose innovative, more comprehensive or more “truthful” accounts on a given topic. (This quest is at the forefront of analytic philosophy, which reads philosophy as progressing towards ever clearer understandings of the truth.)

Another way to look at these two differing orientations can be classified as the difference between the “traditional” and “modern” approaches. When following traditions, authority is revered and valued as such, whereas modernity, generally identified with novelty and rupture with the past, in various ways asks us to depart from traditions and do something new. Here the relationship between one’s work and authority is antagonistic. One should not rely on authority but become an authority oneself. This is clearly dangerous when it comes to building a house, and can be off-putting when it comes to making a pizza. What about philosophy?

What we are proposing is not simply to follow authority but to go with authority. In going with authority, we mean a two-directional process. If we place an authoritative resource in our contemporary discourse, we also need to recognize that this resource is already embedded in its own tradition. “Going with” also means that when we engage in more fundamental critiques we do not completely overturn others (at least not as a rule). We may seek to re-evaluate the roots, or critique others for focusing too much on the branches, but “going with” can mean working through those branches to get at the root.

Examining general attitudes can be illustrative. It is not uncommon to read Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy where some version of this is noted: “Here I read [this character] as [another character]”. Compared to Chinese standards this phrase is far from innocuous. It would be strange—and actually disrespectful, or we could say “unprofessional”—for Chinese scholars to make the same comment. Instead they tend to say “following so-and-so I read [this character] as [another character]”. The humility of admitting to following others, and working in this way with others, is, we think, a better practice than the now popular call for “original contributions”.

Original Contributions: What Types of Pizza Aren’t Allowed?

What does it mean to make a contribution? According to the editorial practices of many major Western journals, this question is answered in terms of increasing something. To publish something is of course the first step, but the work itself has to represent an “increase” as well—it must add to the already available knowledge.
Coupled with the emphasis on authenticity pervasive in our culture, a “contribution” in academia is normally formulated along the lines of “original contribution” or “unique contribution”. Many journals explicitly require such an “original contribution to philosophy” yet do not also demand a command of the original language, traditional scholarship or commentaries, or even engagement with the discourse in, for example, Chinese academia. Understanding texts in their native contexts is of course expected, if not taken for granted, but still the emphasis is on originality—and this is very telling. More than competence in tracing and comprehending the “origins”, what is valued is that one become an originator of an idea, theory, or method oneself. Authors are thus encouraged to present their own perspectives, understandings, and arguments. So they readily admit to, for instance, providing a study of the Zhuangzi that makes no reference to the Analects. Secondary sources are treated similarly. At times the only coherent explanation for the publication of such work can be that it marks some “original contribution”. We might thus wonder where we should draw the limits in this context.

As many note, the humanities are now taking a number of cues from the sciences. Progress in philosophical or historical analysis is seen as comparable to progress in physics. Whether scientific progress is understood as incremental or as successive paradigm shifts, discarding or breaking with old theories and ideas, and increasing knowledge, are deemed indispensable. In many cases the simple transferring of such expectations to philosophy, often done by those who are in administrative positions and/or have a background in “hard sciences”, is grossly inappropriate. Indeed, we might note that while a continual increase of knowledge in areas such as medicine is generally welcome, we do not always desire something new and innovative in other areas. I do not want my house built in such a way that completely overturns the old principles, any more than I desire to fly in an airplane that is completely original. In aesthetics we often have similar attitudes. While some modern, funky designs are quite interesting to look at, the well-established patterns that appear on some rugs are traditional (i.e. old and still popular) for a reason. And in writing, reasoning, and a host of other areas, we generally teach our students to do things in certain ways. We do not expect original contributions to how term papers are written, and we hardly expect them in content either.¹ (Even when we expect what they say is original we do not expect how they say it will be.)

¹ Some societies, particularly the US, have merged the desire for original content with authenticity so that students are (strongly) encouraged to present their own ideas. This satisfies, superficially at least, the need for original contributions and increases in content. Unfortunately, as anyone who has taught in these settings knows, not only is this often done at the expense of learning the actual material, but the results are exceedingly bland. Another undergraduate (or graduate) paper on the difference between Mencius and Xunzi on human nature is just that. Asking for the students’ “original opinions” on such matters often simply leads to bad papers.
Truly innovative contributions are rare and do not emerge upon coercion. Certainly there should be space for them to be made—but how much sense does that really make? The “space” or “requirement” for making an original contribution paradoxically tends to bring the opposite result. (Just as demands for authenticity are paradoxical and only result in relative uniformity.) Many of us have experienced that the review process, for example, can make our work blander, more boring, and less innovative then we initially had it. The space for “originality” is predetermined, and something that is actually original would be outside of that space, and is generally frowned upon. The root of this issue can be found by examining methodology, as follows.

Methodology: Old Recipes, New Pizzas

In recent years there has been a growing concern in Western academia about the asymmetry in intercultural philosophical exchange between the West and China. The common sentiment is that while Chinese scholars have been rigorously engaging with Western thinkers for centuries, the West has underappreciated the Chinese philosophical tradition and largely ignored its contemporary contributions. (A quick browse at bookstores bears witness to this: in China we find translations of nearly everything, while in the West translations of Chinese works are relatively rare.) Over the past few decades the situation has been gradually shifting. An increasing number of Western scholars are not only (re)discovering resonances between thinkers, schools, and ideas of the West and East, but also challenging their own assumptions and turning to the Chinese philosophical tradition for ways of reframing contemporary issues (e.g. different ways of structuring the framework of the climate crisis or democracy). It is often suggested that, in our quest for orientative guides to life, and in order to gain a better understanding of the world we live in and improve global cooperation, it is only reasonable that we engage with what we know less, with what is most different. This concern is often coupled with an expressed denouncement of the West’s presumed infallibility and the resulting intellectual isolationism.

However, while opening up and appreciating some aspects of difference between the Western and Chinese worlds of thought, we seem to fail to appreciate the full scope of difference. Engaging with the cultural Other, Western scholars tend to focus primarily on variance in terms of content (moral, social, philosophical, and religious ideas), not in terms of the framework of critical questions, of research attitudes, and methods. Chinese philosophy is seen as a valuable resource in the global discussion on issues such as sustainable development or transgenerational
responsibility, and yet the method of study Chinese thinkers employ is deemed at best irrelevant, if not improper—although not explicitly, of course. Questions can be (and often are) reformulated and diversified, but the silent reality is that research norms largely remain unchallenged. We may recognize the need to listen to and understand what Chinese thinkers are saying, but we seem to be largely uninterested in learning from where they say it. Limiting the scope of difference to content ignores the full extent of the difference, so that it necessarily remains superficial. This not only deprives us from valuable resources and opportunities to challenge our operative assumptions, but also creates obstructions to Chinese scholars’ participation in Western discussions.

Appreciating the full scope of difference does not mean replacing Western methods with Chinese ones (better or not). The goal is far humbler. Firstly, it means acknowledging that method is inseparable from content. It is a truism that the dialogic form of Plato’s work or Wittgenstein’s aphoristic style constitute philosophical positions in themselves. Similarly, methodological norms in the Chinese philosophical discourse are part and parcel of what we find important, relevant, and fascinating about Chinese philosophy. We thus have good reason to explore and understand these norms, and even consider applying them ourselves, as changing the way we approach Chinese texts could very well change our understanding of their philosophical content in unforeseeable and important ways. As such, appreciating the full scope of difference also means recognizing that there is no single way of doing philosophy. There are different and equally legitimate ways of philosophical study scholars could consider as options. Appreciating the full scope of difference also means being critical of our own methods and not treating them as the litmus test of academic legitimacy. We thus propose that philosophy, and especially Chinese-comparative philosophy done in English, be more accepting of some rather diverse (though thoroughly traditional) forms of philosophical study.

Western scholars engage with many of the same primary resources as their Chinese peers, but while Western scholars tend not to cite Chinese discourse, Chinese scholars invariably cite Western scholars in their studies of Western philosophy (and regularly in those on Chinese thought, too). Research attitudes in the East and West are also different in a more fundamental way, with these differences rooted in the respective worldviews and mentalities, as expressed in their attitudes to tradition and perceptions of truth, progress, and creativity. Individuality, scepticism, and breaking with received ideas have been traditionally understood to drive the philosophical endeavour in the West. It is thus expected and laudable, as noted earlier, to propose unique, even highly idiosyncratic readings (“I read this character/passage to mean…”). On the other hand, the Chinese tradition values
continuity, trust in tradition, and creative adjustment of positions. Chinese philosophical works customarily include introductions replete with references to lineages of thought where the particular work is proudly ensconced, and new works are the product of selective re-arrangements of older ones.

In fact, the Chinese commentarial and exegetical tradition can be understood as a series of “corrected meanings” (zheng yi 正義). They are corrected in two ways: first, in terms of how we should understand this character or that passage and the meaning within the text; secondly, in terms of how it applies to contemporary circumstances. In this way, the corrective attitude can mean searching for the “correct” meaning of the text, but also, and philosophically more importantly, it means adapting what the text says to current states of affairs. The emphasis is not on how I read this text, but on how the text speaks to contemporary issues. And, moreover, what matters is not how I can figure out how the text responds to contemporary issues, but whether and how the text itself does so. (I may have valid and pressing questions about gender equality, but these questions may very well fall outside the scope of a text like the Analects or a commentator’s concerns.) The commentarial tradition can be easily misunderstood as simply offering exegeses and not novel analyses based on the particulars of new philosophical issues. What is valued is not novelty per se, nor in fact “correction” of faulty interpretations, but the construction of a convincing and authoritative account, based on the work of worthy predecessors with the goal of inspiring ever present in the background.

Throughout the Chinese tradition, philosophical texts have served as practical guides for self-improvement, with Chinese thinkers interested in offering all-encompassing visions of the good life and inspiring readers to embrace and realize them. Reading and mastering the meaning of texts is taken to be a lifetime process of self-improvement, not a one-off act of intellectual understanding. The focus is not on spelling out all-applicable (universal) solutions, but, as mentioned earlier, on mastering the skill of understanding the meaning of a particular character or passage by adjusting it to the unique, concrete situations of one’s own life. Texts are thus not meant to provide final answers, but to create the conditions for reflection: for one to be able to ask (and hopefully answer) their own unique questions. They are to be continually explored, and should inspire one to explore them. In today’s Western discourses, however, inspiration is considered of little to no importance. Overspecialization and the increasing scientification of philosophical study have shifted the focus to answering narrow questions and providing very specific (and

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2 Inspiration was also highly valued in the Western philosophical tradition since its very beginning and was connected to style. Heraclitus’s prophetic tone, Parmenides’s metaphysical poetry, and Aristotle’s essay style evince the awareness that thinkers could trigger emotive and intellectual responses through appropriate writing styles.
original) answers. The focus is on informing rather than transforming, more on contributing to future debates than on inspiring readers in life-changing ways.

Texts inspire by triggering emotive as well as intellectual responses. Inspiration is thus indelibly linked with aesthetic effects through style. Rethinking comparative philosophy as *poiesis* allows us to appreciate the “poetic qualities” of Chinese philosophical texts: elusiveness, suggestiveness, ambiguity, descriptive imagery, and rhythm. These features are a silent affirmation of the partiality of our gaze and the limits of our language: we cannot really say everything, just as we cannot understand nor communicate everything. Chinese philosophy as *poiesis* creates riddles that appear unexpectedly, demanding further thought and engagement. It is a conversation we never planned and thus one of the best conversations we could ever have. There was a time when philosophy was written in verse, when philosophical language inspired with its puzzles. Confucius’s collected conversations in the *Analects* and their commentaries, modelled on primary texts, attest to this fact. Reticence, suggestiveness, and obscurity used to be marks of wisdom. While we will likely not completely return to these methods, perhaps we may want to leave space for these qualities in our philosophical discourses or include discussions where these features still retain some prominence. There is much to be gained from listening to the past.

**Listening Instead of Speaking: The Joy of Eating Pizza**

There is something disconcerting about the expressed demand to “let Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms”—and variations thereof. This is a valid goal, but both structurally and practically, it is an extremely difficult ideal to achieve. As demonstrated in the previous sections, not only does the entire approach to Chinese philosophy in English-language discourse differ from that in Chinese discourse, but Chinese authors are conspicuously non-present. Some do speak, and speak loud and clear—we very much appreciate the works of Huang Yong, Robin Wang, Ni Peimin, and Li Chenyang (to name a few) for instance. However, those who do not have significant training in Western academia find it difficult to publish, and often do not. Some of the most influential scholars in China today, such as Li Zehou, Chen Guying, Chen Lai, Yang Guorong, Guo Qiyong, and Wang Bo, hardly ever publish in English, or only in translation.

Many of those who align themselves with “letting Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms” actually do the speaking themselves, and there is more than a little mediation. One extreme example is the concerns about Western academia being racist because it does not include Chinese philosophy. In China there is little
worry about this issue. Chinese professors are generally more concerned with the fact that Western scholars of comparative philosophy often seem out of touch with Chinese-language discourse, and continue to rely heavily on Western concepts, vocabulary, and categories. In China, whether or not Chinese philosophy is taught in Europe, North America, or Australia is more a political concern than a philosophical one.

Given the observations above on authority, originality, and methodology, it comes as little surprise that many of those who claim to “let others speak” are in fact only hearing their own voices. Tu Weiming has made this point with regard to dominant attitudes in the US: America is a culture that likes to speak, the Chinese culture is one that likes to listen. We are not sure how true this statement is, and whether it is a valid characterization of Western attitudes in general, but, considering the concerns being addressed here, listening is certainly a prerequisite to speaking. The problem therefore is that if our standard is to “let Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms”, then whoever does the speaking seems to be dictating which terms (both literal and metaphoric) count and which do not. We observe at least four major points, all of which demonstrate that in “letting Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms” many are actually speaking for Chinese thought, and with little regard for the actual tradition.

Firstly, in the serious complaints that Western academia is racist for not including more Chinese philosophy there have been and are many efforts to get more specialists of non-Western philosophy to teach at colleges and universities in North America and Europe. There is very little, however, attention made to programs in China which cater to the same student groups. As recently as early 2022 the latest “Philosophy Gourmet” ranking list, where nine experts of Chinese philosophy contributed to the grading of nine programs and mentioned six others, only two of the total fifteen programs considered were not American schools, and many excellent programs in China were not mentioned. The charge of racism thus seems to be made from within, and only pertaining to, certain boundaries.

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3 For example, at East China Normal University (our school) there is a robust MA and PhD program taught entirely in English. While many schools in the West are happy to boast two, and sometimes even three specialists of non-Western philosophy, the school of philosophy at East China Normal University has more than forty full-time philosophy faculty, nearly all of whom can teach Chinese or comparative philosophy. About half can teach in English as well. Additionally, courses taught for the English-language program in Chinese philosophy include Chinese students, who bring much (real) diversity to classroom discussions. Students are also required to learn Chinese, and most courses consist of reading the classics in Classical Chinese.

4 Among the programs not mentioned were the one at East China Normal University, as well as programs in Hong Kong and one in Macau.
Secondly, and relatedly, while today we are all expected to support unfettered diversity in every corner of academia, there are some rather conspicuous blind spots that many still choose to ignore. It is well known, for example, that Chinese scholars without significant experience in Western academia have serious problems publishing in Western journals. And it is not because they are not interested in doing so. Oftentimes even translations of their work need to be “pushed” through normal review processes. As mentioned above, the methodology is a huge obstacle. However, in our celebration of diversity, in our rejection of anything even remotely resembling racism, and in heeding the clarion call to “let Chinese philosophy speak…”, we should be letting Chinese scholars make their own contributions.

Thirdly, “let Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms” is undermined by a strange reality: most scholars who engage in this discourse rarely cite Chinese sources. Looking at the reference list of articles and books published in English the lack of diversity in the sources is astounding. Western academia mainly cites itself. Nearly every text will include references to Chinese classics, but very few include commentators and even fewer include secondary literature. Of course, not every scholar reads Chinese (which itself is a problem in our eyes), but the past decade has seen an explosion of translations of contemporary Chinese scholars, and yet these are hardly cited.

The fourth issue is that, as noted above, Western scholars prioritize contributions and originality over authority and respecting traditions. The very methodology of Western discourse necessitates a rejection of the spirit of the Chinese discourse—at least as it has been practiced since Confucius said “I transmit, I do not innovate”. So “letting Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms” is actually not something Western academia can allow, given its extreme emphasis on contributions and originality over authority and respecting traditions. It can only allow that the authors who express this demand, and even those who do not, constantly rework, reword, and speak in original ways. Simply being a mouthpiece will not help one get published, or even accepted at a conference.

We thus propose a different demand. Instead of “letting Chinese philosophy speak on its own terms”, which seems to involve a lot of “speaking for”, we suggest “letting Chinese philosophy be read on its own terms”. In other words, placing

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5 The Chinese government wants to increase its influence in all areas, including scholarship. Incentives for publishing in highly ranked Western journals are double or two and a half times what they are for publishing in top Chinese journals. In other words, for promotion and funding in China (professors get bonuses based on publications), publishing in Western journals (such as this one) is highly desirable. Still, we have a surprisingly low number of Chinese philosophy professors even submitting to Western journals.
emphasis on listening instead of speaking. Concretely, this means, first, trusting the authority of commentators and respected authorities—especially considering this is how the tradition developed; and second, rethinking tradition as the condition of creativity, and thus de-emphasizing the importance of making “original contributions”. By making more researched commentaries, interpretations, and texts available, we are already contributing to discussions in a unique way. Additionally, we suggest such listening be done by looking at how Chinese discourse reframes familiar problematics.

Engaging with Chinese philosophy in this way will be different than it is commonly practiced today. Relative to what is now commonly practiced, and referred to as “comparative philosophy”, there would be much less comparison. Instead, we would emphasize what should precede this, the learning, and publications based on insights learned rather than creative contributions made/spoken, and also on what comes later—that is, beyond comparison.

Comparison—Before and Beyond: Making Pizza

The term “comparative philosophy” is often coupled with “Chinese philosophy”, but the two can be seen as representing completely different types of study. In his recent work Geir Sigurðsson, for instance, often discusses the virtues of “comparative philosophy”. Much can be gained from this type of research, which itself does not really belong to the Chinese or Western tradition—though it certainly skews toward the latter. For the virtues of this study see Sigurðsson’s own work, but in what follows we will note some critical points.

In our experience there is a kind of “Chinese-comparative philosophy” done in Europe and in North America which does not correspond to the way Chinese philosophy is done in China, and how some Westerners do Chinese philosophy, too. For example, in doing “Chinese-comparative philosophy” we find scholars ask questions such as “How does Heidegger’s notion of authenticity correspond to the idea of zhen 真 in the Zhuangzi?”, “What are the similarities between Confucius’s and Aristotle’s theories of good?” or “What are the differences between The Prince and Hanfeizi 韩非子?” These questions may even come in forms that are not explicitly comparative, for example: “What is the good life for Zhuangzi?”, “How does the Mencius conceive of justice?” or “Is Confucianism a type of virtue ethics?”

6 We can of course argue that philosophy is always comparative, see Silius (2020, 266–68) and Rošker (2020, 313).

7 See for example Sigurðsson (forthcoming).
It is difficult to adequately articulate in this format, but there is something distinct about how questions are asked, the frameworks used, the vocabulary that informs, and concepts assumed, when doing “comparative philosophy”. We fully agree with Sigurðsson that this type of study can be extremely fruitful, but we cannot help noticing some imbalances. “Chinese-comparative philosophy” has been asymmetrical in English: there is much more reliance on Western frameworks, terminology, concepts and questions than Chinese ones. We do not often ask, for example, about filial piety in Plato or humaneness in Rawls. Some corrective attempts have been made, but for the most part it seems that “philosophy” on the global scale needs to play by Western rules. Trying to make Chinese philosophy global we should not forget that it is Chinese. This is not to say that we think Chinese philosophy should be respected or included simply because it is Chinese. We are not arguing for diversity in this manner. Instead, what makes Chinese philosophy worthwhile is its philosophical reflections. When we take them out of their own context, however, and make them play by rules they never knew, the game often ends up on one extreme or the other—scholars either find Chinese philosophical texts to be esoteric, bland, or lesser versions of Western ideas, or else tout the Middle Kingdom as home to better versions of everything (Western). Hopefully these extremes will lessen and a more measured view, one which recognizes and respects the distinctiveness of Chinese philosophical discourse, can emerge.

As a first step towards this direction, we propose what might be called a “pre-comparative” stage. Students of Chinese philosophy are first engaged in the discourse itself. They learn how Chinese thinkers speak to one another, what terms they use, how they construe their concepts, how issues are framed, and dialogues form. Understanding how the tradition developed is also important here. At this first stage learning the language is just as important as learning what is said. Just as much as we need to know what the Zhuangzi said about Confucius, and how Wang Bi interpreted this, to engage deeply with the Analects, for example, we also need to have some grasp of Classical Chinese. Later the related developments, including contemporary Chinese discourse, should also be studied. Research in “pre-comparative” philosophy would include doing translations—of primary texts, commentaries, and contemporary scholarship—and engaging with scholarship on understudied issues. This type of research emphasizes the mastery of skills in facing the (often immense) difficulty of understanding the texts within their own contexts.

When some degree of competency is achieved—through translating, studying commentaries (traditional and contemporary), engaging with Chinese scholars, and memorizing passages from the classics—certain scholars have displayed what we identify as “beyond comparative” philosophy. The “beyond comparison”
approach is readily traceable in the way influential scholars have tackled major issues drawing on diverse resources.

Here, Li Zehou’s discussion of the relationship between harmony and justice is a great example. The concepts themselves, thinkers he is in dialogue with, and resources he draws on, span cultures and history. His work is not restricted to Chinese sources, nor is it simply comparative. He goes beyond comparison to deal with the focal issue itself. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont’s work on “role ethics” is similar. Henry Rosemont readily admits that it does not need to be called “Confucian”. They are dealing directly with the issue of how we conceive of the person, and what ethics should mean. Early Confucian texts are a major inspiration, but Ames and Rosemont’s entire project is indebted to Western resources as well. What “beyond comparison” mainly indicates is a different type of philosophical inquiry. Engaging in philosophy that is “beyond comparison” means addressing philosophical issues drawing seamlessly among various traditions while understanding their distinct frameworks, concepts, and discourses.

Conclusion

Responding to the idea of “trans-cultural” philosophy, this paper has proposed expanding the scope of diversification to include methodology. In particular, acknowledging the need to step back from our assumptions and venture on new paths of philosophical study, we have argued that the Chinese tradition and contemporary Chinese-language scholarship offer valuable methodological insights for reimagining comparative philosophy as poiesis: the art of bringing something into being that did not exist before, with existing materials and using tested methods. Unlike dominant models and norms in Western academic discourses, thinking of trans-cultural philosophy as poiesis suggests “going with” tradition and “listening” to texts rather than “speaking” for them. Trans-cultural philosophy as poiesis includes trust in authorities as the condition for creativity and original contribution. It also involves mastery of skills. On this, we generally agree with Robert Carleo. In his contribution to this volume, he outlines what “skill” can look like in a highly inspiring way. Philosophy thus conceived is less about right or wrong, truth or falsity, “original” or “unoriginal”, than the art and skill of reflection.
References

