Why the Chinese Tradition Had No Concept of “Barbarian”: The Mercurial Nature of the Human and Non-Human in Chinese Metaphysics

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Abstract

This article argues that the concept of the “barbarian” is inapplicable to the Chinese tradition. By contrasting the Greek and later European view on what it means to be human with the image of the authentic human in Chinese philosophy, this paper argues that the Chinese tradition did not have a conception of what the Greeks understood as “barbarian”. In the former, the ideal of the human is understood through an investigation of the concept of *ousia*, which is characterized by a dualistic hierarchy between “form” and “matter”. The same dualism and hierarchy that distinguishes *ousia*, can be mapped onto the Greek distinction between the human and barbarian. Chinese metaphysics is not consistent with the Greek idea that reality is constituted by unchanging forms that are self-identical and keep within their own boundaries. Relatedly, the idea that there is a static hierarchy among the myriad things of the world is also foreign to Chinese metaphysics. Instead, the Chinese metaphysical tradition assumes that nothing will stay the same forever as all “things” are a function of how they relate to an ever-changing environment. One important consequence of this view is that the human and non-human distinction is much more dynamic. Related to this dynamic view of self is the (Confucian) view that the human being only becomes authentically human through their acculturation. This acculturation is the process of a person’s growth through public symbolic media such as *li* (礼), *yue* (乐) and *wen* (文). This process of growth shapes the person into an other-regarding social being (*ren* 仁). Importantly, no one is born a fully-realized human; human-ness is not an essence that is possessed but is always a result of the process of acculturation.

Keywords: barbarian, culture, cultural anthropology, Confucianism, evolutionary biology, Chinese metaphysics

Zakaj kitajska tradicija ni imela pojma »barbar«: spremenljiva narava človeškega in nečloveškega v kitajski metafiziki

Izvleček

Teza članka je, da koncept »barbara« ni uporaben v kontekstu kitajske tradicije. S primerjavo grškega in poznejšega evropskega pogleda na to, kaj pomeni biti človek, s podobo

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Introduction

This paper compares Greek and Chinese metaphysics and argues that the divergences between them effects how the two respective traditions understood the nature of the human. The understanding of the nature of the human, in turn, effects how the respective traditions understood what distinguishes the Greek from the non-Greek and the Chinese from the non-Chinese. It argues that the Greek understanding of the non-Greek—in terms of a “barbarian”—is so different from how the Chinese understood the non-Chinese that we can no longer, without qualification, use the term “barbarian” to describe Chinese views of non-Chinese.

In *Chinese Cosmopolitanism: The History and Philosophy of an Idea* (Xiang 2023a), I attempted to correct the pervasive practice of using (Western) terms such as “barbarian” and “race” to describe the historical Chinese relationship with the non-Chinese. My argument was that underlying terms such as “barbarian” and “race” is a particular metaphysical worldview that Chinese culture did not share. The absence of this worldview means that the actions of the historic Sinosphere was not shaped by ideological formations that lead to intentions or actions that accord with the rubric of racism. As I show in chapter two, racism has deep cultural roots in the Western tradition and can be traced to the Greek idea of the barbarian. The idea of the barbarian is in turn a function of Greek understanding about ontological order, the place of the human in cosmic order, and the nature
of the human. I understand racial ideology as a manifestation of other, more deep-seated psychological malaises and the worldviews that shape these. This article will thus focus on the Greek view of ontological order, the place of the human in cosmic order, and the nature of the human through an analysis of the concept of *ousia*. Clarity on this concept will in turn bring clarity to the Greek concept of the barbarian.

The concept of the barbarian only has meaning within this Greek philosophical context. Within the context of the Greek and the later Christian tradition that inherited these ideas, the barbarian is a species that resides between the animal and human. As a semi-human creature, the barbarian functions, in racialized cultures, as a *Doppelgänger* of what the human would become if it were to lose its humanity and be human only in shape. This very idea of the barbarian and the fear and revulsion of the barbarian and later racial other is indebted to two key characteristics of Western metaphysics. (1) A dualistic metaphysics that results in the law of the excluded middle. Under this binary, one is either human or one is not human, and if one is not human then one is either a barbarian or an animal.¹ (2) An ontologically static universe in which all difference is hierarchically ordered. This means that humans, being more rational, legitimately dominate the semi-human barbarians as the former are higher on this great chain of being than the latter. Given these metaphysical characteristics, the Western tradition has (predominantly) thought about the nature of the human as essential, innate and constant: the tradition has understood human nature in terms of the philosophical concept of substance or its earlier Greek variant, *ousia*.

The Chinese tradition differs in its understanding of metaphysical order and does not entertain such bivalent metaphysical dualisms. Consequently, it has a different understanding of what it is to be human. Below, I expand on my argument in *Chinese Cosmopolitanism* by showing how Chinese metaphysics influences how Confucian-Chinese philosophy understood the nature of the human. This tradition saw the human being as functionally incomplete without exposure to that which will complete her: culture. Culture is specifically the public, symbolic infrastructure created by the founding sages of the (Chinese) tradition which qualitatively transforms a person. Whilst we are all born biologically human, it is only the process of acculturation that allows us to become authentically human. Unlike lower animals, our biology does not determine our destiny. Our destiny lies both in our individual hands as well as the collective hands of humanity. Individually, an agent has a degree of freedom in choosing the culture(s) they engage with and, through

¹ Please see my earlier work on how the idea of “animal” in the Chinese context differs from the idea of the animal in the Greco-Christian context due to the “processual holist” nature of Chinese metaphysics (Xiang 2021b).
their engagement, furthers both the individual capacity to achieve greater levels of freedom and the collective ability to maintain and create the space of culture. Collectively, humanity creates the culture in which and through which we are formed. Unlike the lower animals whose behaviors and reactions to their environment are almost wholly predetermined by their genetic makeup, a person's interaction with their environment is shaped to a constitutive extent by the socially created world of culture (language, art, technology and so forth).

This Confucian-Chinese conception of personhood differs from the dominant understanding of self in the Western tradition. In the latter tradition, the essence of humanity is something static that is predetermined prior to the arrival of the self in the world. The human does not differ from the lower animals in being predetermined by their genetic makeup. Indeed, it is precisely their genetic makeup or biological essence that distinguishes them from all other organisms in nature. It is for this reason that in the history of Western philosophy there is a visible obsession with defining and delimiting the essence that makes humans distinct from the rest of the natural world. It is not the process of our acculturation that makes us human, but, instead, our humanity is reduced to an innate quality: a substance or essence. This conception of personhood is non-relational; what makes one human is an a priori quality that is static and constant regardless of the context in which it is placed. This quality (“human nature”) is defined in itself and is conceived by itself (quod in se est et per se concipitur) and has a one-way causal efficacy (like the philosophical concept of an essence) in forming the human being. In contrast, the Confucian-Chinese conception of the self is a relational one: a self cannot be defined prior to the relationships it partake of and these relationships are mediated by the public symbolic system that is culture. It is due this understanding that the self is formed through socially constructed symbolic nexus that the Confucianism traditionally stressed the importance of li (礼), yue (乐) and wen (文). If the self is formed through culture, then it is vitally important that it is formed through cultures that predispose the self towards a public-mindedness that conduces to harmony with both the social other and the world. What is authentically human is activated through a person's relationship to the social and physical worlds (i.e. the social other and the physical environment) and the inter-relational symbolic system that mediates these.

2 In Republic 430 B, for example, Plato talks about the precarious form of true belief that can be found in the nature of animals and slaves (Plato 1997, 1062; Sorabji 1993, 11). The gradualism in Aristotle's biology is interrupted by introducing a sharp distinction between animal and man (Sorabji 1993, 13–14). For Aristotle, animals are without the definitive qualities of humans: reason (logos), reasoning (logismos), thought (dianoia), intellect (nous), and belief (doxa) (ibid., 14). Much of his treatise On the Soul is concerned with distinguishing between plant, animal, and human souls (ibid., 15). See Xiang (2023a, 98).
This paper will proceed as follows. It will first show the correlation between Greek metaphysics and its attendant conception of the human before examining the correlation between Chinese metaphysics and its attendant conception of the human.

The Ousiodic Conception of the Human: The Unconditioned Form

In *Metaphysics and Oppression: Heidegger's Challenge to Western Philosophy*, John McCumber describes the Greek concept of *ousia*. McCumber clarifies that it is related to “substance”, “essence”, “form”, and “matter” (McCumber 1999, 21). McCumber argues that under the Aristotelian conception, for a thing to be an *ousia* it will be distinguished by the characteristics of “boundary”, “disposition”, and “initiative”. By boundary is meant that the thing has definite spatial limits beyond which that thing no longer is. Various qualities inhere in *ousia* but *ousia* does not itself breach its own boundaries and become a part of something else. By disposition is meant that one aspect of the thing—and for Aristotle this is the thing’s form or essence—generates its parts out of matter, orders them and everything else within these boundaries and maintains this order. All the properties of the thing exist because they inhere in its underlying nature. By initiative is meant that the thing affects the world beyond its boundaries through the movement of its form or essence beyond its boundaries (ibid., 14, 22, 25‒26).

McCumber clarifies that “a being which sets a standard for itself is an *ousia*”. An *ousia* exists according to itself in the sense that it doesn’t merely exist (in the way that a heap of sand exists), but exists by virtue of being in accordance with itself or its own standard (which is itself) (ibid., 27). This standard that *ousia* sets for itself, non-accordance with which would mean that it is no longer *ousia*, is its essence. “Essence” as Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics* (VII.4) is “what [a thing] is said to be according to itself” (quoted in McCumber 1999, 29). Any property not belonging to the essence is relegated to derivative status or excluded as accidental (ibid., 44). When this essence moves beyond its own boundaries, for example, in human reproduction, then we can speak of “form”. Form can be understood as the universal that particulars can participate in (in the case of humans, the particular “essence” of a species) (ibid., 33‒34). Matter is that which submits to form. Matter exists in a negative dialectical relationship with form. Without form, matter is not anything at all and is defined negatively as outside the determination of being (ibid., 38). Whereas form is a unitary active principle that orders matter into the parts of a living body and maintains this order, matter is merely that which is acted upon. Take the example of a sapling that generates its leaves, branches and bark from other matter (the nutrients in the soil and carbon dioxide, for example).
The ousiodic form of the sapling generates a composite from other matter, orders and then maintains this form. This form, since it imparts unity, must itself be a unit. The ousiodic form of a thing is thus a unitary active principle which shapes the matter it encounters into the parts of a living body and maintains the correct functioning of these parts (ibid., 36–37). This form is the “active potency” of a thing to affect what is outside its boundaries (ibid., 42). In nature, when a form acts on matter, this form generates the boundaries of the matter and generates and orders the content of this matter (ibid., 41).

McCumber’s account of the characteristics of ousia apply to how the Western tradition has overwhelmingly understood the nature of being human. What is most authentically human is an unconditioned, a priori principle that affects the material world but is itself unaffected that world. This principle cannot change, because if it changed it would no longer be itself. This conception of the human, I argue, is the basis for the obsession with a “universal human nature”, that is, the idea that there are general aspects of human nature that transcend human groups. The thought goes that human “universals” are hereditary and genetically based behaviours (Sussman 1995, 5). It is also the basis for the historic (and continuing) Western obsession with genetic determinism, eugenics and racial determinism. The idea that human differences were permanently fixed in genes was historically the major rational for the eugenics movement (ibid., 2). Elsewhere (Xiang 2021c), I have shown how contemporary science, under the guise of genetics, is still obsessed with the idea of an unconditioned human nature, genetic predestination and with the idea that the characteristics of socially constructed “racial” groups have a basis in ousia.

The Barbarian: Dualism and Hierarchy

The above discussion on ousia will help to elucidate the Greek and later European conception of the human and the “barbarian”. One of the defining characteristics of the Aristotelian conception of ousia is its ability to bring order to matter. Inherent in the concept of ousia is a dualism between essence/form and matter. The Greek conception of the barbarian, I argue, operates under this dualistic structure. Recall that McCumber characterized the form or essence of ousia as “initiative”, that is, the active seeking of matter beyond its own boundaries to shape and maintain according to its own ordering. The Greek conception of the barbarian and its relationship to its master can be understood in terms of the dualism that is defining of the concept of ousia. For the Greek tradition, the barbarian is understood as matter without form, awaiting the form of the master so that it can be ordered.
In this regard, it is interesting that for Aristotle matter tends to reject its ordering by form. Matter has a tendency towards dissolution and an active principle, the “immanent form”, is needed to keep this from happening. The idea that matter is to be disciplined by form and that matter is antithetical to form, not only in the sense that it is the absence of form but also that it actively tends towards the dissolution of form, will be revisited below in showing how these characteristics also apply to the Greek concept of the barbarian. First, I want to show that this dualistic structure that I have argued is inherent to the Aristotelian concept of *ousia* can also be seen in the Aristotelian account of causation. Once again, matter is set in a negative dialectical relationship with what can be construed as initiative.

Aristotle’s four causes (material, formal, efficient and final) explain “causation”—causation here denoting motion, change, generation and destruction. Aristotle’s conception of causation is dualistic. As he writes in the *Physics*, “The last three [formal, efficient and final causes] often coincide; ‘for the what’ and ‘that for the sake of which’ are one, while the primary source of motion is the same in species as these” (*Physics* 198a25-27). The material cause is thus seen as a category apart from the other causes, and is a mere potentiality which needs the three other causes to be made into an actuality. The separation of material cause from formal, efficient and final causes means that there is an implicit conception of (formless) matter as inert such that order is externally imposed. As G. E. R. Lloyd notes, the ubiquitous use of technological and craft imagery in Aristotle’s cosmological doctrines point to “a distinction between the moving cause and the material upon which it acts”³ (Lloyd 1966, 291). In sum, under the Aristotelian conception of causation, there is a dualistic conception of a substrate that is abstracted from its relationships (formal, efficient and final causes). This hypothetical substrate, a hypothetical thing that is devoid of relationships and order, is the dualistic opposite of order (formal, efficient and final causes). Causation is explained as the application of these three causes onto the material cause. The material cause or matter is mere potential that needs to be ordered by something external.

It follows from this dualism between order and matter described above that under the Aristotelian view of nature all motion in the world is set into motion by an unmoved mover (*Physics* 258b10-259a20). Nothing in the physical world moves of its own accord, as its movement must be caused by something external and necessary (*Physics* 258b30-33). Things that are more powerful are higher up in this hierarchy and move the lower (*Metaphysics* 1018b19–1018b25). The view that a higher thing moves a lower thing in the physical world corresponds to the dualism that arises between the material and form can thus be attributed to the idea of intelligent design. The material itself is never self-organizing; the presence of organization has to be a sign of some agent who did the organizing/form-giving.

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Aristotelian view that in the microcosm of the body, there are similar natural hierarchies where there is a ruler and a ruled (Politics 1254a28-30): the ruler being the soul, and the ruled being the body (Politics 1254a33-34). The soul is identified with the mind and the rational element, as well as the male, whereas the body is identified with desires and the female (Politics 1254a42-56). In the Nichomachean Ethics, the soul itself is described as dualistic, “one part [of the soul] has such a principle in the sense of being obedient to one, the other in the sense of possessing one and exercising thought” (Eth. Nic. 1.7 1098a3-5). There is a part of the soul “which is by nature opposed to reason, fights against it, and resists it” (Eth. Nic. 1102b16f). In spite of its antagonism to reason, it is able to recognize and obey reason (Eth. Nic. I.13 1101a3). Paralleling this hierarchical understanding of motion, in Aristotelian teleology the final cause of something is the perfection of that thing, the fulfilment of its existence and its inherent purpose. This means that “lower” species exist for the sake of “higher” ones (Pol. I.8, 1256a19-21) and all generated creatures are ranked in terms of “nobility” (GA II. I 732a24 – 733b23) in the Scala Naturae.

There are thus two ways to understand the nature of the barbarian and its relationship to the master: (1) The barbarian is matter without form and waits upon the form of the master for it to be ordered; and (2) The ousia of the barbarian is to obey the ousia of the master. In the latter option, the ousia of the barbarian is less perfect than that of its master and is thus moved by the ousia of the master according to what the later European tradition would variously call the Scala Naturae or the great chain of being. This ambiguity about the exact nature of the barbarian is reflected in Aristotle’s own ambiguity about whether matter is ousia or not. At times, he denies that matter is ousia (Metaph. Zeta 3) but elsewhere, he writes “that matter is also ousia is obvious” (Metaph. Eta 1.1042a32; quoted in Pellegrin 1986: 70). Further, ousia exhibits a hierarchy within itself. At the top is essence and at the very bottom is matter: “sullen and posterior, unknown and unknowable” and “abasing the pristine universality of form” (McCumber 1999, 44–45). In any case, whether the barbarian is matter without form or is ousia, the barbarian can be understood as what needs to be ordered by the master. Below, we will see how the theorization of the relationship between the barbarian and its master follows the same metaphysical structure as the above discussion of ousia.

When this dualistic hierarchy, (which “exists in living creatures, but not in them alone; it originates in the constitution of the universe” (Politics 1254a28f)) becomes expanded onto the socio-political world, the animal which “cannot even apprehend reason” and merely obey their passions (Politics 1254a55–56) is identified with the body and the ruled, whereas (Greek) men are identified with reason and the ruler. The relationship between animals (unreason) and men
(reason) is one of ruled and ruler. Like the animal, slaves are in their best state when they are ruled by a (free) man, for, “the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different” (Politics 1254a56-57). The slave is analogous to the material cause and his master, the formal, efficient and moving cause. The slave benefits from being ruled by his master as he is himself without reason, but partakes of reason through being subjugated by his master (Politics 1254b22-24). There are a few characteristics worth noting from the infamous passage of the Politics on the theory of natural slavery:

For that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is by nature lord and master, and that which can with its body give effect to such foresight is a subject, and by nature a slave; hence master and slave have the same interest. Now nature has distinguished between the female and the slave. For she is not niggardly, like the smith who fashions the Delphian knife for many uses; she makes each thing for a single use, and every instrument is best made when intended for one and not for many uses. But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female. That is why the poets say—It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians; as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one. (Politics 1252a31-1252b9)

From this it can be seen that: (1) Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery equates all non-Greeks with barbarians and barbarians with natural slaves such that non-Greeks are equated with ontological inferiority and ontological inferiority legitimizes domination. Because of the ontological inferiority of the barbarian, their domination by Greek men is ontologically justified. The slave like the animal, is all body (i.e., purely matter) and no mind, and as such should be ruled by those who embody mind (and transcend nature)—Greek men. (2) The proper telos, and the only telos of the slave is to be a slave. As Aquinas later explains, the slave is “almost an animated instrument of service” (quoted in Pagden 2015, 104). (3) The master and slave have the same interest, because the slave can partake of reason by imitating his master, but in his natural state he is incapable of fulfilling his proper telos. The relationship between the master and slave as described in Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery has historically been applied to that between conqueror and conquered. Augustine’s City of God quotes Cicero’s de Republica as saying that the ruling of the provinces is just as “servitude may be advantageous to the provincials” because as “they became worse and worse so long as they were free, they will improve by subjection” (quoted in Isaac 2004, 183).
Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery relies on the following assumptions: (1) A single ontological order in which all finite beings are fixed in an eternal order. (2) Each thing therefore has a telos and essence. (3) The world is metaphysically determined and so there is no possibility of any one thing changing its essence. (4) Things are not different due to the confluence of various circumstances, but as having been necessarily so for all eternity. The concept of the barbarian rests on a dialectical relationship with the master. The former is matter and wholly conditioned whereas the latter is form and unconditioned. In *Chinese Cosmopolitanism*, and inspired by James Baldwin, I argued that the psychology of racism rests on this very idea that “we” are unconditioned, whereas the racial other-cum-barbarian is wholly conditioned. As Baldwin writes, “white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them” (Baldwin 1998, 339). He continues,

The only way he can be released from the Negro’s tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller’s checks, visits surreptitiously after dark. (ibid.)

The only way to be rid of the malaise of racism is to admit that we are all conditioned, to realize that, as living beings, we all suffer the same fate of, decay, mortality and loss.

Underlying the Greek idea of the barbarian is that he is merely matter and matter is merely potential. The very etymology of the term “barbarian” testifies to this dualism in which the barbarian is an absence of form or reason. “Barbarian” derives from the Greek barbarous which refers to “someone who cannot speak Greek”. Since there is a semantic connection between reason (logos) and speech (also logos), those who could not speak Greek were seen as devoid of reason. We see this connection between the inability to have (Greek) speech, with an inability to have reason in Aristotle. For Aristotle, the inability of animals to form civic society is due to their incapacity for the rational activity of speech (*Politics* 1.2, 1253a8–18; Aristotle 2007, 1988; Sorabji 1993, 15). According to Aristotle, the barbarian is like the animal in that he also has no capacity for reason and correct political organization. Representative depictions of the non-Greek as barbarians appear in Aristotle’s writings:

A bestial character is rare among human beings; it is found most frequently among barbarians, and some cases also occur (among Greeks) as a result of disease or arrested development. We sometimes also use

People irrational by nature and living solely by sensation, like certain remote tribes of barbarians, belong to the bestial class, others who lose their reason because of a disease or insanity, belong to the diseased. (Aristotle *Eth. Nic.* 1149a 9–12; quoted in Isaac 2004, 199)

The connection that the ancient Greeks makes between language and the capacity for reason testifies to an innatism in which the human being is defined according to ontological properties. Language acquisition is arguably a result of acculturation or inculturation. The foreigner can, for example, learn to speak Greek. The ancient Greek tendency to see those who cannot speak Greek as related to an ontological incapacity for reason makes the error of taking a provisional state (a current inability to speak Greek) for a fixed, eternal one (an ontological incapacity for speech and thus reason). The mistake evident here is the tendency to ontologize what is merely provisional.

The bivalent dualism inherent in the structure of *ousia* and the Aristotelian conception of causality is antithetical to the view held by Chinese metaphysics that everything is interconnected, everything is potential, indeterminate, with no excluded middle, in sum that interconnection and change is the metaphysical basis of life on this planet. Under the Chinese view, since all things are interconnected, everything has the potential to change and is thus creatively indeterminate. The world is therefore not constituted by fixed forms but the relationship of everything to everything else. In other words, all things are conditioned. The idea dominant in Greek metaphysics whereby order in the world is a function of form impressing itself onto matter, and thereby bringing what was merely potentiality into actuality, underlies the ideology of colonialism. This I describe in chapter five, “Metaphysics of Colonialism and Metaphysics of Harmony”, in *Chinese Cosmopolitanism* (2023a). There, I describe the same bivalent dualism of Greek metaphysics via Plato’s conception of the genesis of the forms. In contrast to the Greek idea that the order of reality consists in the imprinting of form (actuality) upon matter (potentiality), I describe the Chinese conception of the reason for cosmic order. This consists in bringing things into relationships that conduce to the mutual flourishing: harmony. In what follows I describe this Chinese metaphysics.
Chinese Metaphysics as Processual Holism: Everything is Conditioned

The Aristotelian concept of *ousia*—the assumption that there are unchanging essences underlying reality—has been formative for Western intellectual history. The biological concept of “natural kinds” and “species”, for example, is indebted to this idea. However, recent work in the philosophy of biology argues that the tendency to see form as prior to change is unwarranted. In his foreword to *Everything Flows: Towards a Processual Philosophy of Biology*, the scientist Johannes Jäger writes of how deeply engrained “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” is in Western cognitive habits as well as in the practice and theorization of biology. This fixation with substance “consists in the unwarranted reification of objects, which become fundamental and replace the underlying dynamic reality in our thinking” (Jäger 2018, xi). Modern science suggests that this ideology of substance (fixity, endurance, boundary) is unempirical. Instead, boundaries are often ambiguous, such that it can be hard to say where one thing ends and another begins. Reality is a continuum of overlapping processes that provide no single, real way of dividing up reality into distinct “kinds” or “classes” of entities. The individuation of nature into distinct individual entities proves to be a slippery matter under a view of nature as continuous, processual, and holistic. A “promiscuous individualism” appears when we attempt to define individual entities, just as a “promiscuous realism” appears when we attempt to pinpoint natural kinds (Dupré and Nicholson 2018, 2–4).

The idea of natural kinds and species that Dupré and Nicholson speak of as a shibboleth that is stubbornly persistent in biological research speaks to the enduring power of the Aristotelian concept of *ousia*. Chinese metaphysics, however, does not have the idea of a cause or ordering principle that is separate from its material manifestation and which can be abstracted from the changes that this material manifestation undergoes. Under the Chinese view, all things are related to each other in the sense that they mutually condition each other in a never-ending process. Chinese metaphysics is thus well-described as “processual holism” (Xiang 2021b). As noted above, McCumber defines *ousia* in terms of “boundary”, “disposition”, and “initiative”. By boundary is meant that the thing has definite spatial limits beyond which that thing no longer is; by disposition is meant the form or essence of the thing that orders the things that come into its orbit according to a standard that it gives itself (or is itself); and by initiative is meant the active potency of form to go beyond itself and shape matter beyond its boundaries. This active potency is realized by a quality passing from one thing to another, that is, when the boundaries of the two things are
transgressed. McCumber suggests that the idea of active potency is in tension with the boundary and initiative as the transit of form beyond its boundaries is transgressive. “It would be better for Aristotle, one suspects, if active potency did not exist” (McCumber 1999, 42), and “far better would be for the form of a living thing to remain permanently within its boundaries, i.e. for the living individual to be immortal” (ibid., 50). In Chinese metaphysics, we could say, the tendency of things to pass beyond its boundaries is taken as primary. It is this very “transgression”, not the tendency of a thing to remain self-identical with itself, that is understood as the reason why things exist or is the principle capturing the fundamental reality of things. As we read in the “Change as the Ultimate Mandate” (Yi ben ming 易本命) chapter in the Records of Ritual Matters by Dai the Elder (Da Dai Liji 大戴礼记), “it is due to change [yi 易] that creativity and fecundity is ceaselessly generated” (Wang 1983, 256 my translation). Absent in Chinese metaphysics is the idea that reality is constituted by unchanging essences and the related idea of a forming principle that, self-identical with itself and keeps within its own boundaries, is the fundamental structure of reality. Chinese metaphysics assumes that the universe is anarchic, ziran, or, in Brian Bruya’s phrase, is “spontaneous[ly] self-causing” (Bruya 2022) and all things in the world “autopoeitic” (to borrow the term of Chilean scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) (quoted in Shiva and Shiva 2019, 11). The universe is spontaneously self-causing because all things are understood to be conditioned. Each thing, instead of being understood as imperfectly imitating a transcendent or universal “form”, is precisely what it is only as a particular. Thus, each “thing” is a unique focal point of changing relationships. Since each “thing” is a unique focal point of changing relationships, every “thing”, even a cell or microbe, is interconnected, conditioned and so dynamic, evolving. Further, given that it is constantly responding to its changing environment, it is also autopoeitic, self-organizing and free.

In Chinese metaphysics and under the view of processual philosophy described above, the reason why each thing has the form it does is not because of a reality antecedent to change and empirical experience. Because each thing is the focal point of infinite interrelationships, no “thing” has a “form” or telos or a strictly delimited way in which it can develop. Since every particular is related to all that is not itself, every particular can develop in ways that are unpredictable. As such, it becomes impossible to define a thing absolutely. A typical expression of this view that order is emergent as things change in unpredictable ways can be found in the “Reaching Utmost Happiness” (zhile 至乐) chapter of the Zhuangzi, which declares the impossibility of defining and delimiting the constant transformation of things:
The seeds of things have subtle workings \([ji \, 机]\). In the water they become Break Vine, on the edges of the water they become Frog’s Robe. If they sprout on the slopes, they become Hill Slippers. If Hill Slippers get rich soil, they turn into Crow’s Feet. The roots of Crow’s Feet turn into maggots and their leaves turn into butterflies. Before long the butterflies are transformed and turn into insects that live under the stove; they look like snakes and their name is Qu-Duo. After a thousand days, the Qu-Duo insects become birds called Dried Leftover Bones. The saliva of the Dried Leftover Bones becomes Si-Mi bugs and the Si-Mi bugs become Vinegar Eaters. I-lo bugs are born from the Vinegar Eaters, and Huang-Kuang bugs from Jiu-You bugs. Jiu-You bugs are born from Mao-Rui bugs and Mou-jui bugs are born from Rot Grubs and Rot Grubs are born from Sheep’s Groom. Sheep’s Groom couples with bamboo that has not sprouted for a long while and produces Green Peace plants. Green Peace plants produce leopards and leopards produce horses and horses produce men. Men in time return again to natural spontaneity \([ji \, 机]\). So, all creatures come out of natural spontaneity \([ji \, 机]\) and go back into it again. (My translation based on Watson 1964, 117)

The account of change and generation that the *Zhuangzi* provides makes much sense if we take a long-range view of the history of our planet.

Contemporary science believes that the Earth has existed for 4.5 billion years. The first forms of life are believed to have arisen 3.5 billion years ago in the Archean period. It was two billion years ago, in the Meso-Proterozoic period, however, that we find the first evidence of eukaryotic cells, that is, cells that contain internal organs (organelles). Vertebrates appeared in the Cambrian period 535 million years ago and animals with four legs appeared 397 million years ago, in the Devonian period. The first mammals appeared 200 million years ago in the Triassic period. The first flowering plants appeared 130 million years ago, in the Cretaceous period. The first primates appeared 60 million years ago in the Palaeocene period. Hominins, ancestors to “modern” humans, appeared 6.5 million years ago in the Miocene period and the first “modern” humans—Homo sapiens—appeared 300,000 years ago in the Pleistocene period. In the billions of years since there has been life on Earth, infinite types of organisms have appeared and disappeared. One type of organism that appeared and subsequently disappeared is the Prototaxites, a fungal-like organism that defies easy classification according to any now extant group of organisms. Flourishing from the Middle Ordovician (470 million years ago) until the Late Devonian periods (360 million years ago), it...

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4 [https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/age-earth/](https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/age-earth/)
had a diameter of up to 1 metre and a height reaching 8.8 metres. The reality of now-extinct organisms like Prototaxites that defy easy categorization according to the natural kinds of present-day biological life counters the Aristotelian idea of forms and the project of classical taxonomy.

An example of the fundamentally dynamic nature of biological life that shows how organic life is not fixed, eternal and bounded is the panda. Whilst the panda is classified as a bear and shares many characteristics with bears in terms of its teeth, skeletons, muscles, and organ systems, it is unlike any other kind of bear in that it is an herbivore. Due to its feeding behaviour, habitat and enlarged wrist bone that functions like a thumb, the panda is also very similar to the red panda, which bears more similarities to a raccoon than a bear! The panda became what it is due to the unique environment in which it found itself (an abundance of bamboo, among other things). We understand the nature of the panda not by appealing to some atemporal form, but to the history of how its ancestors related to and changed according to its environment. Under this construction, the panda is not a particular that instantiates the universal of “bear-ness”, but an ongoing narrative. Another example of how the truth about things is not a static essence but the history of its interaction with the environment is the fact that, as Jeremy Griffith writes in “From Leaky Pots to Spillover-Goblets: Plato and Zhuangzi on the Responsiveness of Knowledge” that the category of “reptile” is a fiction of abstraction that appeals to a transcendent essence. Given that reptiles, birds and mammals evolved from a common ancestor, “reptile” as an isolatable group makes little evolutionary sense (Griffith 2017, 228).

Life changes in relationship to the world in which it finds itself and its “form” is a time-splice in a continuing history of change such that what our present perspective sees as a “form” is but a local and provisional consistency.

It is this metaphysical assumption of the creative indeterminacy of phenomena—that all phenomena are an emergent result of a coalescing nexus of different relationships—that underlies the Confucian understanding of self as a perpetual becoming. As I have argued in my two-part paper “Why the Confucians Had no Concept of Race”, otherness only became so problematic in the Western context because the (racial) other was understood, under a substance ontology, to be essentially other, i.e. ontologically distinct from what is properly human. Under the traditional Confucian/Chinese process-metaphysics view of the self as a human-becoming, however, human-ness is not an essence that is congenitally and eternally possessed, rather, one becomes human through acculturation. This cultural-processual as opposed to

6 Please see Xiang (2019a) and Xiang (2019b) especially, part I, section 3 “The Chinese Conception of the Human: Becoming ‘Chinese’ through Acculturation” and part II, section 4, “The Socioeconomic-cultural Emergent Self: Becoming Human”.
racial-ontological identity is reflected in the central tenet of Confucianism: “The basic educability of all human beings—even non-Chinese barbarians” (Slingerland 2003, 189). This central tenet has meant that, “the test of barbarity” throughout Chinese history “was not so much race or religion or national origin as it was cultural achievement” (Hsü 1960, 6). The Greek view, on the other hand, assumes an ontological dualism between Greeks (who embody form) and non-Greeks, who are “barbarians” (who are mere matter without form). Due to the absence of the idea of unchanging form as the ultimate ordering principle, absent in Chinese metaphysics is the accompanying idea of a static ontological order in which each thing has a fixed place. Each thing and each self are creatively indeterminate and what “form” they have is a function of their environment. Under this view, the Aristotelian idea of a barbarian-cum-natural slave becomes a non sequitur.

The term “barbarian”, does not have a single analogue in the Chinese language (Bauer 1980, 9; Müller 1980, 46, 56–7; Di Cosmo 2002, 95). The absence of any exact equivalent in the Chinese language that translates as “barbarian” substantiates my point that there is no concept of the barbarian in the Chinese tradition. As Nicola Di Cosmo explains, “It is well known that the term ‘barbarian’ common in a number of European languages, does not have a single analog in the Chinese language. Yet a number of terms designating foreign peoples (Man, Yi, Ti, Jung, Chi’ang, Hu, etc.) are routinely translated as ‘barbarians’” (Di Cosmo 2002, 95–96, footnote 7). By “barbarian” is meant a Manichean other who is incapable of reason and moral behaviour. This subhuman other is ontologically incapable of civilization, thus the only possible relationship with them is one of subordinating them or annihilating them. The barbarian is a black hole that cannot be accommodated with the light that is civilization. The Chinese tradition has no such view of non-Chinese. Below, I offer a few examples of terms in the Chinese tradition that are commonly translated as “barbarian” and show that these are mistranslations. As we will see, the terms that are conventionally translated as “barbarian” are all proper nouns for specific groups of people. As the sociologist Byung Ho Lee writes, “these terms [Yi, Di, Rong, Man, Fan, Lu, and Hu] are basically generic words meaning ‘aliens’, and were employed indiscriminately in Chinese texts to indicate foreign peoples and their polities. Their usage was generally meant to be objectively descriptive” (Lee 2011, 205).

Whilst it has become common practice today to translate yidi (夷狄) as “barbarian”, it bears remembering how recent a phenomenon this is. In the late 19th
century, James Legge was translating still translating the term as “rude tribes of the east and north” (Legge 1861, 20) or “rude, uncultivated tribes” (ibid., 135). In a telling episode in the history of the term, Lydia Liu traces the identification between yi (夷) and “barbarian” to agents of the British state in mid-19th-century China who took offence at being designated as yi because they identified it with “barbarian”. Despite Chinese protestations that the term was innocuous, in article 51 of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin of 1858 (an unequal treaty that ended the first phase of the Second Opium War), the British stipulated that Britain and British subjects were never to be referred to as yi (Liu 2004, 31–69). This episode is telling because the Qing government evidently did not deem the term yi to be so offensive that it could not be used in official diplomatic exchanges. This episode is also telling of the racial consciousness that the British operated under such that they would be so sensitive to anything approximating the European cultural understanding of the “barbarian”.

Another term that is commonly equated with “barbarian” today is the Chinese term Qiang (羌). However, the term itself might be merely descriptive. Chinese records describe the Qiang as nomadic shepherds, implying that the exonym was descriptive rather than derogatory. In the Shuowen jiezi (Xu 2013), for example, the entry for Qiang is: “sheep-herding people of the Western Rong (戎)”. The Austrian Sinologist-anthropologist, Claudius Müller writes that in the case of the Qiang, the sheep radical evidently points to the economic interpretation of the sheep (Müller 1980, 61). In any case,

The difficulty of making statements about the names of tribes is heightened for the Chinese material of the Zhou and Han periods, because we do not know the original criteria for naming. As a general rule of thumb [allgemeine Richtschnur] the sinologist Boodberg’s observation is valid: “that the early Chinese scholars in paraphrasing [Umschreibung] foreign words often chose those out of several possibilities the one that gave as faithfully as possible the foreign sounds as well as an indication of the semantic value of the original.” (Müller 1980, 59, my translation)

Another term that is often identified with “barbarian” is Yao (猺), which Müller tells us probably goes back to the tribe’s own self-identification, with which we are no longer familiar (Müller 1980, 60). The names of many different tribes also stem from the geographical locations and foods with which they are associated (ibid., 62). Another term that is identified with “barbarian” is Rong (戎). The Rong (戎) had the connotation of “military” before it was used as a name for a group of people (Creel 1970, 198) as the early form of the character is comprised of a
dagger-axe and, possibly, a coat of armour (ibid., 198 n8). The Rong were also known for their martial valour. For Creel, it was unlikely that all the terms for foreigners were terms of contempt (ibid., 198).

China currently accounts for about 20% of the world’s population, and this number excludes the sizable Chinese diaspora. By the close of the 18th century, the population of 300 million people under Qing rule constituted 30% of the world’s population, and by 1850 around 40% (Xiang 2023a, 213n1). The “Chinese” people could not have become so populous had they had a conception of the “barbarian” as an antithetical other. The Chinese people became so populous through what can be called “creolizing” with what would have been, at some point in history, “non-Chinese” peoples (see ibid., 28‒38). One example of such “creolization” is in 108 CE, when 2,400 members of the defeated Qianglong (羌龙) tribe were admitted as inner subjects to the Han dynasty. As Yü Ying-shih writes, “It is clear that in the Later Han period [. . .] a large-scale movement of Ch’iang [Qiang] populations was taking place from points all along the western border into China proper” (Yü 1986, 429; Fan 1965, 2898–99). These resettled tribes were allowed to follow their own social customs and ways of life (Yü 1986, 383). The hybridity of the Chinese peoples is such that, as the Sinologist John Fairbank has written, the “inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom” were “themselves largely descendants of barbarians” (Fairbank 1942, 130).8

On both a theoretical level, which is reflected in the language, and on an empirical level, which is reflected in the hybridity of Chinese culture and the “Chinese” people, we see the absence of the structuring idea of the “barbarian”. Should such an idea have existed in Chinese history we would see Chinese history mirror much of the colonial, genocidal behaviours of the West. Absent in the Chinese tradition is the idea of a “barbarian” who is without form and thus capacity for reason and moral behaviour and therefore marked out for subjugation and annihilation.

Acculturation, Sociality and the Authentic Self

In A Philosophical Defense of Culture: Perspectives from Confucianism and Cassirer (Xiang 2021a), I argued that Confucianism had a “cultural” conception of personhood. The cultural conception of personhood has much to do with why the Confucian–Chinese tradition has no concept of “barbarian”, and why this tradition assumes that everyone is born human in the biological sense, but only some become authentically human in the sense of ren (仁). Below, I will further articulate this

8 For more textual examples of why the Greek idea of the barbarian is inapplicable to the Chinese context please see Xiang (2019a) and Xiang (2019b).
Confucian conception of personhood by borrowing from the ideas of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his work on symbolic anthropology.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz argued against the idea that human dispositions are genetically prior to culture. Instead, as he writes, recent research in anthropology suggests that the human being’s capabilities as realized are due to cultural amplifications or extensions of pre-existent dispositions. Geertz points to the fact that the final stages of human evolution occurred after the appearance of “culture”, which implies that the idea of a basic, pure, unconditioned human nature or an innate constitution of human beings is “so functionally incomplete as to be unworkable”. “Tools, hunting, family organization, and later, art, religion, and ‘science’ moulded man somatically; and they are, therefore, necessary not merely to his survival but to his existential realization. The application of this revised view of human evolution leads to the hypothesis that cultural resources are ingredient, not accessory, to human thought.” (Geertz 1973, 82‒83) For Geertz, the fact that the human brain and culture emerged synchronically as opposed to serially means that the latter stages of human evolution relied on the appearance of cultural mechanisms. The history of how we evolved in conjunction with cultural artefacts and institutions of our own creation means that “[t]he human nervous system relies, inescapably, on the accessibility of public symbolic structures to build up its own autonomous, ongoing pattern of activity”. As a result, human thinking is first of all an act conducted through the terms of the common culture, and only secondarily a private matter (ibid., 83).

In *A Philosophical Defense of Culture* and following one of Geertz’s intellectual influences, Ernst Cassirer, I argued that the human being is a cultural animal. What we can call culture or symbolic systems are extrinsic sources of information created by human beings in coherence with certain constants about the world and human being. Geertz himself described culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (ibid., 89). These are extrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms or programmes for perceiving, understanding, judging and manipulating the world. They provide a template for the organization of social and psychological processes (ibid., 216). The reason why these cultural or symbolic templates are necessary is that “human behaviour is inherently extremely plastic”. Human behaviour is only very broadly controlled by genes. This means that our behaviours, if they are to have “any effective form at all, [need to] be controlled to a significant extent by extrinsic ones”. Humans differ from lower-order animals in that much of the behaviour of the latter are innate, instinctive, and almost completely pre-programed and physiologically performed. A spider immediately attacks the prey in its net without being taught to do so,
and birds learn how to fly instinctively. In human beings, however, “[t]he extreme generality, diffuseness, and variability of man’s innate response capacities mean that the particular pattern his behavior takes is guided predominantly by cultural rather than genetic templates, the latter setting the overall psychophysical context within which precise activity sequences are organized by the former”. The human being might be more accurately called “the self-completing animal” — “The agent of his own realization, he creates out of his general capacity for the construction of symbolic models the specific capabilities that define him.” (ibid., 217‒18) Unique among all biological life, humans are those that create their own (symbolic) environment for their realization. Whilst all animals need an environment amenable to their natures to survive, a human being can only survive through an environment of their own creation: culture.

Geertz’s view that the human being is a self-completing animal that is suspended within and relies on the symbolic web of culture that they themselves have spun also describes the Confucian view of personhood. Confucianism would agree with Geertz that a person that was not brought up within culture would be so functionally incomplete as to be unworkable. Likewise, the idea of a humanity without culture would be a contradiction in terms. The Confucian conception of the human is that they are almost completely conditioned by environment and much of this environment is the socio-cultural milieu.

**The Relational-Social Self as the Authentic Self**

For Confucianism, the true self is the social self (ren 仁). As Tu Weiming writes, “sociality is a constituent aspect of the authentic self” such that society itself “is an extended self” (Tu 1979, 25). The Confucian view is that we are all born with the capacity to achieve our social (ren, 仁) natures. However, to become truly human requires acculturation. This acculturation is the formation of the self, such that the self becomes instinctively social. The achievement of this authentic humanity can be seen in Confucius’ biography, where in *Analects* 2.4, by the age of 70, he could follow what his heart desired without transgressing what was right. At the end of his life, all of Confucius’ desires are public-minded. To put it another way, since Confucius desires nothing that is antisocial, none of his desires transgress what is right.

For the Confucian tradition, we are born with the capacity for sociality, but to become our authentic selves requires socialization. This is achieved through the participation in culture as culture is inherently a public symbolic medium. For the Confucians, the defining examples of this formation through culture are *li*
The reasons that Xunzi gives for “bad” behaviour are all due to selfish and egoistic behaviours such as profit-seeking and sensual desires that are detrimental to public harmony. From their perspective, the egoistic conception of self is not the authentic self: it is pathological. This authentic human nature can be usefully contrasted against the idea of an egoistic sociopathy that sees others as merely means to arrive at one’s own ends. Even though humans can become sociopaths, this capacity for sociopathy is not, for Confucians, what is the authentic human nature. Whilst the vast majority of humankind has the potential to be other-regarding, sympathetic and compassionate beings, this potential does not equal actuality. We are not born with a form that predetermines what we will become irrespective of the environment. This potential requires sustained effort, education as well as a culture that practices other-regarding habits. For Confucianism, it is the social nature of the human being that most authentically defines what we are, but this authentic state of the self is not biologically predetermined to be constant irrespective of the environment. Instead, as Lewis Gordon writes, “As relational, […] each human being is a constant negotiation of ongoing efforts to build relationships with others, which means no one actually enters a situation without establishing new situations of action and meaning” (Gordon 2021, 78). It is precisely interaction with our physical and social environments that determines our “natures”.

An example of how humanness is a product of acculturation as opposed to an essence can be seen in the famous story of Nie Xiaoqian (聂小倩) from Pu Songling’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. Here, a female ghost becomes human through acculturation in human culture such as reading Buddhist sutras and acting according to ritually correct norms such as filial piety. This processual understanding of humanness contrasts with the Western tradition which overwhelmingly saw humanness as a static quality. It is the idea that barbarians cannot become acculturated that contributed to the racial violence, genocide, enslavement of large swathes of the human race under European colonialism, as well as the genocidal projects of the Nazi regime. If that which is perceived as “bad” cannot be rehabilitated for civilization, then the only solution is to extinguish it. Such a logic is a collateral part of a certain metaphysics that is absent in the Chinese tradition. As I have shown (Xiang 2023a, 56), antisemitism rests on a substance ontology in which the more the Jew tries to acculturate, the more fearsome he becomes to the gentile. Since the governing logic of antisemitism is that the Jew is an eternal Jew (*ewige Jude*), the Jew’s attempt to assimilate through acculturation merely makes his Jewishness more disguised, concealed and so sinister. This invisibility makes his danger all the more threatening. Such a logic does not exist under the Chinese metaphysics I have described in which a person’s acculturation *is* the authentic person.
For the Confucian inspired Chinese tradition, we are not born authentically human. This authentic self is a “second nature” that we become reconciled to through cultivation. A wolf-child that is not raised among human company cannot appreciate the pleasures of accessing the mind of an author from another time and another place, such as Gabriel García Márquez. This ability to understand and sympathize with others through symbolic mediation, be that through, language, art, music, or ritual is the distinguishing characteristic of the human and is a product of acculturation. As I have argued elsewhere (Xiang 2023b), this conception of personhood is comparable to the ideal of personhood that decolonial philosophers speak of: a non-essentialized self who, as a dynamic, creative work in process, realizes herself through interaction with others.

Conclusion

There is much misuse of the concept of the “barbarian” in its application to historical Chinese attitudes towards the non-Chinese. This is a practice that merely applies the Greek attitude towards non-Greeks to the Chinese context. This is not a trivial mistake. As this paper has shown, this unexamined borrowing of terms across cultural contexts insinuates Greek ideas about ontological order, the place of the human in cosmic order, and the nature of the human into the Chinese context. This paper has explored the differences in the Greek and Chinese views on these issues. Under the Chinese processual holist view, all things are related to each other in the sense that they mutually condition each other in a never-ending process. The human being, like the rest of the immanent world, is constantly changing. This assumption of dynamism is related to the Confucian view that the self is not born human. It is instead the process of the growth of the human, and how they relate to their environment, that comes to define them. It is therefore crucial that their inevitable conditioning is one conduces to them becoming authentically human. Borrowing from the insights of cultural anthropology, this paper has argued that, for Confucianism, what is authentically human is the ability to partake of interpersonal symbolic media that human beings themselves have created. It is this interpersonal symbolic media that cultivates a sociality that is authentically human. It is this symbolic structure that completes the human being such that, at the end of their life, the human being is qualitatively different from when they were a baby. The Confucian attitude is informed by the cultural anthropological observation (*avant la lettre*) that it is culture that defines us.

The reason why the Chinese tradition does not have the concept of a barbarian can be stated as follows. Given that it conceives of all immanent things as
conditioned by its environment and subject to change, the human is no dif-
ferent. Whilst the human being has limited control over the physical changes that they undergo, on a spiritual level, human beings have collective agency to determine their own becomings. The idea of the barbarian is incoherent with the Chinese conception that all things are conditioned and change and further, that it is their own creative realization through culture that defines what is au-
thentically human.

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