

The Philosophical Study of Chinese Thought
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1. The Philosophical Study of Chinese Thought

A question that has occupied scholars of Chinese thought for the past several decades is whether Chinese thought can be described as “philosophy” or, put more directly, whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy. The question has been discussed in both English and Chinese language publications; in the latter case, it is framed in terms of the expression *zhe xue*, a by now standard translation of the English word “philosophy”. Just in the past decade, the question continues to be debated in English language publications, while in China, numerous articles have been published on the issue of the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy”.¹ Different positions result from different takes on the use of the word “philosophy” or its Chinese equivalent *zhe xue*. Some defend an affirmative and some a negative answer to the question based on their different understandings of the term; some advocate redefining the term while some even question the value of the practice of philosophy.² While this debate has helped highlight some distinctive features of Chinese thought, the focus on the term “philosophy” or its Chinese equivalent tends also to divert

¹ For example, a series of papers was published in Philosophy: East and West in the past decade: Carine Defoort, “Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate,” 51 (2001): 393-413; Rein Raud, “Philosophies versus Philosophy: In defense of a Flexible Definition,” 56 (2006): 618-625; Carine Defoort, “Is ‘Chinese Philosophy’ a Proper Name? A Response to Rein Raud,” 56 (2006): 625-660. Numerous articles have been written on the subject of the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy in mainland Chinese publications in recent years.

² See Carine Defoort, “Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate,” 51 (2001): 393-413, for a delineation of these different positions.

attention away from the kinds of concern that motivated the question in the first place. In this paper, I will sidestep the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy, and instead attend directly to the possible concerns that might have motivated this question. Once we have addressed these concerns, how we understand the term “philosophy” and whether we describe Chinese thought as “philosophy” loses its significance as an independent question.

There are at least three kinds of concerns that might have motivated the question. The first has to do with *institutional* considerations, namely, the place of Chinese thought in relation to philosophy as it has been institutionalized in the contemporary educational and professional context. We have philosophy departments in present day universities, including Chinese universities which use the equivalent Chinese term *zhè xue* to label these departments, and we also have philosophy curricula at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as introductory courses on philosophy for the student body at large. Should Chinese thought have a presence in these departments, curricula, and courses? We also have professional organizations such as the American Philosophical Association as well as numerous journals devoted to philosophy as it is practiced nowadays. Should Chinese thought have a presence in such journals and in conferences hosted by such organizations? These questions have to do with how the study of Chinese thought fits into the institutionalized environment surrounding the contemporary practice of philosophy.

The second kind of concern has to do with *intellectual* considerations, and is about how the study of Chinese thought relates to the discipline of philosophy. This is related to, but not identical with, the first kind of concern. Independently of whether Chinese thought has a presence in the kind of institutionalized contexts described earlier, can the study of Chinese thought relate and contribute in some appropriate way to the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays? I have deliberately

added the qualification “in some appropriate way”, as the study of many other disciplines also relate and contribute to the study of philosophy in some way, such as literature and theology. But the interest behind the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy is an interest in seeing whether there is a relation of some more intimate kind between the study of Chinese thought and the contemporary practice of philosophy. I will say more about the nature of this relation in the last section of this paper.

The third kind of concern has to do with considerations of *relevance*, and is about how the study of Chinese thought bears on our present day interests, concerns, and experiences. Both within an institutionalized setting, such as the way philosophy major requirements are structured, and in the field of philosophy as such, we often find, at least in the Anglo-American context, a distinction between the study of the history of philosophy and the study of philosophy as such, where the latter is conceived in terms of a study of philosophical topics of direct contemporary relevance. Partly because Chinese thought has evolved through a commentarial process, with later thinkers commenting and elaborating on ideas of earlier thinkers, the study of Chinese thought has largely taken the form of a study of historical figures. The question then arises as to how, if at all, the study of Chinese thought relates to the present. If we work with the distinction between the history of philosophy and philosophy as such, the question can be phrased as one about whether the study of Chinese thought is of philosophical or purely historical interest. Thus, part of the concern behind the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy is about whether the study of Chinese thought can have a contemporary relevance.

The three kinds of concern just described are related. If the study of Chinese thought can be conducted in a way that relates in some appropriate way to philosophy as it is practiced nowadays and that brings out its contemporary relevance, this would

make a strong case for its presence in the kind of institutionalized contexts we described earlier. Since these institutionalized contexts should ideally reflect the way we conceive of the discipline of philosophy as an intellectual pursuit, how we address the first kind of concern should depend on how we address the other two kinds of concern, especially the second. For this reason, I will not discuss the first kind of concern directly and will instead focus my attention on the other two kinds of concern.

Suppose we say that the philosophical study of Chinese thought has to do with studying Chinese thought in a way that relates in some appropriate way to philosophy as it is practiced nowadays and that brings out its contemporary relevance. The concerns that motivate the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy can then be addressed by considering the question whether the philosophical study of Chinese thought is possible, and if so, how. Addressing this question does not depend on our first addressing the question how the term “philosophy” is or should be used. Instead, it depends on whether we can come up with an account of how we may approach the study of Chinese thought, in a way that relates in some appropriate way to the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays. And this question is not about whether the Chinese thinkers whose ideas provide our objects of study themselves engaged in intellectual activities of a kind akin to the present day practice of philosophy. Instead, independently of the kind of intellectual activities they themselves engage in, the question is whether we *ourselves* can approach their thinking in a way that has this kind of relation to present day philosophical practices.

Before addressing this question, let us consider the term “Chinese thought” which I have used with the assumption that its use is not subject to the same kind of controversies that surround the use of the term “Chinese philosophy”. The use of the

term does make some assumptions, but of a much less controversial nature. It is generally acknowledged that, in the history of China, there is a body of texts containing ideas with a certain degree of cohesion and intelligibility that make them worth studying in their own right. When speaking of the study of Chinese thought, I am referring to the study of these ideas, with the assumption that these texts do contain ideas with these characteristics. These texts, and the ideas they contain, can be approached in different ways by different disciplines, and the philosophical study of Chinese thought, characterized in the manner just described, is one of such approaches. These texts and ideas can be the object of textual studies whose focus is on analyzing the texts with the goal of approximating the ideas that are recorded in the texts. And they can also be studied as part of intellectual history, with focus on the way the relevant ideas evolved against the social and political background as well as the intellectual climate of the relevant historical periods. Textual and historical studies both focus on the past, seeking to approximate the ideas contained in the past texts and to understand the way they evolved during the relevant historical periods. By contrast, the philosophical study of Chinese thought focuses more on the present. While taking the ideas from the past as its starting point, it approaches them in a way that links up with the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays and that draws out their contemporary relevance. To the extent that this kind of intellectual activity is rooted in the ideas of the past, the philosophical study of Chinese thought is dependent on textual and historical studies.

In moving beyond textual and historical studies to the philosophical study of Chinese thought, we need to address two kinds of potential tension between the different goals that guide such study. Seeing how these two potential tensions can be addressed will help us better understand what is involved in the philosophical study of Chinese thought. The first potential tension is that between seeking to understand the

thinkers and texts of the past and the attempt to make them relevant to the present. On the one hand, though the interest in the philosophical study of Chinese thought is directed more to the present, we still want to base our study on an accurate understanding of the ideas of the past thinkers, and so would want to approximate as much as possible their ideas as recorded in the past texts. On the other hand, our interest is also in the present, and we seek to make these ideas intelligible and relevant to us in our present circumstances. But these two goals, which point in different directions, do not always sit well together. If spelt out in their fine details, the ideas of the past thinkers will inevitably contain elements that no longer appeal and might not even be fully intelligible to us. Even those elements that seem more intelligible and appealing could be, for these past thinkers, inextricably bound up with the other elements, and our abstracting the former in separation from the latter already involves a departure from the perspectives of these thinkers. Thus, it would appear that of these two tasks, that of approximating ideas in the past and that of making them relevant to the present, our taking on one might come at the expense of the other.

The second potential tension is that between trying to do justice to the distinctive features of Chinese traditions of thought and relating them to other philosophical traditions that have evolved relatively independent of Chinese traditions. In seeking to approach Chinese thought in a way that relates in some appropriate way to the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays, we will inevitably be relating our study to other philosophical traditions represented in present philosophical practices. In the process of building the linkage to these other philosophical traditions, there is the danger that we would be viewing Chinese traditions of thought through the conceptual apparatus of these other traditions, thereby distorting our understanding of the former or at least leading us to miss some of their distinctive features. On the other hand, if we stay close to Chinese traditions of thought as they are, without

regard to other philosophical traditions, this might undermine our goal of relating Chinese traditions of thought to contemporary philosophical practices.

In what follows, I will describe an approach that seeks to mitigate the two kinds of tension just described. In doing so, I also hope to illustrate a way in which the philosophical study of Chinese thought might be possible. My own interest in the philosophical study of Chinese thought is in studying Confucian ethical thought in a way that links up with work in contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy and with our own contemporary ethical concerns and experiences. To make the discussion more concrete, I will focus specifically on this kind of study in my discussion.

2. The Past and the Present

The first potential tension is between approximating the ideas of past thinkers and making these ideas intelligible and relevant to us nowadays. These two goals point in potentially opposed directions – the more we do with these past ideas to make them intelligible and relevant to the present, the further we will potentially be removed from the perspectives of the past thinkers. Thus, there is a potential risk in combining these two goals in a single project – we might be led to impose on past thinkers our own present perspectives if we do not clearly distinguish between these goals. To minimize this risk, what we can do is to separate the two goals by undertaking them in separate stages.

In my own study of Confucian thought, I have adopted this approach, and the following is a summary of the methodological approach I have presented in earlier publications.³ On this approach, there is a distinction between three tasks in the study

³ See my “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections,” Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 36 (2009): 455-478.

of Chinese thought. First, we can engage in *textual analysis*, which seeks to approximate the ideas recorded in past texts and the perspectives of past thinkers whose ideas are recorded in these texts. To accomplish this goal, we work with evidence which includes linguistic, textual and historical considerations. Admittedly, the available evidence might be limited and often we cannot arrive at definitive conclusions about the past ideas we seek to approximate. Furthermore, we will inevitably be working from our contemporary perspective and in a contemporary language, and so it is not possible to completely free ourselves of the influence of the present. Nevertheless, though we inevitably view the past from a present perspective, there is still a distinction between facts about the past and our present perspective. By working with present evidence, we can make conscious efforts to minimize the influence of our present perspective on our understanding of the past, thereby enabling us to approximate these past ideas. And though the available evidence might be limited, that there is evidence of this kind at least gives us reason to expect a significant degree of convergence in the conclusions we draw about these past ideas. What textual analysis assumes is not that we can somehow transcend our present perspective in viewing the past, only that there is evidence we can work with which enables us to minimize the influence of our present perspective in the attempt to approximate the past ideas.

The task of textual analysis involves a mentality that is directed maximally to the past and minimally to the present. By contrast, the task of *reconstruction* involves a mentality that is directed maximally to the present and minimally to the past. In reconstruction, we take some insights from the past texts as a starting point, and build a reflective account on their basis that links up with the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays and that also relates to our present concerns and experiences. This is what constitutes the philosophical study of Chinese thought, and it depends on

textual analysis for the understanding of past ideas that it takes as its starting point. Unlike textual analysis, the focus of reconstruction is on the present – we seek to build a reflective account that we, from our present perspective, regard as appealing. It also differs in that it works not with the kind of linguistic, textual and historical evidence that textual analysis works with, but with other criteria of assessment, such as whether our account meets the criteria of excellence that characterize the kind of philosophical practice (such as the Anglo-American philosophical tradition) that we are working with and whether it helps address our present day concerns and make sense of our experiences. Accordingly, there is little reason to expect the same degree of convergence in our conclusions that we would expect from textual analysis, though there is a limit to divergence in our conclusions as the insights in the relevant texts that reconstruction takes as its starting point provide some parameters within which we work.

Reconstruction takes as its starting point certain insights of early Chinese thinkers, but how do we arrive at these insights? Let us consider the study of Confucian thought in an attempt to bring out its contemporary relevance. In speaking of the insights of the Confucian thinkers, we are referring to their ideas that have significance not just for their own ethical concerns and experiences, but also for ours – it is the latter linkage that makes their ideas insights for us. Textual analysis by itself seeks only to approximate the ideas of the early thinkers, but does not assess the contemporary significance of these ideas. On the other hand, reconstruction assumes that we have already identified ideas of the Confucian thinkers that indeed have contemporary significance. Thus, neither activity is directed to identifying those past ideas that indeed have contemporary significance; to do so, we need a third kind of activity that involves our moving back and forth between the past and the present in an attempt to assess the contemporary significance of past ideas. We start with a

certain idea extracted from a past text through textual analysis that initially appears relevant to our own present concerns and experiences. We think through its potential contemporary implications, and then go back to the past text to see if the way we make sense of this initial idea fits in with other ideas in the text, again extracted through textual analysis. To the extent it does, we again take up these other ideas and think through their potential contemporary implications. We continue to move back and forth between the past ideas and our own contemporary concerns and experiences in this manner and, through this process, identify those past ideas that indeed have contemporary significance. This process, which I have referred to as *articulation* in past writings, helps to bridge the transition from textual analysis to reconstruction. In articulation, though we try to make sense of the past texts in a way that engages our own present concerns and experiences, we seek to do so in a way that is largely consistent with the past texts; in this way, articulation differs from reconstruction. At the same time, because of the attempt at linkage with our present concerns and experiences, the way we read the texts often go in various ways beyond the texts and might not be definitively supported by the textual evidence; in this way, articulation also differs from textual analysis. Instead of directing attention maximally to the past or to the present, articulation involves an imaginative interplay between the past and the present.

By proceeding in phases from textual analysis to articulation and then to reconstruction, we address the first potential tension by separating the goals that can potentially point in opposed directions. I have myself engaged in a multi-volume study of Confucian thought that proceeds roughly in this fashion, to ensure that the different goals do not impinge on one another.⁴ However, it is important to note that

⁴ The first two volumes are devoted to textual studies, focusing respectively on early and on later Confucian thought. The third volume discusses methodological issues related to the transition from

this distinction between the three tasks is not a clear cut distinction; rather, it is a distinction between three kinds of mentality that merge into each other. The difference is more a matter of degrees: the degree of linkage to the past texts decreases and the degree to which our present perspective shapes the outcome increases as we move from textual analysis to articulation and then to reconstruction. Furthermore, although I have spoken of the potential risk in combining the different goals, and have myself sought to minimize such risk by separating these goals, it is possible to combine the different goals in a single project without incurring such risk as long as one is sufficiently self-reflective. Indeed, it is common in the literature to find all three tasks being represented to some extent in a single project, with one's intellectual focus shifting back and forth along the spectrum just described. This is not by itself problematic, as long as one is self-conscious about which task one is undertaking at which point in the overall project. Thus, my claim is not that the three tasks must be conducted separately, only that they can in principle be separated, that it is important to be self-conscious about which task one is undertaking at any one point, and that it is important to be able to separate them if needed. In addition, my claim is not that any scholar interested in the philosophical study of Chinese thought must undertake all three tasks. There has been excellent work in the philosophical study of Chinese thought conducted by scholars who rely on the textual scholarship of others without themselves engaging in textual analysis. My claim is not that each scholar must *individually* undertake all these different tasks in the philosophical study of Chinese thought, only that we *collectively* need to undertake all three tasks, starting with the more textual studies and eventually moving on to the more philosophical explorations.

textual studies to philosophical explorations, and the fourth volume engages in a primarily philosophical discussion of Confucian moral psychology.

3. Bridging Traditions

The second potential tension in the philosophical study of Chinese thought is that between grasping the distinctive features of Chinese traditions of thought and establishing a linkage to other, especially western, traditions. In working toward the second goal, we run the risk of losing sight of what is distinctive of Chinese traditions or even distorting our understanding of them by viewing them through the lens of western philosophical frameworks. Such risk is particularly heightened in works that seek to bridge traditions by making certain western philosophical frameworks the guiding theme, inquiring into how Chinese traditions of thought fit into such frameworks. The approach described in the previous section to some extent addresses this potential tension – by proceeding in phases from textual analysis to articulation and then to reconstruction, we can relegate the goal of understanding Chinese traditions of thought to textual analysis, which does not yet involve the linkage to other traditions. Still, when we do get to the point of establishing a linkage to western philosophical traditions, the reference to western philosophical concepts and frameworks is inevitable and does generate the potential risk just described.

Examples of the appeal to western philosophical concepts and frameworks in the attempt to bridge traditions are common in the literature. We find, for example, discussions of whether Confucian ethical thought has a conception of rights or works with a notion of self and autonomy, and whether it is a form of virtue ethics. To address the potential tension, we can approach the reference to such western philosophical concepts and frameworks in a way similar to the one adopted in this paper toward the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy. Instead of directly addressing the question formulated in this manner, which inevitably leads to a focus on the use of the term “philosophy”, what I have done is to

distance myself from this terminological focus by attending not directly to this question, but to the kinds of concern that might have motivated the question in the first place. Similarly, instead of focusing on the western philosophical terms that might be invoked in our attempt to bridge traditions, such as “rights”, “self”, “autonomy”, and “virtue ethics”, what we can do is to attend directly to the kinds of concern that lie behind the use of such terms, and then consider the Confucian perspective in this connection. Often, the use of a western philosophical term is associated with a certain range of phenomena that engage the interest and attention of the philosophical tradition to which it belongs. Instead of focusing on the term as such, we can focus on the phenomena with which it is associated, and probe the Confucian perspective on such phenomena. To illustrate this approach, I will draw on an example from my recent writings, having to do with the subject of anger.⁵

Let us consider a certain view on anger, resentment, and forgiveness found in recent Anglo-American philosophical discussions. On this view, anger can take two different forms, indignation and resentment, which refer respectively to anger from a third and from a first personal perspective. Resentment, as a first personal response to inappropriate treatment of oneself, shows that one takes one’s rights and entitlements seriously, and in that sense is protective of self-respect. Resentment leads to a breach in the relationship between the offender and oneself as the victim, and forgiveness is the forswearing of resentment, thereby helping to restore the relationship. It is good to be forgiving, but just as a failure to respond with resentment to injuries to oneself shows a lack of self-respect, forgiving too easily also shows insufficient self-respect.⁶

⁵ See my “On Anger – An Experimental Essay in Confucian Moral Psychology,” forthcoming in David Jones & He Jinli, eds., *Zhu Xi Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Great Ultimate* (State University of New York Press).

⁶ For presentations of such a view, see Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” in Jeffrie G. Murphy & Jean Hampton *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 14-34; David

Discussions of such a view highlight a range of phenomena that engage the interest and attention of certain contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, and if we can describe such phenomena in a way that does not carry substantive western philosophical presuppositions, we can then probe the Confucian perspective on the related phenomena.

Suppose we characterize anger broadly in terms of responses to situations that one regards as unacceptable or inappropriate, where such responses engage one's emotions and often move one to act to correct the situation. So characterized, the notion anger is sufficiently broad to enable us to speak of the Confucian perspective on anger, even though the Chinese terms used to describe related phenomena have connotations and conceptual connections different from their English counterparts. Resentment, by contrast, is a special form that anger takes when one has been treated inappropriately. What is special is not that I might respond with greater emotional intensity and feel a greater urgency to act in response to the situation. Such differences have to do more with a differential response based on the different relations I stand to the victim of the treatment, whether the victim is myself or someone close to me. Rather, what is special about resentment is that, aside from any differential response when the victim is myself, there is an additional thought about the attitude of the offender, to the effect that the offender is targeting me and is treating me with disrespect. As a result, I am moved to correct not just the tangible injury but also such an attitude, which has led to a breach in my relation to the offender.

Now, the Confucians do acknowledge that this kind of response is a common human response to inappropriate treatment of oneself, and there are Chinese terms

Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 299-315.

close in connotations to the English term “resentment”. What is distinctive of their perspective is that they advocate a shift away from this kind of response, even though they endorse differential responses based on the different relations in which one stands to the victim. Instead of focusing on ourselves as the victims targeted by the offender, we should focus on the situation as an ethically problematic situation. And instead of focusing on countering the attitude of the offender, we should focus on the ethical quality of our responses to the situation. Though the kind of responses akin to resentment may be common human responses, the ultimate way to address them is not by changing our perspective on the offender in a way that leads to forgiveness, but by changing the way we view the situation thereby enabling such responses to dissipate. Thus, while the Confucians do talk about responses akin to resentment as common human responses, they do not discuss forgiveness as a way to address such responses.

The above is just a brief summary of a discussion of the subject that I have undertaken elsewhere, but it illustrates the approach I mentioned earlier about how to establish a linkage to western philosophical traditions without incurring the risk of losing sight of what is distinctive of Chinese traditions. Reference to western philosophical concepts and frameworks is useful as it helps draw our attention to certain phenomena that western philosophical traditions are concerned with and to their perspectives on such phenomena. This in turn helps direct our attention to the way the Confucians view related phenomena, and by setting the Confucian perspective against western perspectives, it also helps bring into focus the distinctive features of the Confucian perspective. At the same time, it is important to avoid being overly focused on the terms and concepts that are used to present the western perspective, thereby losing sight of what is distinctive of the Confucian view. To minimize such risk, we can first describe the relevant phenomena in more ordinary terms, shifting attention away from western philosophical terms and their associated

presuppositions. We can then probe the Confucian perspective on the related phenomena, free from the influence of such presuppositions. On this approach, the appeal to western philosophical terms and concepts plays primarily a catalytic role, and their use is ultimately dispensable once we have grasped the substantive phenomena associated with their use.⁷

4. Concluding Remarks

We started our discussion with the often discussed question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy. To avoid being overly focused on the terminological issues surrounding the use of the word “philosophy”, I proposed to attend instead to the kinds of concerns that might have motivated the question in the first place. At least three kinds of concerns might have motivated the question: institutional considerations, intellectual considerations, and considerations of relevance. These have to do respectively with the three questions: how the study of Chinese thought fits into the way philosophy has been institutionalized in educational and professional contexts, how it links up with the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays, and how it relates to our contemporary concerns and experiences. Addressing the first question depends on addressing the other two questions, and so I have focused on the latter two questions in the way I characterized the philosophical study of Chinese thought. Namely, it is an approach to Chinese thought that relates in some appropriate way to the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays and that brings out its

⁷ For another example of this approach, see my discussion of how to approach the notions of self and of rights in relation to Confucian thought, in “Concept of the Person in Early Confucian Thought,” David B. Wong & Kwong-loi Shun, ed., Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 183-199.

contemporary relevance. The question we started with, whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy, is now replaced with the question whether the philosophical study of Chinese thought is possible.

I then introduced the example of anger to illustrate a way of conducting the philosophical study of Chinese thought, showing how we can approach the Confucian view on anger in a way that relates to the contemporary practice of philosophy and that brings out its contemporary relevance. The example, which I have dealt with in much greater detail in other publications, illustrates the more specific nature of the relation to the contemporary practice of philosophy I have in mind. Namely, the philosophical study of Chinese thought can take as its subject matter a topic that engages the interest of both a Chinese tradition of thought and the contemporary philosophical practice that we are working with, and approach it in a way that is both inspired by ideas from the Chinese tradition and guided by the criteria of excellence that characterize the contemporary philosophical practice. There can, of course, be other ways of viewing that relation, but doing so in this way establishes a linkage between the institutional considerations and the other two kinds of considerations. If Chinese thought can be studied in a manner that meets the criteria of excellence pertaining to philosophy as it is practiced nowadays, and in relation to subject matters that also engage the attention of contemporary philosophers, this would provide a strong reason for such study to have a presence in the kinds of institutionalized contexts described at the beginning of this paper.

This approach to Chinese thought faces two potential tensions, one between approximating ideas of past thinkers and making such ideas relevant to the present, and the other between grasping the distinctive features of traditional Chinese thought and establishing a linkage between Chinese and other, especially western, traditions. To resolve the first potential tension, I proposed that we start by focusing on textual

studies, bracketing our own contemporary perspectives and avoiding the use of western philosophical frameworks as much as possible. Having approximated the ideas and perspectives of past Chinese thinkers through such studies, we can then shift our attention to probing the outcome of the textual studies to see which of these past ideas might have potential significance for us nowadays. Finally, having obtained a sense of which of these past ideas can potentially enrich our understanding of our own present experiences, we can then use these insights of past thinkers as a starting point to build a reflective account that meets the criteria of excellence that pertain to the contemporary philosophical practice that we are working with. By separating the goals of approximating the past ideas and of relating such ideas to the present, this approach addresses the first potential tension.

To address the second potential tension, we need to be able to bring into our discussion the concepts and frameworks from other, especially western, traditions of thought without allowing them to constrain or even distort our understanding of Chinese traditions. For this purpose, I proposed that we first determine the range of phenomena that is the focus of the use of these western philosophical concepts and frameworks, and try to describe these phenomena in ordinary terms that do not carry substantive western philosophical presuppositions. Having done so, we can then attend to such phenomena directly and examine the Chinese perspective on them, without being vulnerable to the potentially constraining or distorting effects of the western concepts and frameworks.

Given the limited scope of this paper, I was only able to present in very brief detail an example to illustrate this approach; I have provided a more detailed discussion of the subject elsewhere, and will continue to elaborate further in

forthcoming work.⁸ The point of the example is to show that the philosophical study of Chinese thought, as characterized in this paper, is a possible activity. If it is possible to engage in the philosophical study of Chinese thought, this will provide a sense in which the initial question we started with, whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy, can be answered in the affirmative. But this affirmative answer does not depend on our addressing the terminological issues surrounding the use of the term “philosophy”. Instead, it depends on our actually conducting a study that illustrates how we can study Chinese thought in a way that relates in an appropriate way to the discipline of philosophy as it is practiced nowadays, and that also links up with our own contemporary concerns and experiences.

Indeed, if we take the possibility of a philosophical study of Chinese thought to provide an affirmative answer to the question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy, we would be understanding the term “Chinese philosophy” in a way quite different from the way it is usually understood. Namely, to affirm that there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy is not to say that the Chinese thinkers of the past engaged in an activity that can be described as “philosophy”; our discussion is not directed to and so is neutral on this question. Instead, it is to say that we *ourselves* can engage in an intellectual activity that is akin to philosophy as it is practiced nowadays, in relation to a subject matter that engages the interest of both contemporary philosophers and past Chinese thinkers, and approaching the subject matter in a way that is guided primarily by the insights of past Chinese thinkers on the subject. That is, what we have done is to transform the question from one about whether past Chinese thinkers engage in the practice of philosophy, to one about whether we ourselves can

⁸ The third volume of my four volume project, tentatively titled From Philology to Philosophy, will be devoted to illustrating the methodological approach described in this paper using anger and other related phenomena as an example.

engage in the practice of philosophy as it is understood nowadays, in a way that is clearly inspired by the insights of past Chinese thinkers. Our ability to do so would give a strong reason for Chinese philosophy, so understood, to have a presence in the institutionalized contexts, both educational and professional, surrounding the discipline of philosophy.