Introduction: Towards a Communicative Encounter – Traditional Chinese Philosophy in Contemporary Discourses

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Guest editors

The Original Intent

In this special issue, we present contemporary studies of traditional Chinese philosophy, born out of the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The scholars who contributed to this volume sought to engage in a profound dialogue, a necessity during a time when the pandemic prevented in-person cross-border meetings. Though COVID-19 is now behind us, the impact it left on our world continues to resonate. This collection should be seen as a response to the concern that “the loss of memory and the possibility of intercultural dialogues ...will deal humanism a final, fatal blow” (Rošker 2023, 8). It encompasses a diverse array of systematic studies predominantly authored by scholars from mainland China.1

This special issue comprises three distinct sections. The first involves a systematic exploration of contemporary Chinese scholarship. Following this, it delves into contemporary interpretations of classical texts, emphasizing the current state of the field and theoretical reconstructions. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of two Confucian theories relevant to the present and a critical analysis of the comparative approach.

Two notable features warrant explanation. Firstly, it is important to highlight that five out of the ten articles in this issue have been translated from Chinese into English. Secondly, a significant portion of these articles, seven of the ten, have been authored by scholars affiliated with mainland Chinese academic institutions. Additionally, Stephen Angle’s paper focuses on the author’s interactions and critical reflections on scholars in mainland China. This special issue thus serves as a practical case study of the scholarly engagement between East and West.

1 We thank the editorial team of the journal, Michael Schapers, Rens Krijgsman, and Carine Defoort who have carefully engaged with this introduction and made improvements to it.
In this introduction, we aim to discuss the kind of encounter and communication we intend to achieve. In the process of communication, how can we understand the practice of translation and the function of a translator? How should the existing criticism of the Eurocentric curricula in Western philosophy departments inspire reflection on the Chinese side, especially given that Chinese scholarship has underscored the importance of comparative philosophy?

**What Kind of Encounter?**

Carine Defoort’s observations reveal the evolving dynamics in cultural interactions between China and the West. This interaction commenced in the 17th century, characterized by both sides interpreting each other through their own frameworks of thought. The 20th century witnessed a significant shift, with Western theories and scholarship dominating the discourse. However, recent decades have seen resistance against this one-sided dominance, under the banner of “the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” (Defoort 2022, 358‒59).

In contemplating the Western dominance in global intellectual discussions, Defoort suggests considering the role of emotions, attitudes, institutional structures, and disciplinary rigidity in the process of cultural exchange. She underscores the limitations of relying solely on rational debates to challenge the institutional biases and intellectual preconceptions in Chinese philosophy, a matter also examined by Vytis Silius (2020). Additionally, Defoort encourages an outlook of inclusivity and responsiveness (Defoort 2022).

As face-to-face communication becomes more accessible, whether in person or through virtual platforms, it is essential to explore the practices that drive and exemplify inclusive and responsive attitudes in contemporary Chinese philosophical exchanges with the West. How does communication characterized by inclusivity and responsiveness differ from other communication styles?

One way of understanding communication is by emphasizing the argumentation and presentation of facts, theories, and ideas, which constitutes the transaction of information. In this context, the emphasis lies on the significance of truth and facts, overshadowing the identities of the communicators and the manner in which they converse. Rational debate, being truth-centric, is undoubtedly vital and forms the foundation of effective communication. However, it is essential to recognize that genuine communication transcends this framework.

In the words of Eilan (2020, 12), “A shouting out to B in the supermarket that he is spilling sugar does not put him in a communicative relation with B unless B
responds to A in a way that involves his adopting an attitude of address towards A.” This underscores that authentic communication extends beyond mere information exchange; it hinges on the acknowledgment and response to one another, fostering a shared sense of engagement and interaction.

An alternative form of communication is instrumental and ideological, aiming to persuade and alter others’ viewpoints. However, this approach is distinct from our conception of communication, as it inherently fosters opposition, where individuals advocate their views against one another, resulting in a fixed worldview for the interlocutors. In this type of communication, the relationship concludes once one party successfully persuades the other.

In contrast, our vision of communication centres on reciprocity and mutual attention. In this context, the recipient perceives that the communicator is addressing them directly. The recipient not only recognizes but also reacts and responds to the communication, forming a dynamic exchange. The communicator, in turn, receives and acknowledges this response, fostering a continuous, interactive dialogue.2 According to Husserl

> All sociality is based […] on the actual connection of the communicative community (Mitteilungsgemeinschaft), the mere community of address and uptake of address, or more precisely, of addressing and listening. (Husserl 1973, 475, cited in Meindl 2023, 363)

If we shift our perspective and view communication not solely as a transaction of knowledge, as exemplified by one-sided shouting in a supermarket, or as a mere instrument for persuading or changing others’ opinions, several transformative changes emerge. To cultivate mutually attentive communicative behaviour, we must undertake certain steps.

Husserl’s insight into communication initiates a contemplation of the assessment of translation. This signifies that we need to examine the act of translating information, concepts, and perspectives across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. By doing so, we enhance our ability to engage in meaningful, mutually attentive communication.

2 The practice of authors meeting critics might function closer to the communication intended in this introduction. The author writes, the critic responds, and the author replies. They start with a shared concern. While equally expanding their horizon and the public space of discussion, they also attend to each other. The writer’s academic world enters into the critic’s space of debate, and the writer is obligated to respond to the critic’s attention and comments.
Translation as a Creative Act

To comprehend the essence of translation and the role of a translator, we must explore the concept of translation as a creative act. This leads us to ponder what occurs when certain elements remain untranslatable, a question that often lacks definitive answers. This issue becomes particularly pertinent in the context of *Chinese Literature and Thought Today*, a continuous endeavour to offer the finest English translations and insightful critical essays on contemporary Chinese literature, culture, philosophy, and intellectual history. Furthermore, the “State of the Field Report” within *Dao, A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, underscores the necessity of fostering effective research communication between the realms of Chinese and English academia.³

Moreover, Silius proposes that “translation should be taken as a philosophical method”, because it creates new meanings, expands language and mind, and allows them to be attested by others (Silius 2022, 72). What Silius probably has in mind is translating classical Chinese texts into modern languages. The significance of this, however, also reaches the translation of research articles, book reviews, conference reports, and so on. If translators are given recognition for “creating new meanings and expanding language and mind”, a good translator should be considered to engage with creative and highly skilled academic practice. As such, the different meanings embedded in translations will no longer be perceived as a gap, which often leads to the argument of the untranslatability of words due to the lack of lexical items within a cultural context, as criticized by Slingerland (Slingerland 2004, 5). This in return requires the practice of translation as much more than a literal transformation of words and sentences from one language to another, but with reinterpretations of concepts and the repositioning of debates. We need to be aware of the fact that “an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 languages still separate the people of the world, and only a small intellectual elite gather by agreeing to communicate in a common language, usually English” (Fügen 2007, 211). Being able to fully communicate in English should not be a baseline requirement for communication to start from, but should be recognized as an achievable goal by way of translation. In fact, the efforts made to approach Chinese scholarship in English journals reflect the practices of such an inclusive attitude while showing an intention to attend to Chinese scholarship.

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³ For instance, consider contemporary Chinese studies of concepts like *tianxia* 天下 (all under Heaven) as discussed by Tang (2023, 473–90), or the exploration of *wang* 忘 (forgetfulness) in the *Zhuangzi*, a topic addressed by Lam (2023, 297–317).
Comparative Philosophy: A Shared Situation

The articles featured in this volume play a pivotal role in the contemporary resurgence of traditional Chinese thought. They contribute through a diverse range of theoretical and textual reconstructions, reflecting the growing interest in comparative philosophy within academic discourse. Remarkably, this shared interest in comparative philosophy reveals that both East and West face a common challenge – the necessity, that is, to be included in the standard curriculum in university philosophy departments.

In several English-language articles, scholars have advocated for the inclusion of Chinese philosophy or comparative philosophy courses as a part of the standard curriculum in English-speaking universities (Silius 2020; Defoort 2022). This reflection on course structures is not exclusive to English-speaking philosophy departments, as it also extends to Chinese-speaking universities. When assessing the Chinese philosophy curriculum within Chinese-speaking academic settings, it is pertinent to ask how many philosophy courses carry the specific title “Comparative Philosophy”. Additionally, how many articles, even if not originally in Chinese, are considered essential readings in Chinese classrooms, reflecting global dialogues on the subject?

Even when a Chinese philosophy instructor encourages the application of a comparative approach in teaching, the course title itself signifies a broader interest in establishing students’ foundational knowledge and underscores the significance of addressing both similarities and differences. The call for institutional inclusion of comparative philosophy requires not only extensive research in this field, but also direct communication and mutual attention “for” and “with” one another from both sides.

The Structure of This Issue

This special issue aims to facilitate meaningful communication and is structured into four distinct sections. It commences with an opening section dedicated to the exploration of contemporary Confucian philosophy in mainland China and the critical examination of its methodological underpinnings.

In the first contribution titled “Virtue Ethics, Confucian Tradition and General Predicament of Modern Society: A Discussion of Chen Lai’s 陳來 Confucian Theory of Virtue” by Tang Wenming 唐文明, the nature of Confucian ethics and its complex relationship with modernity are extensively examined through the analysis of Chen Lai’s work on the Confucian Theory of Virtue. Tang points out
that Confucian ethical theory is inherently rooted in virtue ethics, and the differ-
entiation between public and private virtues within modern moral constructs in-
evitably results in the dominance of the former over the latter. This issue en-
capsulates a broader challenge faced by virtue ethics in the context of modern
societies.

The second paper in this section, authored by Zhao Jingang 趙金剛, explores the
topic of “Cultural Reflections on the Great and Originating Period: Chen Lai and
the Creative Transformation and Innovative Development of China’s Rich
Traditional Culture”. According to Zhao, Chen has been dedicated to resolving
this dichotomy by contemplating the role of tradition in modern society through
the lens of multicultural structures. He emphasizes the continuity of traditions root-
ed in value rationality. As a result, Chen has departed from monistic universality
and introduced the concept of poly-universalism to reevaluate the manner in which
universality exists. Chen argues that universality is not an exclusive mode, where
one must select one form of universalism over another, but rather, each civilization
inherently contains universality. While certain conditions are necessary to realize
universality, one cannot entirely replace the universal values of one civilization with
those of another.

In light of this cultural perspective and the consideration of the relationship be-
tween the fundamental tenets of Marxism and traditional Chinese culture, Chen
upholds the essence of benevolence, advocates for the new four virtues, and re-

flects upon the value of traditional Confucian virtue in contemporary China.

In the following paper, titled “How to ‘Do Chinese Philosophy’: On Chen Shaom-
ing’s 陳少明 ‘Method of Doing Chinese Philosophy’”, Chen Bisheng 陳壁生 ex-
plores Chen Shaoming’s approach as a method that marks a shift in perspective.
Instead of focusing on the historical study of Chinese philosophy, this method
emphasizes the innovative creation of the meaning of Chinese philosophy.

Chen defines Chinese philosophy as philosophy that embodies the cultural spirit
and experiences of China. This perspective calls for a broader array of resources
beyond the conventional historical study of Chinese philosophy, aiming to bridge
classical philosophical ideas with contemporary life experiences. It does not pro-
mote a metaphysical presupposition in research, but instead embraces methodo-
logical diversity while encouraging the cultivation and application of imagination.
Ultimately, this approach aspires to shape a philosophical field that is both intel-
lectually rich and encompassing in its scope.

This section concludes with Liu Yutong’s 劉禹彤 paper titled “On the Suprema-
cy of Confucianism and the Periodization of Confucian Classics Learning in the
Han Dynasty”. Liu presents a counterargument to Wang Baoxuan’s 王葆玹 claim that Emperor Wu 武 of the Han 漢 dynasty esteemed the Five Confucian Classics 五經 and allowed for the coexistence of non-Confucian schools. Liu contends that the full implementation of the supremacy of Confucianism (獨尊儒術) did not occur until the reign of Emperor Cheng 成. Additionally, Wang’s twofold premise, which suggests that masters learning (zixue 子學) during the Warring States period served as the foundation of classical learning (jingxue 經學) in the Western Han dynasty and that the decline of classical learning resulted from the extinction of masters learning during the ascendancy of Confucianism, is also challenged by Liu.

Liu’s paper proposes that the supremacy of Confucianism aimed at the second founding of the Han dynasty, rather than altering the relationship between classical texts and masters learning. Both the Qin 秦 and early Han dynasties drew inspiration from masters learning as their guiding ideology. However, Emperor Wu recognized that relying solely on masters learning, a collection of ideas from great thinkers, was unsustainable. Instead, the Han dynasty needed to be founded on classical learning, representing the traditional Chinese civilization inherited from the three ancient sage dynasties of the Xia 夏, Shang 商, and Zhou 周. Hence the supremacy of Confucianism was a means of ensuring the continuity and stability of the Han dynasty, as implemented by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 and Emperor Wu.

The second section of this special issue looks into the diverse interpretations of classical texts. It comprises three papers, starting with a contribution by Ding Sixin 丁四新 and Zhao Qiannan 趙乾男: “Newly Excavated Confucian Bamboo Manuscripts and Related Research”. They comprehensively survey the research on excavated Confucian texts from the past thirty years, including those from the Guodian 郭店, Shanghai Museum 上博, Tsinghua University 清華, Anhui University 安大, and Haihunhou Tomb 海昏侯墓 corpora. In terms of their content, these each have their own focus and characteristics. Among the bamboo manuscripts there is a large number that is dedicated to the Shijing 詩經, Shujing 書經, Liji 禮記 and Yijing 易經, as well as to Confucius, making them of great importance. At present, research on the Guodian and the Shanghai Museum manuscripts is mostly completed and that of the Tsinghua University collection is making large strides, while research on the Anhui University collection is only beginning to develop. Among all this research, Ding and Zhao point out that one of the weakest areas concerns the explanation and discussion of Confucian thought and related problems. This includes textual evidence in the form of excavated Confucian texts that provide a foundation for leaving behind the age of doubting antiquity (zouchu yigu shidai 走出疑古時代), and related debates by scholars that are beneficial to transmitting and revising this theory.
The next paper, authored by Kevin Turner, bears the title “Reconstructing a Theory of Mind in the *Mengzi*”. In this, the focus lies on the reconstruction of the theory of mind as presented in the *Mengzi* 孟子. The central argument of the paper pertains to recent studies that, in advocating for a mind-body dualism, inadvertently introduce Cartesianism through the language they employ. This paper meticulously exposes the utilization of Cartesian language within these arguments, with the intention of catalyzing a significant shift in our comprehension of Confucian philosophy. To achieve this shift, the paper turns to John Dewey’s conception of mind, which defines it as both “minding” and “discourse”. This view portrays the mind as a product of attentive engagement rooted in a backdrop of traditional values and meanings. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how the *Mengzi*’s concepts of *ren* 仁 and *tian* 天 contribute to a theory of mind. It identifies *ren* as *xin* 心, signifying mindful engagement, and *tian* implies tradition as a shared reservoir of social and cultural meanings. Through a comparative interpretation of the philosophies of the *Mengzi* and Dewey, a Mengzian theory of mind is reconstructed.

The subsequent paper, authored by Gong Zhichong 宮致翀, delves into the intricacies of Kang Youwei’s 康有為 thought, particularly within the context of the Confucian tradition. Gong’s analysis centres on a pivotal element of Kang’s philosophy, the Theory of the Three Ages (san shi shuo 三世說). In particular, it explores Kang’s synthesis of Confucius as a reformer (*Kongzi gai zhi 孔子改制*) and the doctrine that humans are born from Heaven (*ren wei tian sheng 人为天生*). These concepts were inherited from the Confucian tradition but underwent transformation in Kang’s interpretation. Kang’s perception of Confucius as a reformer served as the foundational theory behind his evolutionary Theory of the Three Ages, influencing its fundamental structure. The idea that humans are born from Heaven complemented this theory and provided the ethical basis for the construction of the “Great Unity” (*da tong 大同*). A significant aspect of Kang’s philosophy is its role as a bridge, offering insights into the Confucian tradition while also exemplifying a Confucian response to the challenges posed by the modern world.

The final section of this issue, titled “Reconstructing Confucian Philosophy”, features three contributions. The first paper, authored by Huang Yong 黃勇, explores the question, “Virtue Ethicist of the Ideal Type: Aristotle or Zhu Xi?” In this, Huang examines the impressive resurgence of virtue ethics as a contender against deontology and consequentialism within contemporary Western normative ethics. This resurgence has sparked great interest among comparative philosophers in identifying potential forms of virtue ethics in various philosophical traditions worldwide, with Confucianism notably in focus.
However, many of these comparative studies tend to employ historical examples of virtue ethics from the Western philosophical tradition, particularly Aristotelian ethics, as the ideal benchmark for measuring historical examples of virtue ethics in other philosophical traditions. This approach can potentially introduce bias, as non-Western examples of virtue ethics, no matter how noteworthy they may be, are often perceived as somehow lacking in comparison to their Western counterparts. In this paper, Huang first constructs the ideal type of virtue ethics, contrasting it with the ideal types of consequentialism and deontology. This ideal type envisions a normative ethics in which virtue takes precedence. Subsequently, Huang uses this ideal type of virtue ethics as a measuring tool to evaluate the virtue ethics of both Aristotle and Zhu Xi’s 朱熹, concluding that Zhu’s virtue ethics aligns more closely with the ideal type of virtue ethics than Aristotle’s.

Following Huang’s innovative comparative approach, Stephen Angle presents his own philosophical reconstruction in an essay titled “My Progressive Confucian Journey”. This essay looks at the interaction between Progressive Confucianism and mainland China in three distinct parts. It commences with a narrative chronicling Angle’s personal journey of self-identifying as a Confucian and advocating for Progressive Confucianism. The second part explores a pivotal phase in his intellectual evolution, marked by a series of ten dialogues held with mainland Chinese Confucians in the Spring of 2017. Angle’s article provides an overview of the topics that were debated, emphasizes recurring themes that emerged throughout these dialogues, reveals the diversity of views among mainland Chinese Confucians, and underscores the significance of these dialogues in the context of Progressive Confucianism. The essay concludes by offering reflections on these dialogues, which encompass points of agreement and disagreement, pivotal areas where Angle found himself learning from the conversations, and contemplations regarding the future of Progressive Confucianism in China.

The final paper in this issue, titled “An Introduction to Zoeontology” by Wu Fei 吳飛, introduces the concept of Zoeontology, a modern philosophical system constructed in the spirit of traditional Chinese philosophy. Zoeontology centres on the study of living and reimagines living as the central philosophical concern within the Chinese tradition, contrasting with Western philosophy’s focus on “being”. While “being” is often seen as eternal, with death as a negation of being, “living” encompasses the entire cycle of birth, growth, aging, and death. In zoeontology time is perceived as the rhythm of living, and space is considered the orientation within a living community. This philosophy views the living subject as a time-space system, interacting with the world from an ego-centred perspective. Zoeontology thus embraces a subjective philosophy. Different living subjects engage with one another when their rhythms of living run parallel or overlap,
highlighting the intimate and profound interactions between generations, such as parents and children. This interaction forms the foundation of a civil community. Zoontology also explores the dialectical relationship between civilization and nature, emphasizing that the purpose of human civilization is to civilize a natural living community, operating in harmony with the rules of nature. Human civilization is not about changing nature, but rather fulfilling its natural order.

In summary, this special issue presents a wide array of perspectives on the contemporary resurgence of traditional Chinese philosophy. It encompasses discussions within virtue ethics, comparative methodologies, textual analyses, and the reconstruction of philosophical theories grounded in Chinese sources. The fundamental theme running through this issue is the commitment to fostering open communication and a sustained effort to build a mutually enriching dialogue.

The successful realization of this special issue owes much to the participation and dedication of our translators. We would like to extend our gratitude to Kelvin Turner for translating the papers of Tang Wenming and Zhao Jinggang, Yves Vendé for translating the paper of Chen Bisheng, and Oliver Hargrave for translating Gong Zhichong’s article. Acknowledging the invaluable input from our reviewers regarding the selection of translated terms, concepts, and book titles, both authors and translators have actively grappled with the challenge of preserving meaning during translation while ensuring enhanced readability for English-speaking audiences.

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