

## Nivison and the Philosophical Study of Confucian Thought

*In Memory of David S. Nivison (1923 – 2014)*

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Among David S. Nivison's many contributions to the study of Chinese thought and culture, one that will have a lasting impact is his pioneering work in bridging traditional philological studies and western philosophical inquiry. His methodological approach, which can be discerned in his philosophical study of Confucian thought, resonates in spirit with a Confucian approach to the study of Chinese thought. I will begin with a summary of this Confucian approach, and then discuss his work against this background.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars of Chinese thought have concerned themselves with the way to relate Chinese thought to western philosophical inquiry. Hu Shi 胡適 characterizes philosophy, or *zhe xue* 哲學, in terms of a reflective study of the fundamental problems of human life, and argues that China has philosophy in this sense.<sup>1</sup> Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 describes philosophical activity as a rational process of argumentation, and argues that Chinese thinkers such as Mencius and Xunzi 荀子 engage in this kind of activity and hence that there is philosophy in China.<sup>2</sup> However, he adds, because of the practical orientation of Chinese thought, Chinese thinkers are inferior to western philosophers in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Hu and Feng, Lao Siguang 勞思光 focuses more on the way to study Chinese thought than on the nature of Chinese thought as such. According to him, western philosophical methods are characterized by logical thinking and an analytic approach, and these methods can legitimately be used in the study of Chinese thought even though such methods are not developed by Chinese thinkers themselves.<sup>4</sup> In response to criticisms that his approach has imposed western philosophical frameworks onto Chinese thought, he proposes a distinction between the content of Chinese thought and the way it has evolved. According to him, the content of the teaching of a Chinese thinker can be separated from the historical, social, and individual context in which the thinker puts forward the teaching, and it can be studied and its

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Shi 胡適, *Zhongguo Gudai Zhexue Shi* 中國古代哲學史 (Taipei: Shangwu, 1975), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi* 中國哲學史 (Hong Kong: Taipingyang Tushu Gongsu, 1970), 4-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-11.

<sup>4</sup> Lao Siguang 勞思光, *Zhongguo Zhexue Shi* 中國哲學史, vol. 1, revised edition (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1974). Preface, 20-21.

validity assessed as a body of ideas without regard to its context, just like the way we view a body of ideas in a western philosophical theory.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast to these attempts to relate Chinese thought to western philosophical inquiry, Confucian thinkers associated with the New Asia tradition emphasize the importance of grasping the distinctive features of Chinese thought in their historical and cultural context, and of avoiding distortions of our understanding through imposing western philosophical frameworks. Tang Junyi 唐君毅 and Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 find it important to take into account the practical orientation of Chinese thinkers, which accounts for the fact that the kind of ethical understanding the Confucian thinkers seek involves one's personally experiencing (*ti yan* 體驗) what is understood, unlike the kind of conceptual understanding in which one stands in a subject-object relation to what is understood.<sup>6</sup> Tang Junyi and Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 emphasize that the study of Chinese thought should start with close philological and textual studies (*xun gu* 訓詁), eventually moving on to studies that focus on ideas (*yi li* 義理), taking into serious account the historical and cultural context in which a thinker's ideas have evolved and the life experiences they reflect. We should avoid imposing our own conceptions onto the object of study and should instead approach it with *jing* 敬, an attitude of seriousness and caution, involving a genuine dedication to a proper understanding of the thinker under investigation, as well as being focused in attention and on guard against errors.<sup>7</sup>

Similar ideas can be found in Zhu Xi's 朱熹 views on the way to study the Confucian classics (*du shu fa* 讀書法). According to him, the study of classics should start with close attention to textual details, carefully reading every word, sentence, and paragraph, viewing each individual item in the context of other related parts of the text, and consulting various annotations and commentaries.<sup>8</sup> When reading the text, we should maintain an open mind (*xu xin* 虛心), one that is unbiased and receptive, and should avoid imposing our own personal opinions (*si yi* 私意), artificially making the text say what we wish it to say.<sup>9</sup> Such careful and detailed textual work serves the purpose of enriching our understanding of our own lives, and so we should personally experience (*ti yan* 體驗) the ideas it contains to make them personally relevant to ourselves (*qie*

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 360-363.

<sup>6</sup> Tang Junyi 唐君毅 "Lun Zhongxi Zhexue Wenti de Butong" 論中西哲學問題之不同, in *Zhongxi Zhexue Sixiang zhi Bijiao Lunwenji* 中西哲學思想之比較論文集 (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1988), 52-55; Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi* 中國哲學的特質, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1978), 4-6.

<sup>7</sup> Tang Junyi 唐君毅, "Zhongguo Zhexue Yanjiu zhi yi Xinfangxiang" 中國哲學研究之一新方向, in *Zhonghua Renwen yu Dangjin Shijie* 中華人文與當今世界, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1980), 382-388; Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, "Yanjiu Zhongguo Sixiangshi de Fangfa yu Taidu Wenti" 研究中國思想史的方法與態度問題, in *Zhongguo Sixiangshi Lunji* 中國思想史論集, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1975), 2-6.

<sup>8</sup> Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhuzi Yulei* 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhunghua, 1986), 10.162, 11.192-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.179, 11.180, 11.185.

*ji* 切己).<sup>10</sup> Like Tang and Xu, Zhu Xi describes the attitude involved in reading the classics as *jing*.<sup>11</sup>

From the perspective of these Confucian thinkers, any attempt to relate an early Chinese thinker's ideas to the philosophical scene of one's times must be preceded by a serious and dedicated study of the thinker's ideas in the proper historical and cultural context, with careful attention to textual details. A failure to do so makes one vulnerable to the danger of imposing one's own preconceptions onto the object of study, and when seeking linkage to western philosophical inquiry, the danger of imposing western philosophical frameworks onto Chinese thought. Just as Lao Siguang is criticized on this account, Mou Zongsan also criticizes Feng Youlan for committing this error.<sup>12</sup> Tang Junyi is particularly emphatic that traditions of thought are cultural products, and their proper understanding requires serious attention to the cultural context in which they have evolved so as to do justice to their distinctive features. He notes the tendency of some scholars to impose western philosophical frameworks onto their study of Chinese thought, thereby presenting Chinese thinkers as if they were working with the same agendas as western philosophers, and Chinese thought as a variant, probably of an inferior kind, of western philosophical thought.<sup>13</sup> Feng Youlan, as we saw, actually makes some such observation about the inferiority of Chinese thought as philosophical inquiry in the western sense.

This Confucian perspective contrasts with that of someone like Lao Siguang who, in explicit criticism of Tang Junyi, observes that Tang's emphasis on preserving the distinctive features of Chinese traditions of thought runs the risk of making them irrelevant to the present – in his own words, they “will find their place only in the museum.”<sup>14</sup> While acknowledging the practical orientation of Chinese thought, he insists that Chinese thought can be studied in an analytic fashion and in abstraction from its historical and cultural context.<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible to study traditional Chinese thought in a way that does justice to its historical and cultural context, without making it irrelevant to the present and to western philosophical inquiry? Nivison's approach to the philosophical study of Confucian thought, which resonates in spirit with the Confucian approach just described, illustrates one way in which this can be accomplished.

Nivison takes into account the historical and cultural context and the distinctive features of Confucian thought in a number of ways. In relation to key terms, he traces the use of the terms and their associated connotations to the earliest available sources. While he might mention a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.161, 10.162, 10.165, 11.179, 11.181.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.168, 11.176.

<sup>12</sup> Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, 2-4.

<sup>13</sup> Tang Junyi, “*Zhongguo Zhexue Yanjiu zhi yi Xinfangxiang*”, 385.

<sup>14</sup> Lao Siguang 勞思光, “Guanyu ‘Zhongguo Zhexue Yanjiu’ de Jidian Yijian” 關於‘中國哲學研究’的幾點意見, *Zhongguo Zhexue yu Wenhua* 中國哲學與文化 1 (2007): 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

possible translation of a key term in the course of discussion, he deliberately avoids the use of such translation until the connotations of the translation has been specified in a way that matches those of the term being translated. This helps avoid the common pitfall of reading into a term connotations often associated with a translation of the term even though the term itself does not carry such connotations. This strategy is clearly at work in his three sequential lectures on *de* 德. In these lectures, he first explores the connotations of *de* as it is used in the earliest available sources, including oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, and then introduces “virtue” as a translation that carries matching connotations, before actually using the term “virtue” in discussing the way certain perplexities related to *de*, which he summarily refers to as “the paradox of virtue”, are tackled by Confucian thinkers of different periods.<sup>16</sup> On his analysis, *de* has to do with certain qualities of a king and of a good person in general, on the basis of which a certain power or force is felt by others as emanating from such a person. For example, beneficiaries of generous acts would feel a compulsion to respond to someone of generosity, and wise counsellors would feel drawn to someone of humility who heeds good advice, as if they were responding to some psychic power emanating from the person.

Another example of the attention to historical and cultural context in the study of key terms is his analysis of *zhong* 忠 and *shu* 恕. He notes how the two terms were, in the pre- and early Han period, conceived concretely in terms of social, familial and political relationships, with *shu* being directed toward one’s inferiors or equals and *zhong* toward superiors or equals. On his analysis, *shu* has to do with flexibility in applying rules in dealing with inferiors or equals, amending or suspending them as befits the individual’s circumstances, while *zhong* has to do with being self-disciplined in holding firm to one’s duties toward superiors or equals, even when doing so would be unpleasant.<sup>17</sup>

In relation to the interpretation of texts, Nivison’s strategy can be seen from his detailed treatment of passages 2A:2, 6A:3-5 and 7A:17 of the *Mengzi* 孟子, to each of which he devotes a full paper.<sup>18</sup> In analyzing the use of a key term in a passage, such as *yan* 言 in Gaozi’s 告子 sixteen character maxim in 2A:2, he would consult its use in other texts from the same or a preceding period. For the interpretation of a passage as a whole, he would consult the range of interpretations found in translations, traditional commentaries, and other secondary literature, and adjudicate between them on the basis of the available textual evidence. Such evidence includes the details of the passage under investigation, other related passages in the same text, as well as passages in other related texts from the same or a preceding period. The extensive consultation of translations and commentaries is illustrated by his treatment of 7A:17, the attention to textual details including syntactic nuances by his analysis of 6A:3-5, and the cross references to other related texts by his discussion of Gaozi’s maxim in 2A:2, which he relates to parallel passages in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the “*Jie*” 戒 and “*Nei Ye*” 內業 chapters of the

<sup>16</sup> David S. Nivison, *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1996), chapters 2-4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-67

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 8, 10, 11.

*Guanzi* 管子. The goal is to develop interpretations of key passages that are firmly anchored in the available textual evidence, taking into account and adjudicating between possible competing interpretations.

On the basis of such interpretations, we may ascribe to the texts certain ideas, which in turn provide the basis for elaborating on certain themes that relate to western philosophical traditions, thereby establishing a linkage between Chinese and western traditions. In doing so, we will inevitably go beyond what can be supported by the textual evidence as such. Still, Nivison exercises caution in ensuring that the elaboration on these themes reflects their cultural context and the distinctive forms they take in Confucian thought. Two examples of such themes are the paradox of virtue and weakness of will.

According to Nivison, the paradox of virtue takes two related forms. The first is that, when I have *de* with another person, I acquire a hold on the person and thereby gain personal advantage. Although I am supposed to gain *de* by having *de* with others in a way that denies my own interest, it appears that I will actually lose *de* by so acting as I will be enhancing my own interest instead of denying it. The second is that, apparently, I must already have *de* in order to do the things that will enable me to attain *de*; for example, I must already have *de* to heed instruction that will guide me toward *de*. These two formulations are opposite sides of the same coin since the first implies that, in order to gain *de*, I must act without regard to personal advantage even if personal advantage does follow from my so acting. But then my acting without regard to personal advantage means that I already have *de*, from which it follows that I must already have *de* to do things that will enable me to gain *de*, which is the second formulation.<sup>19</sup>

These perplexities are not explicitly stated in the relevant texts, and ascribing them to the texts requires us to go beyond, though not against, the textual evidence. For example, when ascribing the second form of the paradox to specific passages in the *Lun yu* 論語, Nivison only proposes this as a possible way of interpreting the passages, and does not defend this interpretation through a detailed examination of the textual evidence in the way he does for the *Mengzi* passages mentioned earlier.<sup>20</sup> Still, it is a possible interpretation that does not conflict with the textual evidence, and the perplexities it describes are indeed offshoots of the notion of *de*. Furthermore, in elaborating on this theme, Nivison makes effort to do justice to the distinctive forms it takes in the Chinese context, and avoids artificially fitting it into western philosophical frameworks. In that spirit, he points out how the perplexities surrounding *de* differ from those that occupy Plato's and Aristotle's attention. Unlike Plato who focuses on knowledge (what one learns one must apparently already in some sense know), the Confucians focus on motivation (one's being moved to seek *de* apparently depends on one's being already properly motivated and hence already having *de*). And unlike Aristotle who highlights the role of childhood upbringing in cultivating virtue, the Confucians are concerned primarily with adult learning, the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

perplexities about *de* being derived from the fact that adults have sufficient intelligence to act for their own personal advantage.<sup>21</sup>

There is a similar sensitivity to cultural context in his discussion of weakness of will. Having noted the distinction in western philosophical discussions between *akrasia* (not doing what one judges one should because of temptations that move one not to) and *acedia* (not doing what one judges one should because one does not care enough to so act), and having noted that the latter is what more typically concerns Chinese moral thinkers, he goes on to highlight other distinctive features of the Confucian perspective.<sup>22</sup> For example, in addition to one's not acting despite seeing that one should, Confucian thinkers are also concerned with one's acting as one should but without the proper feelings, as in the case of following the rites (*li* 禮) without reverence (*jing* 敬).<sup>23</sup> Also, Confucian thinkers such as Mencius work with a model of the mind (*xin* 心) as being able to freely choose to act or not act, unlike the senses which automatically seek their ideal objects unless stopped, a model explicitly stated in *Mengzi* 6A:15.<sup>24</sup> On this model, a failure to do what one judges one should is primarily a failure of the mind to act or to intervene in certain ongoing activities, such as stopping the automatic operations of the senses or the deliverance of an improper gift to oneself.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis on not accepting an improper gift has its cultural reasons, namely, the sense of gratitude and compulsion to respond that accompanies the acceptance of a gift in early China, a phenomenon related to the notion of *de*. These examples illustrate how, while we might go beyond the textual evidence in the effort to establish linkage to western philosophical traditions by elaborating on certain common themes, our efforts should still be sensitive to the historical and cultural context in which such themes are embedded.

This summary of Nivison's approach shows how it resonates in spirit with the Confucian approach described earlier. He pays close attention to key terms, tracing their use to the earliest available sources and viewing them in their historical and cultural context. He attends closely to textual details in the analysis of passages, carefully comparing interpretations in traditional commentaries and translations, and cross referencing other parts of the same text or other texts where appropriate. These efforts echo Zhu Xi's emphasis on closely examining every word, sentence, paragraph in a text, viewing each in relation to other parts of the text and to other related texts, and extensively consulting annotations and commentaries. The goal is to maintain an unbiased and receptive mind (*xu xin*) so that one's conclusions follow the textual evidence, thereby minimizing the risk of imposing one's own preconceptions onto the text.

Having developed interpretations of the relevant texts through close textual studies, Nivison elaborates on ideas in the texts in an attempt to establish linkage to western philosophical inquiry. Though such elaborations inevitably go beyond what is supported by the textual evidence as such, they are continuous with the texts in that they do not conflict with the textual evidence and flow naturally from ideas ascribable to the texts on the basis of evidence.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-90.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Furthermore, his elaborations respect the historical and cultural context in which such ideas evolved and their distinctive features by contrast to western philosophical traditions. This echoes Tang Junyi's emphasis on doing justice to the cultural context in which Chinese traditions of thought evolved, and on avoiding the tendency to impose western frameworks onto these traditions. Nivison's emphasis on cultural sensitivity is also reflected in the courses he taught on early Chinese thought, which always included the teaching of the classical language and relevant key terms, mastering which is crucial to an understanding of the cultural distinctiveness of early Chinese thought.<sup>26</sup>

In emphasizing cultural sensitivity in our study of Chinese thought, one has to confront the concern that Lao Siguang raises in regard to Tang Junyi's approach. If Chinese traditions of thought have these culturally distinctive features, would it not mean that they are only of historical and local interest, lacking relevance to the present or to an audience from a different cultural background? Or, setting this concern in the context of Nivison's efforts to bridge Chinese and western traditions, would this emphasis on cultural distinctiveness mean that ideas from Chinese traditions of thought will be of limited interest and relevance to a western philosophical audience? Admittedly, Nivison's style of presentation exhibits a clarity and analyticity that also characterize the Anglo-American philosophical approach, something that Lao Siguang advocates as one way of bridging traditions. And Nivison himself has shown little interest in the kind of question that occupies Hu Shi's and Feng Youlan's attention, namely, whether Chinese thought exhibits general characteristics that warrant its being described as "philosophy" in the western sense. Still, even without addressing this question, might there be points of contact between the different traditions in terms of the phenomena they are interested in, so that the linkage goes beyond just a similarity in the style of presentation?

As a first step toward an affirmative answer, we might note that, despite the different forms that a certain phenomenon might take and be viewed in the Chinese context, these are nevertheless variants of a general phenomenon that occupies the attention of different cultural traditions. For example, what accounts for the possibility of ethical failure is something that both Chinese and western traditions of thought are concerned with, though the Confucian thinkers might have distinctive ways of accounting for that possibility. For Mencius, as we have seen, it is a matter of the mind's failing to do something, while for Wang Yangming 王陽明 and Dai Zhen 戴震, it is a matter of the mind's interfering with the functioning of its own moral knowledge.<sup>27</sup> And the question how one can acquire the proper feelings in acting, though not as widely discussed in western philosophical traditions, is a question whose significance such traditions can also recognize. According to Nivison, Mozi 墨子 believes that one can just adopt the proper feelings once one sees a reason, Mencius believes that one needs to steer certain incipient moral feelings that one already has in the proper direction, while Xunzi believes that acquiring the proper feelings require a long process of conditioning and cultivation.<sup>28</sup> Even if these answers to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 138-140.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 82-87.

the question might be specific to these Chinese thinkers, the question itself is not specific to any culture.

As another example, consider what Nivison describes as a paradox in the way Xunzi defends the Confucian ideal. On Nivison's interpretation, Xunzi believes that one can, on reflection, come to see that living the good life will further one's interest; in his words, "the good is good because it is satisfying, and we are predisposed to seek satisfaction."<sup>29</sup> The paradox is that "Xunzi's cultivated person has apparently acquired an affection for the good, for its own sake, inconsistent with the view of Xunzi's enlightened philosopher, who values it for what he or she sees it will do (namely, provide a satisfying life)."<sup>30</sup> While this apparent paradox arises in this specific form for Xunzi, it is an instance of a more general perplexity that pertains to any reflective ethical view, including western moral theories such as consequentialism and Kantian ethics. Namely, there is an apparent incompatibility between the perspective of the truly ethical person who lives up to a certain ethical ideal and the perspective of someone who has a reflective understanding of why one should live up to such an ideal. The potential incompatibility is between the ideal motivations of the truly ethical person and a reflective understanding that appears to undermine such motivations.<sup>31</sup>

This reference to more general cross-cultural phenomena does not yet fully address our initial question. Even if the different forms that a phenomenon takes and is viewed in the Chinese context are just variants of a more general cross-cultural phenomenon that is also of interest to a western philosophical audience, why should such an audience pay attention to these Chinese variants of the phenomenon instead of just confining attention to the forms it takes in western philosophical discussions? An answer to this further question is that, although the way a Chinese thinker views a certain phenomenon might be culturally informed or even specific to that thinker, there could nevertheless be elements of such a view that transcend cultures and times, so that someone working in the present and in a different cultural context can still find these elements appealing. To come to appreciate their appeal, one will need to devote efforts not just to an intellectual understanding, but to "experiencing" these elements in the sense of trying them out in the context of one's own life experiences. This is what, in a cross-temporal rather than cross-cultural setting, Zhu Xi and Tang Junyi advocate we do in studying the ideas of an earlier thinker, namely, to personally experience (*ti yan*) them to see if they resonate with one's own experiences. A remark of Nivison's in the context of discussing Wang Yangming shows that he shares this Confucian sentiment. He notes how understanding Wang's ideas requires one to "test out" such ideas; according to him, it follows that, to the extent that one succeeds in thereby understanding such ideas, one must to some extent also agree with them.<sup>32</sup> Through this exercise

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>31</sup> I discussed and proposed a way of addressing this potential incompatibility in my "Ideal Motivations and Reflective Understanding," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33:1 (January 1996), 91-104. Although the paper contains no reference to Chinese thought, Nivison perceptively and correctly pointed out in personal correspondence that I was, without making this explicit, actually addressing the paradox that he discerned in Mencius and Xunzi.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 231.



of relating the ideas of Confucian thinkers to our own life experiences, we may discover that certain elements of the culturally distinctive perspectives of the Confucian thinkers have a cross-cultural significance that also engages a contemporary audience, including western philosophical communities.

To the extent that certain ideas of theirs do resonate with us, whether because we have “tested out” these ideas or because our own cultural background bears some affinity to that of the Confucians, we can then reframe these ideas in a more accessible language for a contemporary audience, or in a language that engages with contemporary philosophical discourse. This has to be done in a way that is continuous with the perspectives of the Confucian thinkers and that avoids artificially imposing western philosophical conceptions onto them. Such work requires a high degree of self-reflectivity – one has to be reflective on the way one executes this task, constantly reminding oneself of potential pitfalls, whether stemming from a failure to transcend certain habits of thought or from insufficient focus of attention in the effort to do justice to the Confucian perspectives. Nivison’s more philosophical work on Confucian thought takes this direction, building on his philological and textual studies.

Earlier, we noted how Confucian thinkers emphasize *jing* in the study of earlier thinkers. *Jing*, when directed to a task, involves at least four elements: taking the task seriously and being dedicated to its proper completion, focus of attention and carefully attending to all relevant details, fearfulness and being on guard against errors and missteps, and a sense of the largeness of the task at hand and of one’s limited capabilities. The first three elements are illustrated by the aspects of Nivison’s work summarized above – his dedication to properly understanding Confucian thought in its historical and cultural context, his patient and careful attention to textual details as he develops his interpretation of the relevant texts, and his deliberate efforts to avoid being influenced by preconceptions in approaching the relevant texts and being influenced by western philosophical conceptions when elaborating on the relevant ideas. The fourth element, though not as immediately noticeable, is illustrated by his overall attitude toward intellectual inquiry.

Starting with his earlier seminal work on Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 of the Qing, he was led from subject to subject in his explorations in Chinese thought and culture, all the way back to major thinkers of late Zhou, to inscription texts of early Zhou and Shang, and to astronomical details in inscriptions and to dating of events in early Chinese history. This eagerness to learn and explore can also be witnessed in more specific areas of inquiry, such as how he was led to work on a whole article on Wang Yangming by an incidental remark of his in a review article.<sup>33</sup> Throughout these explorations, he was continually self-critical, being unwilling to commit to publication till he was confident that he had done his very best with the subject matter at hand.<sup>34</sup> And even when published, he retained self-awareness of potential problems for his own

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>34</sup> Many of Nivison’s papers eventually published, with Bryan Van Norden’s editorship, in *The Ways of Confucianism* were written in the seventies and eighties. He had for several years been reluctant to publish the papers, in some instances (such as the third of the three lectures on *de*) reluctant even to circulate them, because of the continuing sense of room for refinement.

conclusions, such as how *Mengzi* 7A:4 poses a potential problem for his interpretation of *shu*.<sup>35</sup> And this eagerness to learn and explore was not confined to Chinese thought and culture. For example, his continuing excursions into western philosophical thought are illustrated by his work on akrasia and by his self-teaching himself logic by working through Quine's *Methods of Logic*.<sup>36</sup>

This fondness for learning, or *hao xue* 好學, is yet another quality that he shared with the Confucians, and he retained it till the end of his life, being totally immersed in the vast and fascinating world of learning, constantly trying to explore as much of it as his time allowed.<sup>37</sup> For the Confucians, this is not just an intellectual, but also a moral, quality. After all, Confucius himself and Yan Hui 顏回 are the only two specific individuals described in the *Lun yu* as being fond of learning (*Lun yu* 5.28; 6.3, 11.7), and they are also the only two specific individuals described in terms of a state of moral contentment, or *le* 樂 (*Lun yu* 7.16, 7.19; 6.11), one of the highest moral achievements. Nivison himself rarely writes about his own personal or moral experiences, but certain moral qualities of his can clearly be discerned by those who have had personal associations with him. Just as the Confucians advocate “learning for oneself” and not “for others” (*Lun yu* 14.24), he never sought attention or recognition despite his momentous accomplishments. Some might even compare him to the Confucian superior person, or *jun zi* 君子, in reference to his humility and gentle demeanor. Such humility in personal life no doubt comes hand-in-hand with his fondness for learning, which involves subsuming the self to the boundless world of learning. And for those who have the fortune of having been associated with him, he will be remembered for these personal qualities in addition to his many scholarly achievements and contributions.

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<sup>35</sup> Nivison, *ibid.*, 73.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> I cannot resist recollecting how, the last time I had lunch with him on the Stanford campus, a few years before his passing and when he needed assistance with moving around, he asked to be taken to the campus bookstore to look up a few books. It was a moving experience to see him browsing through the bookshelves, totally immersed and obviously feeling a deep sense of satisfaction and delight.