

# How to “Do Chinese Philosophy”: On Chen Shaoming’s Method of “Doing Chinese Philosophy”

*Bisheng CHEN*

## Abstract

“Doing Chinese philosophy” as a method proposed by Chen Shaoming offers a perspective that shifts from the study of the history of Chinese philosophy to the innovation or creation of the significance of Chinese philosophy. Chen defines the “Chinese philosophy” as a philosophy that embodies the cultural spirit or experiences of China. This approach calls for an expansion of resource beyond the traditional study of the history of Chinese philosophy and seeks to bridge classical thoughts with modern life experiences. It does not advocate a metaphysical presupposition for research but accepts methodological diversity while promoting the cultivation and use of imagination. This approach also aims at envisioning a philosophy field that is rich in thought and broad in scope.

**Keywords:** doing Chinese Philosophy, Chen Shaoming, classical experience

## Kako »delati kitajsko filozofijo«? – O Chen Shaomingovi metodi »delanja kitajske filozofije«

### Izvleček

»Delanje kitajske filozofije« kot metoda, ki jo je predlagal Chen Shaoming, ponuja neko perspektivo, ki pooseblja premik od preučevanja kitajske filozofije do inovacije ali ustvarjanja njene pomembnosti. Chen »kitajsko filozofijo« definira kot filozofijo, ki uteleša kulturnega duha ali izkušnje Kitajske. Ta pristop zahteva širitev virov onkraj domene tradicionalnih študij kitajske filozofije in si prizadeva ustvariti most med klasičnimi mislimi ter modernimi življenjskimi izkušnjami. Pri tem ne zagovarja metafizične predpostavke za raziskavo, temveč sprejema metodološko raznolikost, medtem ko spodbuja gojenje in rabo domišljije. Ta pristop si prav tako prizadeva predvideti filozofijo kot miselno bogato in širokokožno področje.

**Ključne besede:** delati kitajsko filozofijo, Chen Shaoming, klasična izkušnja

\* Bisheng CHEN, Department of Philosophy, Tsing Hua University, Beijing 100084, China.  
Email address: bishengchen@163.com



In the early 21st century, discussions on the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy emerged in mainland China, providing a fundamental backdrop for Chinese scholars to contemplate methodological issues within Chinese philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, scholars including Yang Guorong 楊國榮, Peng Guoxiang 彭國翔, and Chen Lai 陳來 have proposed their own novel insights into the research methods of Chinese philosophy. Within these diverse perspectives, Chen Shaoming 陳少明 puts forth a unique viewpoint, known as the philosophical method of “doing Chinese philosophy” 做中國哲學, which became his significant contribution to the study of mainland Chinese philosophy. His books *People, Events and Things in the Classical World* and *Doing Chinese Philosophy* (2008b) serve as concentrated presentations of this method.

“Doing Chinese philosophy” may look like a slogan, but it is a method and road to philosophy research. Philosophy, in the sense of an academic discipline, is imported to China from the West. Therefore, when “Chinese” is added before “philosophy” it often becomes “the history of Chinese philosophy”. Westernization and historicization are the two basic orientations of “Chinese philosophy”. They are the foundation of Chinese philosophy as academic science and the necessary impetus for developing “Chinese philosophy”. However, over-Westernization and over-historicization can quickly become traps for research in Chinese philosophy. The former, along the “East-West” dimension, overuses Western philosophical concepts, thus ignoring the characteristics of Chinese civilization itself. In contrast, the latter overemphasizes historicization and relies too much on the “ancient-modern” dimension, ignoring the innovations of contemporary Chinese philosophy. The “doing Chinese philosophy” method proposed by Chen is precisely a way to overcome over-Westernization and over-historicization. In his essay “Seeking Method: Insights from Western Philosophy”, Chen explains:

Regardless of values’ orientations or ideological debates, the reflection on Chinese philosophy may lead to a tendency to either abandon Chinese philosophy or attempt to examine Chinese learning through the lens of Western science. The reason for this is the overall situation of Chinese philosophical research in the past, which is either very “philosophical” but not “Chinese” or “Chinese” enough but not sufficiently “philosophical”. The former refers to the excessive use of Western philosophical concepts and frameworks to make a truncated account of classical Chinese thought. In contrast, the latter refers to a return to the traditional commentary or philological analysis of the Chinese classics. I believe that

1 This paper is translated by Yves Vendé 溫德 Université Catholique de Lille & Centre Sèvres, (France). It was originally published in 2017 in *Philosophical Research* 哲學研究 (3: 119–26).

overly Westernized Chinese philosophy should be abandoned and that the commentarial mode has its own scholarly value. However, if the latter is taken as the broad path to the renewal of Chinese philosophy, it may lead in the opposite direction. (Chen 2008a)

To be very “philosophical” but not “Chinese” is to be overly Westernized. To be “Chinese” but not “philosophical” is often to be over-historicized. In the preface of Chen Shaoming’s most recent book, *Doing Chinese Philosophy* (2015), he emphasizes the methodological meaning of “doing Chinese philosophy”.

The first is to distinguish it from the historical discourse of philosophy, which only explains but does not create, and the other is to pursue its Chinese characteristics. “Chinese philosophy” has two meanings: classical philosophy, which refers to classical culture and intellectual experience, and contemporary philosophy, and the former is also included in the latter as a concept of time (Chen 2015, 6).

In other words, “doing Chinese philosophy” is not only to research the history of philosophy, but also for the researcher of Chinese philosophy to engage in “philosophical creation”. “Doing” thus carries the meaning of “creating/innovating”. Through this innovative action of thinking, it is possible to overcome both the non-philosophical tendency as a result of the focus on “China” and the non-Chinese tendency as a result of an emphasis on “philosophy”. The former leads to the development of the history of philosophy without philosophizing, while the latter leads to the emphasis on philosophizing without concern for the Chinese dimension. The fundamental standpoint of “doing Chinese philosophy” lies in the researcher’s experience gained through physical activities, ethical living, and conscious thinking. For philosophical innovation, such experiences are both personal and collectively shared in the past and today, in China and the West.

## From the History of Philosophy to Philosophizing

The research method presented in the book *Doing Chinese Philosophy* is based on the existing framework and connotation of the discipline of Chinese philosophy. In addition to clarifying matters of the history of philosophy, it intends to discover the concepts, topics, and even schools and thoughts common in ancient and contemporary Chinese philosophy, so that it can directly face the real world and construct contemporary Chinese thought.

In this context it must first be noted that there was no “philosophy” in ancient China, and “Chinese philosophy” in the sense of a modern academic discipline was formed during the transformation of Chinese scholarship from ancient to

modern times (see Sang 2010; Chen 2015). After the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, Chinese people developed deep doubts about their culture. From Yu Yue 俞樾, Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 to Kang Youwei 康有為 and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, they all realized that learning the Classics (*jingxue* 經學) alone, the core of traditional learning, which was established in the scholarly context of the Qing dynasty, was no longer sustainable and heading for collapse. The basic structure of traditional culture would inevitably give rise to revolutionary changes. After 1911, Hu Shi’s 胡適 generation moved to the centre of the Chinese academic stage, completely turning China—West issues into those of ancient—modern, and after “China” became “ancient”, all discussions on the Chinese scholarly tradition quietly all turned into studies of “ancient” scholarship.

In the background of this change from ancient to modern, research on the earlier Chinese civilization has become a form historical study. Therefore, the usual research and conversations in the humanities carried out in China on literature, history, and philosophy use a Western framework to organize Chinese “history”. This is precisely the approach of “sorting out the national heritage” represented by Hu Shi. Hu Shi’s writings on the history of philosophy and literature are based on this thinking (for details, see Chen 2014). As Chen Shaoming believes: “describing the history of Chinese philosophy with the conceptual framework of Western science is the product of an implicit comparison” (Chen 2015, 57). When the framework and standards of Western “philosophy” are adopted as a reference when searching for the substance of “Chinese philosophy” through such comparing, a complete set of historical narratives of the “history of Chinese philosophy” is established, and the systemization of Chinese philosophy is achieved.

If we affirm that “sorting out the national heritage” was an inevitable choice to establish a new discipline in the early stage of the modern transformation of Chinese academics, the vitality of this discipline lies in its advancement through facing the requirements of contemporary times and engaged in constant self-reflection. After entering the 21st century, the Chinese academic community began to take on some new features to a certain extent. The main background was the re-interpretation of ancient and modern. Specifically, this is reflected in seeing China not as “ancient” in the literal sense of the term, and changing the basis of interpretation to “Chinese and Western”, hoping to rediscover the inherent intellectual value of Chinese tradition from the perspective of a comparison between Chinese and Western civilizations. Chen wrote in the chapter “Research on the History of Chinese Philosophy and Invention of Chinese Philosophy” that “the research on the history of Chinese philosophy has little effect on promoting the creation of Chinese philosophy. The underlying reason is rooted in a century of academic and intellectual history” (Chen 2015, 70). This intellectual movement,

which in its beginning phase was generally a reflection on scholarship of the 20th century, was primarily aimed at saving “learning” from history. For more than ten years, whether it is the conversation on “the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy”, the renewed attention of history to the issue of the ethnic groups in the borderland, or the various re-examinations of “what is China?” in academic circles, the underlying motives more or less all have the aim of emphasizing the “science/learning” of China.

The model of the history of Chinese philosophy as an academic discipline that Chen Shaoming proposes can be summed up as “from the comparison of philosophy to the science of the history of philosophy”. This model, on the one hand, explains the origin of the “history of Chinese philosophy” as a discipline, and on the other hand indicates the genuine creativity of “Chinese philosophy”. Starting from the writing of “The Transformation of the Genealogy of Knowledge”, what Chen pursued was not only to reflect on the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” but to explore a way of creating “Chinese philosophy”. There was no “philosophy” in ancient China, but today we have written a “history of (Chinese) philosophy” based on it. This phenomenon is itself worthy of reflection. If the so-called “history of Chinese philosophy” is based on the creation of Chinese philosophy, the description and arrangement of such a history of philosophy cannot only demonstrate the past of “Chinese philosophy”, but also serve as a lesson on the creation of Chinese philosophy. But if there is no invention of Chinese philosophy, and only the use of the framework and terminology of philosophy to describe the ancient classics, then it can result in turning the wisdom of the Classics into a theoretical game under a modern logical framework, which does not help us understand modern living. Besides, excessive focus on Western philosophical abstraction does not help examine ancient life, either.

However, when establishing the discipline of Chinese philosophy, there lies an implicit possibility of philosophical creation besides sorting out the history of Chinese philosophy. The two-volume *History of Chinese Philosophy* (2000) written by Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 is a classic work in establishing Chinese philosophy as a scientific discipline. In the “Introduction”, Feng stipulates this discipline’s fundamental basis, with two points constituting an essential foundation for developing Chinese philosophy.

The first one is the meaning of Western knowledge, which Feng underlines as follows: “Philosophy is a Western term. Today, if we want to talk about the history of Chinese philosophy, one of the main tasks is to discuss the various contents of Chinese history and select those that can be called philosophy according to Western perspective and describe them” (Feng 2000, 3). Although this

statement has been criticized, it emphasizes the meaning of Western philosophy for Chinese philosophy, which is still very important.

The second foundation is to connect “Chinese philosophy” with the “knowledge of justice and pattern(s)” (義理之學). On this, Feng writes: “What the West calls philosophy can roughly be equivalent to what the Wei and Jin people call *xuanxue* (玄學) in China, what Song and Ming’s people call *daoxue* (道學), and what people in the Qing dynasty name knowledge of justice and pattern(s)” (ibid., 6). The traditional Chinese “knowledge of justice and patterns” is far more than *xuanxue* and Taoism or anything related to justice and pattern(s), although all these schools can be included in the scope of philosophy. Moreover, in traditional scholarship, the inquiry for justice and patterns is the closest to philosophy. Therefore, Feng Youlan uses philosophy to match the knowledge of justice and patterns, which is insightful. If Western philosophy is changed from being a framework into being a reference method, and the understanding of the school of knowledge of justice and pattern(s) is changed from the analysis of rhetoric into broader traditional principles of inquiry, then Feng’s views undoubtedly constitute a basic consensus that the discipline of Chinese philosophy should share. Moreover, precisely because of the emphasis on the importance of Western knowledge and the philosophical nature of the traditional way of inquiring, the discipline of Chinese philosophy, since its establishment, did not lack “philosophical creativity” in its content, e.g., the dedication to “doing Chinese philosophy”, although the sorting out of the “history of philosophy” was a priority.

Regarding the understanding of “doing Chinese philosophy”, in addition to writing books on the history of Chinese philosophy, Chen Shaoming discovers new threads for the research into Chinese philosophy through a series of articles on Chinese wisdom, examining topics such as: Zhang Taiyan’s “Original Name” (原名), “enlightened view” (明見), “Explanations on equalizing things” (齊物論釋), Wang Guowei’s (王國維) “On Nature” (論性), “Explaining *Li*” (釋禮), “Original Mandate” (原命), the structure of Feng Youlan’s “New Neo-Confucianism” (新理學), Pang Pu’s 龐樸 “Talking about *xuanxue*” (談玄) and “Speaking of ‘negativity’” (說無) (Chen 2015, 75–77, 184). What is common to all these endeavours is facing modern life and thinking experiences using a philosophical approach and explaining life today through studying classical texts. As Chen Shaoming said, these theses and works discuss philosophy, but “even when interpreting traditional conceptual scopes or propositions, they do not stop at restoring the original meaning, but go farther to the reconstruction and reflection on the ways of reasoning. That’s authentic philosophical research” (ibid., 77).



In this sense, the method that doing Chinese philosophy points to is to build on what already exists in the field, based on the history of Chinese thought established by Hushi and Feng Youlan, and then to seek a new method that connects the sorting out of the history of Chinese philosophy with the creation of contemporary Chinese philosophy. To realize this connection, the key is not to conduct academic research on the history of Chinese philosophy, but to engage in philosophical discussions on Chinese people's living and conscious experiences.

In the history of the traditional School of Justice and Patterns (義理學), it has always been a question to determine, formally speaking, whether the proposals and updates of justice and patterns come from Classics or real life. Let us look at the history of the transmission of the Classics in China. We can see that the inheritance contains two types of formal knowledge: one type concerns the knowledge presented in the Classics themselves, including analysing the text and bringing together different commentators' opinions. This leads to establishing parallelisms and describing internal and external connections in the Classics, such as Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 AD) does in his commentaries, which bridge different meanings to achieve a new "minor unification" of these ancient texts. Another example is the textual research in the School of Qianjia (乾嘉) in the Qing dynasty. This focuses on exegesis and textual criticism, and the purpose is to show the original meaning of the Han Classics. The other type of formal knowledge is real life-oriented knowledge, e.g., proposing a set of theories from real life and verifying these in the Classics by finding no contradiction within them. A typical example of this approach is the Song-Ming Lixue (理學).

These two types of knowledge are only different in a formal sense. Regarding their actual content, merely explaining the texts can lead to a new conceptual system, the reorganization of the Classics, and possibly a brand-new worldview relevant to real life. Similarly, the theories proposed for real life are not principles without foundations in culture but can be verified in the Classics.

But relatively speaking, the knowledge developed for real life has more practical value as justice and patterns. In the Chinese tradition, the pre-Qin schools of thought, the Weijin *xuanxue* (魏晉玄學), and the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties were all various peaks of the Justice and Patterns School, when the mere analysis of texts could no longer respond to real-life challenges. In such situations, by focusing on real life philosophers invented new forms of thoughts by integrating real life and texts. Similarly, the difference between doing Chinese philosophy and the study of the history of philosophy lies in the formal shift of focus from the Classics to real-life experience, or more precisely, from the concern of how to interpret the Classics to how to establish a connection between

real life and these texts. Reconstruction of this relationship aims at articulating the two dimensions of “searching for virtue” and “being concerned for the country”. At the same time, the meaning of doing Chinese philosophy should also be related to these two dimensions.

## Understanding Classical Experience Philosophically

Chen uses philosophical methods to describe the Chinese experience of life, especially in the classical world, as described in *People, Events and Things in the Classical World*. In the preface to that book, Chen Shaoming explains the content as follows: “To absorb classical wisdom fully, it is necessary to start with excavating various narrative contents of classical texts and create Chinese philosophy in addition to the existing history of philosophy. To achieve this, it requires, first of all, not facing classical ideas and concepts but getting in touch with the lifestyle of the classical world. Experience, not concepts, is the fundamental starting point of philosophy” (Chen 2008b, 5).

Several concepts that repeatedly considered in the *History of Chinese Philosophy* do not originally exist as a theoretical system in the Classics. Because the classical philosophers did not have the desire to create a theoretical system, the notions of humanity (*ren* 仁), justice (*yi* 義), rituals (*li* 禮), existence (*you* 有), and non-existence (*wu* 無) are only embedded in their fragmentary narratives to express what is going on in their behaviours and teachings. Most of these key terms that we come into contact with in the Classics have their specific contexts and display their true significance in these particular contexts. For example, according to the *Analects*, the meaning of “humanity” is expressed and illustrated in the display of the disposition of “a human person that loves others”, in the character of being “resolute and temperate”, in the activity of “restraining oneself and returning to the rites”, in the reflection on “the faults of men are characteristic of the class to which they belong. By observing a man’s faults, it may be known that he is virtuous”. If these “concept-context” analyses are bypassed and the interpretative grid of “Western concept—Chinese concept” is used, the Chinese concept can only be disguised as a variant of the Western discourse system. In contrast, if we use the “concept-context” analysis method to reconstruct the classical world’s lifestyle, many textual elements not accepted by the “history of philosophy” will get value. In the book *People, Events and Things in the Classical World*, Chen Shaoming writes:

We need to address the life experience of the classical world and understand the concepts in their particular context; what’s more, to discover



the hidden ideas in the Classics and conduct in-depth philosophical reflection. Undoubtedly, the so-called life experience of the Classics is mainly presented through narratives in the Classics texts. The centre of the narratives can be characters, events, and even things. Characters, things, and events are mutually exchanged into one another so that the central issue is changed. The purpose is to make a deeper exploration of life in the Classics. (Chen 2008b, 26)

We will now take the chapter “Speaking and Training: Rereading the *Analects* of Confucius” in the book *People, Events and Things in the Classical World* as an example to observe how the methods mentioned above are used to explore the issue of education and formation. The chapter discusses Confucius’ teaching, but the content does not cover “Confucius’ educational thought” or something like that. Instead it considers the literary representation of Confucius and why this is effective in achieving the moral education of his disciples. The *Analects* does not provide us with theories such as a “philosophy of education”, but instead examples of how to develop virtue. In the chapter, Chen Shaoming adds a the following caveat to this process): “No one obtains moral awareness by learning the principles of ethics. The study of ethics cannot replace the role of training people” (ibid., 71). In the *Analects* it is common for Confucius to inspire students through examples drawn from daily life. Confucius gives different answers to different people asking the same question depending on the context; for example, when Zhong Gong 仲弓, Fan Chi 樊遲, Yan Yuan 顏淵, and other disciples ask about “humanity”, Confucius’ answers are entirely different. When Ziyou 子遊, Zixia 子夏, and other disciples ask about “filial piety”, Confucius also responds in totally different ways. This is not because Confucius provides inconsistent theoretical interpretations of the terms “humanity” and “filial piety”, but because he practices education in a customized manner according to the specific situations, identities, and capacities of his interlocutors. Therefore, the analysis of Confucius’ training should not be about removing the particular context of Confucius’ words to make a logical synthesis of these fragments, but it should be more about understanding his ideas on teaching by returning to the conversations on virtue in specific situations. What is discussed in the chapter “Speaking and Teaching” is neither the content of teaching (which has been discussed in many textbooks on the history of philosophy) nor the characteristics of education (which has been addressed under headings such as “Confucius’ educational thought”), but teaching itself—that is, how Confucius, as a master of wisdom, taught his students to become superior men through good learning in the practice of teaching.

One always encounters various difficulties in one’s life experience and moral practice. In the Classics, the sages often use these challenging situations as opportunities for training. For example, in the *Analects* Confucius commented on Guan Zhong 管仲 with his students. On the one hand, Confucius said that Guan Zhong was “humane”: “The Duke Huan assembled all the princes together, and that not with weapons of war and chariots—it was all through the influence of Guan Zhong. Whose humanity was like his?” (*Analects*, 14.16). “Guan Zhong acted as prime minister to duke Huan 齊桓公, made him leader of all the princes, and united and rectified the whole kingdom. Down to the present day, the people enjoy the gifts which he conferred. But for Guan Zhong, we should now be wearing our hair unbound and the lappets of our coats buttoning on the left side” (*Analects*, 14.17). On the other hand, Confucius also said, “Small indeed was the capacity of Guan Zhong!” “If Guan knew the rules of propriety, who does not know them?” (*Analects*, 3.22). If we look at these comments (only) within the framework of the history of philosophy built upon the relationship between humanity and rituals, it is impossible to get a conceptually consistent explanation. But if we look at it from the perspective of a way of training, Zilu 子路 and Zigong 子貢 criticize Guan Zhong for being “inhumane”, referring to the fact that when Duke Huan killed Gong Zijiu, Guan Zhong did not commit (ritual) suicide at the death of Gong Zijiu. This covers Guan Zhong’s lifelong career with Guan Zhong’s momentary injustice. Therefore, Confucius did not praise deeds according to “humanity” but honoured people with “humanity”. At the same time, Confucius rejects Guan Zhong’s lack of frugality and ignorance of rituals. In these three dialogues, what Confucius is doing is not making a comprehensive evaluation of Guan Zhong in theory, but training his disciples in assessing complex and important historical figures based on specific historical events and problems. At a deeper level, when handling the complexity of historical figures, Confucius makes his disciples understand what is right and wrong, good and evil. And this is the real goal of training, as it contributes to the formation of the trainees’ characters. Our reflection today on this training experience also enables us to learn from it—that is, to receive training ourselves. As Chen Shaoming says, “Education is not a theory, nor a learning activity prepared for practice. It is the practice itself and a process of shaping moral personality. At the same time, although this practice is the ancient way of life that originates in ancient Confucianism, it is not irrelevant to contemporary ethical life” (Chen 2008b, 72).

Regarding reflections on the present based on the philosophical explanations of the Classics, several essays stand out in the book *People, Events and Things in the Classical World*: “Peace of Mind, or Reasonable?”, “Dispelling Confusion”, “On Shame”, and “Tolerance and Intolerance”. Peace of mind, reason, confusion,

shame, disgrace, humiliation, and the need for tolerance are all common psychological experiences in daily life that share the same meaning yesterday and today in the East and West. Therefore, analysing the content presented in the Classics is relevant for our lives today.

## Why does “Philosophy” Need the Classics?

When we make real life the object of research and relate it to the innovative dimension of philosophy, then it is enough to “do philosophy”, so why should we add “Chinese” in front of “philosophy”?

From the perspective of cultural history, the difference between “doing Chinese philosophy” and “doing philosophy” lies in considering “China”. Chen Shaoming says: “The word ‘Chinese’ in ‘Chinese Philosophy’ is a cultural rather than a political or geographical concept. It does not refer to philosophical papers written by Chinese nationals or published in China, but theories and thoughts that reflect Chinese culture or Chinese way of life, that is, Chinese philosophy” (Chen 2015, 103). This connotation of “Chinese” is roughly equivalent to the thought and life experience that use the Chinese language as a medium. In Chen Shaoming’s terms, “Chinese philosophy” does not mean “the philosophy of China”, but “philosophy rooted in China”, in which “Chinese philosophy” is understood as an independent and integrated term. This understanding comes from the “experience” emphasized in Chen Shaoming’s book *Doing Chinese Philosophy*.

The word “experience” is the most crucial keyword in doing Chinese philosophy (proposed) by Chen Shaoming. Only by understanding the meaning of “experience” can we know how to “do” Chinese philosophy. In Chinese and Western philosophy, “experience” often plays an essential role in constructing a philosopher’s philosophical system, but it also implies some significant dangers. Because any experience is individual, and individual experience is often unreliable. Therefore, dealing with experience can be very problematic. In the chapter “Cashing in the Bank-Note of Concepts”, Chen Shaoming believes that “experience starts from the moment”:

Although the ‘immediate/now/contemporary’ experience is both modern and Chinese, it does not exclude the classical and the Western ones. Human experience has/contains universal content, in ancient and modern times, in China and the West. However, for any group or cultural community, it must be something that can be experienced or understood by oneself in the ‘here and now’. ... The understanding of experience must start with the most general categories. (Chen 2015, 242)

In this text, Chen Shaoming lists several rough categories of experience: first, the experience of physical activity; second, the moral experience (which is above all ethical); third, the experience of learning a language and using it; fourth, conscious experience, including cognitive and emotional activities (ibid., 242–45). This encapsulates several key issues raised in *Doing Chinese Philosophy*: first, a shared human experience can be abstracted from the miscellaneous individual experiences and transformed into a matter for philosophical inquiry; second, this kind of human experience is universal and cannot be distinguished between classical and modern times, or between China and the West; third, this kind of human experience can be grasped in philosophical thinking.

Chen Shaoming repeatedly mentions the importance of “experience” in both the contemporary situation to the creation of Chinese philosophy. In the preface to *People, Events and Things in the Classical World* he writes: “Philosophy or other knowledge creation always uses two major thinking resources, one is the fruit of thoughts of our predecessors, and the other is the current life experience. Ultimately, life itself is the ultimate source of creation of thoughts/creative thinking” (Chen 2008b, 143). On the other hand, he also argues: “Taking the current life experience as the object of reflection is the most basic and fundamental task in contemporary Chinese philosophy. But as far as Chinese philosophical innovation is involved, the classical life experience stored in the literature is an important thinking resource” (ibid., 103–04).

“Experience” involves two types of content: one is “current life experience”, which includes contemporary and personal factors like emotions, consciousness, and reflection on experience. Only by exploring the immediate and current life experience can there be real scholarly innovation, not just “history”. The other type of content is “classical life experience stockpiled in documents”, which is gained mainly through reading the Classics. This type of experience contrasts with the framework and concepts of the history of philosophy or the knowledge held in the texts of the Classics. The textbook-like history of philosophy often focuses on the experience presented in the Classics, and the textual research on academic histories often focuses on the knowledge in the Classics. What *Doing Chinese Philosophy* focuses on is the vivid ancient experience of life preserved in classical literature.

This involves a critical question regarding the method of “doing Chinese philosophy”: how should we treat the Classics? Chen Shaoming believes that “Classics are only a medium for philosophical reflection on classical thoughts and experiences” (Chen 2015, 109). Philosophy does not regard the ancient Classics as dead books or knowledge that has nothing to do with those of us living today. It looks

at these texts as lively “classical life experiences” and “classical thoughts and experiences”. The greatest significance of the Classics is that they record vibrant details of classical life and thought, as expressed in experiences. Here, the opposite of “experience” are concepts and various interpretations of concepts.

For example, a philosophical reflection on the *Analects* does not understand the *Analects* as a conceptual world composed of humanity, justice, rituals, and wisdom. It looks at every sentence of the *Analects* as a record of Confucius’ training and teaching. Chen Shaoming, in the chapter “Speaking and Training: Rereading the *Analects* of Confucius” in the book *People, Events and Things in the Classical World* (2008b) writes: “The *Analects* are the records of Confucius’ teachings and training; it is not Confucius’ textbook” (Chen 2008b, 63–64). Only by restoring the experiences behind the text can we discover Confucius’ way of teaching and training. This approach already existed in ancient times, as seen when Zhu Zi 朱熹 (1130–1200 AD) writes in the *Commentaries on the Four Books* how to read the *Analects* and *Mencius*, quoting Cheng Yi’s 程頤 (1033–1107 AD) words: “In the *Analects*, scholars should put their questions in the mouth of the disciples, and the Sage would answer them with something to be heard today, and they naturally would get it” (Zhu 2010, 61).

Reading in this way is to restore every line in the *Analects* back to the scene where Confucius was teaching. This feature can be seen everywhere in Zhu Zi’s annotations and commentaries to the *Analects*, and it is necessary to pay attention to the relationships among various people, events, and things that appear in this text it is to be regarded as a record of Confucius’ teaching and training.

For example, the following dialogue between Ji Kangzi 季康子 and Confucius is recorded in the *Analects* in the Yan Yuan 顏淵 chapter:

Ji Kang asked Confucius about government, saying, ‘What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?’ Confucius replied, ‘Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relationship between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.’ If this dialogue is regarded as an expression of thought, it is customary to regard Confucius’ answer as merely developing Confucius’ theory, in conjunction with ‘To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?’ (*Analects* 12.19)

A deeper approach is to even interpret this sentence as the fundamental principle of Confucius’ thinking and conduct to refute Confucius’s criticism of Shao

Zhengmao 少正卯 and other issues. However, if this dialogue is instead read as a life experience, the problem is not so simple. It is related to Ji Kangzi’s status as an influential minister, as well as the departure from the ideal of being a “wise and just” ruler rather than a “tyrannical” one. Even if seen from the perspective of “events”, to link it with Confucius’ response to a question raised by Ji Kangzi regarding a father-son lawsuit, as recorded in the chapter “You Zuo” 宥坐 of *Xunzi* is another possible interpretation (see Hutton 2015). Assuming that the one asking the question was not Ji Kangzi but Yan Hui 顏回, Confucius must not have given such an answer since there was already a common understanding of the Dao (道) between the teacher and his students.

Another example is the understanding of “filial piety” (*xiao* 孝). “Filial piety” is a moral term that implies the relationship between father and son, that is, the son’s attitude towards his father. The textbook-style approach to the history of philosophy would be to classify and summarize the content of Confucianism about filial piety and explain the characteristics and evolution of such piety. What is more “philosophical” in this context is to make the concept of filial piety more abstract.

However, if we look at the issue of filial piety from the perspective of *Doing Chinese Philosophy*, what is mentioned about “filial piety” in the Confucian classics is a reflection on the father-son relationship. The father-son relationship exists in ancient and modern times, in China and the West, and is one of the most universal and fundamental human relationships that plays a vital role in society.

If we reduce the filial piety mentioned in the Classics to the relationship between father and son, we can observe how the ancient Chinese sages used this moral term to define and regulate the son’s affection for his father and, from this, develop a whole ethical order. If we aim to understand the ever-changing father-son relationship in contemporary times, the wisdom of the ancient people still provides a crucial resource for us to comprehend real life, and even offers theoretical support for analysing family life in the West.

It can be said that when Chen Shaoming observes that “the Classics are only a mediation/medium for philosophical reflection on classical thought and experience”, he provides a new understanding of the ancient texts. To reconstruct the text from experience requires the ability to scrutinize the text and then apply imagination and insight into one’s current life experience.

From a contemporary perspective, one can agree or disagree with the classical life experience stored in the Classics, and regard it as effective or ineffective when dealing with the problems of today. However, because the life experience of each



person is limited by their personal context, the basic categories abstracted from life experience as a whole can only ever be a summary of modern life. Therefore, “the life experience stored in the Classics” has become the most important resource for Chinese philosophy, and its importance exceeds that of our immediate, contemporary life experience. It can be said that *Doing Chinese Philosophy* focuses on real life, and the research objects in this endeavour are mainly classical texts.

Regarding the meaning of “experience”, the immediate life experience and the life experience of the Classics are connected. When we think and express ourselves in Chinese, whether ancient or modern, we experience the same world. Because of the language differences between China and the West, the issues involved will be more complicated. But for China, the descriptions of the classics and what people know today share a continuity regarding the meaning of “experience”. For example, in a series of essays by Chen Shaoming, such as “Dispelling Confusion”, “On Shame”, and “Tolerance and Intolerance” in the book *Doing Chinese Philosophy* (Chen 2015), we can identify a large number of nameable moral emotions that have common meanings in both ancient and modern times. It is only by going into an analysis based on the Classics that an experience which starts now can transcend the limits of individual experience and achieve a true universalization. Therefore, the method of *Doing Chinese Philosophy* is essentially to carry out research on classical thought, which is also manifested as research based on classical thought.

Chen Shaoming believes that N experience starts from the immediate present, which can be compared to the “involved learning” emphasized in Zhu Zi’s theory. Zhu Zi’s method of reading focuses on relating to oneself while reading. In the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* he states

‘In reading, one must be humble and relate it to oneself. Being humble allows one to understand the Sages’ ideas; by relating the words to one’s life experience, the words of the sages will not become empty talks.’ He also said: “Be humble and involve yourself. Being humble, the truth will manifest and become clear (*daoli* 道理); relating to your own experience, you will acknowledge it spontaneously.’ (Li 2010, 335)

When reading, it is only when the words of the Sages are connected with your own experience can you understand them properly. Cheng Yichuan says: “Readers should observe the intentions of the sages in writing the scriptures, the reasons behind, what makes a Sage achieve perfect wisdom, and why I haven’t achieved it yet. Dig in every sentence, recite it every day, and review it. Think about it in the middle of the night, calm down and be patient, eliminate the doubts, then you

will be able to reach the perspective of the Sages.” (Cheng and Cheng 2004, 332) In the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, it is said: “someone asked him about Yi Chuan’s saying that ‘reading should be viewed as searching the meaning of the sage(s)’ scriptures and the intentions of the Sage(s)’. He answered: ‘I identify the most with this line of Cheng Yichuan talking about reading.’” (Li 2010, 633) That is to say, through reading one can understand the classical life experience as presented in the Classics and use it as a reference for one’s immediate experience. In this way, experience-oriented philosophical research and innovation can overcome the limits of individual experience and reach universal experience.

Since the transformation of modern Chinese academia, how best to treat the Classics has always been a crucial issue. However, in “sorting out the national heritage” the Classics have become historical relics and dried specimens—to use the metaphor presented by Chen Shaoming—“making the classics into specimens of conceptual labels is like making fresh flowers into dried flowers” (Chen 2008b, 144).

What *Doing Chinese Philosophy* advocates—other than summarizing and generalizing the contents of the Classics under Western concepts—it is to restore the texts back to their original thoughts, lives, consciousness, and emotions, and from these experiences to generate a dynamism shared in the past and present, so that it can serve as the foundation for philosophical innovation based on modern life experience. Because of this, *Doing Chinese Philosophy* must bear the “Chinese dimension” in the cultural sense. It can even be said that any “doing philosophy” done by Chinese people is inherently “doing Chinese philosophy”. If we want to go away from these “Chinese” and “classical” dimensions, e.g., denying that today’s philosophical innovation must build on a 2,000-year-old tradition and “do philosophy” in the Chinese language, it will only be a monologue. There are Chinese and Western traditions, and no one is without a tradition. In the same sense, “philosophy” can be neither Chinese nor Western, but philosophical research and even philosophical innovation, when carried out in Chinese, can only differentiate between “Chinese philosophy” and “Western philosophy”.

### Considering China in *Doing Chinese Philosophy*

Chinese philosophy has developed from analysing the history of Chinese philosophy to “doing Chinese philosophy”, emphasizing the innovation in Chinese philosophy. This shift to putting method at the centre has brought about a transformation of Chinese philosophy, and what stands behind it is the consideration of the Chinese dimension in philosophy.

Over the past decade or so, various breakthroughs in research on Chinese philosophy can be closely related to this adoption of the Chinese dimension. Chen Lai's 陳來 reconstruction of a new Confucianism in "Ontology of Humanity's Learning", Zhang Xianglong's 張祥龍 philosophical demonstration of the traditional Chinese core concept of "filial piety" in *Family and Filial Reverence* 家與孝 (2017), and Chen Shaoming's emphasis on the meaning of methodological transformation in *Doing Chinese Philosophy*, all demonstrate that "Chinese philosophy" is moving away from a pure description of the history of philosophy, and confronting more and more directly the contemporary life of China.

Behind these changes is a new understanding of ancient and modern issues. At the beginning of the foundation of the discipline of Chinese philosophy, "China" was regarded as "ancient". Thus research on the history of philosophy was equated with philosophy itself, and so the discipline could only produce a large number of researchers working on the history of philosophy, but was not able to train new Chinese philosophers.

What is behind the emphasis on producing innovations in philosophy in connection with contemporary life is a reflection on the responsibilities that the discipline of "Chinese philosophy" can and should take on—that is, to regard Chinese civilization as an independent cultural system. Under this premise, it is possible to draw lessons from the methodological experience of Western philosophy to re-interpret the classics and understand the current intellectual situation and emotional world of Chinese people.

From the perspective of China, the Classics, and the experience highlighted in Chen Shaoming's book *Doing Chinese Philosophy*, the philosophical innovation advocated by this method mainly uses experience to connect with ancient and modern times and adopts appropriate methods of Western philosophy to analyse this kind of experience. This is the reason why "the life experience stored in the Classics" must become the resource for today's philosophical research and innovation. A clear conception of history also supports this. The meaning of history for a country is like that of memory for a person. Just as one can become oneself because of one's memory, China can exist because of its history. The understanding of memory is experience, and Chen Shaoming believes that the dimension of historiography that investigates history is the way to understand experience, writing that: "Strictly speaking, history is not a science that exists side by side with philosophy, literature, sociology, economics, mathematics, or natural sciences. It is a way of understanding human experience" (Chen 2011).

In this view of history, it can even be said that the "philosophy" in "doing Chinese philosophy" exists because of "China". Therefore, "China" is not an adjective

(defining word), and rather “Chinese philosophy” is an independently sufficient term and a linguistic unit.

Chen Shaoming writes the following in “Confucianism, Historiography and Historical Metaphysics”: “Just as a person achieves his personality in learning, working and self-cultivation, a nation or a country forms its shared community in the transmission, creation, and development of cultural values. The history that records all this bears the great responsibility of cultural transmission” (ibid.). That is to say, the history of a country is the existence of the country itself. There is thus a strong sense of history and China behind *Doing Chinese Philosophy*.

Since the transformation of modern academia, traditional learning centred on an exegesis of the Confucian Classics (*jingxue* 經學) and Neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理學) has collapsed, and instead the focus of scholars who care for traditional culture has shifted to how to truly make the past and present communicate. The two great revolutions in the first 50 years of the 20th century led to changes in China’s past and present. It is an objective fact that the inherited Chinese culture has now become history, because traditional knowledge alone can no longer explain and respond to the facts of real life. Traditional learning has become “history” in a broad sense, and it must also be researched in the broad sense of “history”—that is, in the study of the Confucian Classics. But if this is only textual research then it naturally has only archaeological significance, which is an inevitable result of these earlier revolutions.

However, this does not mean that the Classics carrying the accomplishments of Chinese culture will become “history”. It can also be seen that more and more “modern” Chinese people will feel that traditional culture is omnipresent in their lives and thoughts, and many traditional elements can still explain modern life. As far as the experience of the Classics in Chinese history is concerned, there have been major changes in Chinese civilization due the replacement of the Yin dynasty by the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties, and with the changes that occurred with the Tang and Song dynasties. However, Chinese civilization has been able to maintain its continuity thanks to the strength of the Classics. Therefore, how to re-interpret tradition and reactivate the dynamism contained in the Classics in contemporary life is still required for the continuity of Chinese civilization.

In fact, every major development of argumentation in Chinese history has absorbed the spirit and existential vision contained in the Classics. For example, during the Song dynasty, as the core carrier of “tradition” (*chuantong* 傳統) at that time, the study of the Five Classics was facing a major crisis. Many learned scholars in the Northern Song dynasty no longer believed that the traditional exegesis of the Classics (*jingxue* 經學) could continue to exert its power, as it did through

the Han annotations during the Han dynasty and the Tang sub-commentaries in the Tang dynasty. Therefore, they changed how they approached the ancient scriptures and started doubting the *Prefaces to Odes* (traditionally attributed to Zixia). They abandoned the three commentaries' approach to the *Spring and Autumn Chronicles*. From the perspective of later generations, this approach made the study of the Classics entirely out of context. With the rise of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi's learning, who were no longer satisfied with deriving knowledge from the Classics but turned their attention to real life, proposed "Heavenly principles" 天理, rebuilt the "Confucian Orthodoxy" (*Daotong* 道統), offered a new understanding of the "moral character" (*xinxing* 心性), and constructed a new system of justice and pattern(s). The purpose of this set of knowledge was not to promote an "archaeological" truth, but instead the construction of a way to re-understand the real world based on the Classics.

Because of this, Lixue Confucians proposed a new intellectual system based on reality and applied this system to the Five Classics. They could then reinterpret the texts so that the Five Classics learning could continue to survive. The justice and pattern(s) experience of Neo-Confucians in the Song and Ming dynasties is still one of ancient China's most important intellectual contributions. At the same time, their way of reconstruction of the justice and pattern(s) tradition can be considered as a way of "doing Chinese philosophy", as they emphasized excavating justice and pattern(s) from both the Classics and real life, regarding the these works as the teaching experience of the ancient sages. The main idea of the method presented in *Doing Chinese Philosophy* is to relate to real life and regard the Classics as a presentation of Chinese thought and experiences to enable communication between ancient and modern times, and the reconstruction of a new philosophical system that is both "Chinese" and "philosophical". Only in this way can we establish a philosophical foundation for re-understanding what China means, for the reinterpretation and reconstruction of the contemporary Chinese way of life.

In addition, it should be pointed out that the method in *Doing Chinese Philosophy* is not only applicable to Chinese scholars, but also holds significance for researchers in the West who are engaged in the study of Chinese philosophy. The position that such researchers find themselves in naturally leads them to approach Chinese philosophy from the perspective of Western philosophy. However, this often results in a lack of accurate and appropriate understanding of Chinese thought and culture, leading to many misinterpretations. Therefore, some Western scholars, such as Roger T. Ames, have argued that to truly comprehend the meaning and significance of the Chinese Classics one must be immersed in the cultural milieu of the texts to grasp their deeper implications. In short, by adopting the "doing Chinese philosophy" approach, researchers in both China and the West are

able to gain a more accurate understanding of the traditions and characteristics of Chinese thought. This method allows for the comprehension of abstract philosophical ideas within the realm of experiential reality. As such, a potential path for addressing real-world challenges can be discerned from an experience rooted in the Chinese Classics.

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