

Methodological Reflections on the Study of Chinese Thought

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*Bloomsbury Research Handbook on Methodology
in Chinese Philosophy*

Tan, Sor-hoon ed. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016)

1. A Methodological Approach

Methodology has to do with systematic reflections on the methods adopted in a certain kind of activity, including that of intellectual inquiry. But we cannot talk intelligibly about the method of a certain kind of activity without knowing more about the nature of the activity as well as the goals and interests behind it. For example, we cannot talk intelligibly about the method of writing without knowing what it is that we write and for what purpose and audience, nor about the method of building a house without knowing what kind of house and for what purpose. This is no less true of intellectual inquiry, in our case, the study of Chinese thought. We cannot talk intelligibly about the method of studying Chinese thought without knowing more about the goals and interests behind such study.

Such goals and interests depend on the investigator engaged in the study. Though rarely totally changed, it is likely that they have evolved and have been refined over time. In addition, the investigator would have learnt from past experiences and identified pitfalls that should be avoided as well as potential tensions and problems that need to be addressed. The method the investigator currently adopts has been shaped by these past experiences and in that sense carries an autobiographical dimension.

That a methodological approach carries this autobiographical dimension does not mean that it is of little relevance to other investigators. After all, each investigator works within one or more larger academic communities, and other members of these communities will likely share similar goals and interests. Making explicit in a methodological discussion the goals and interests guiding the study as well as the potential pitfalls and tensions will enable other investigators to ascertain to what extent the discussion bears on their own work. It also reduces the likelihood of apparent methodological disagreements that are not genuine disagreements because the parties involved are working toward quite different goals.

For this reason, I will begin with a sketch of the way my methodological approach has evolved over time, present a summary of its goals, and identify some of the potential pitfalls and tensions I seek to address. My purpose is to show how this approach bears on methodological discussions among Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century and, in doing so, elaborate further on this approach. As my own emphasis is on Confucian thought and my philosophical approach in the Anglo-American tradition, I will be speaking primarily of the Confucian tradition when I refer to Chinese thought, and of the Anglo-American tradition when I refer to contemporary philosophical inquiry.

In this section, I summarize the methodological approach I have adopted and how it has evolved over time. In section 2, I consider how certain potential tensions I have sought to address are also implicit in discussions among Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century. Specifically, they have to do with implicit disagreements between Tang Junyi and Lao Siguang on the way to study Chinese thought. In section 3, I consider how the writings of Tang Junyi and Xu Fuguan suggest a multi-staged approach to the study of Chinese thought, one also found in Zhu Xi's views on the way to study the Confucian classics. In section 4, I elaborate on this multi-staged approach drawing on a distinction between three tasks in the study of Chinese thought that I presented in previous publications, and relate that distinction to the views presented in section 3. In section 5, I show how this distinction bears on the disagreements summarized in section 2, and on related methodological discussions in contemporary western philosophical literature.

My methodological thinking has to date evolved in three main phases. In the first phase, working in an Anglo-American context, I focused on the need to maintain a clear separation between textual study and philosophical inquiry. There is a potential tension between the goal of approximating the ideas in early Chinese texts, and that of elaborating on these ideas in a way that engages contemporary philosophical discussions. The closer we stay to the way the ideas are presented in the texts, the less likely the ideas will engage with contemporary philosophical inquiry. Conversely, the more we elaborate on these ideas to engage with contemporary philosophical inquiry, the further we will move away from the ideas and perspectives of early thinkers as recorded in the texts. To address this potential tension, I proposed to separate these two goals into sequential projects, first engaging in textual studies with the goal of approximating ideas in the texts, and then elaborating on these ideas in a way that engage with contemporary philosophical discussions.

As part of this approach, I also proposed that, in our textual studies, we should

minimize, if not totally avoid, the use of terms commonly used in contemporary philosophical discussions with special connotations. To the extent that such terms cannot be avoided, we should carefully explain the way we use the terms before actually deploying them. Doing so helps minimize the risk of unwittingly reading contemporary philosophical presuppositions into early Chinese texts.¹

In the second phrase, I refined this methodological approach on the basis of four observations that arose in the context of working in a Chinese academic community. First, to better appreciate the experiential basis and practical import of key ideas in Confucian thought, it will be important to relate these ideas to our own life experiences that bear an affinity to those of the Confucian thinkers. After all, most of the major Confucian thinkers were heavily involved in administration and politics in addition to working toward the moral transformation of themselves and their students. Their ideas evolved in such contexts, and viewing their ideas in relation to similar experiences nowadays would help us better appreciate the import of these ideas. Indeed, it is only through doing so that we know how to move beyond the initial textual studies to the philosophical elaboration on these ideas.

The earlier separation between the two tasks of textual studies and philosophical explorations assumes that, after having approximated the ideas recorded in the texts, we can then go on to elaborate on them in a way that engages with contemporary philosophical inquiry. What this first observation shows is that there is another task in between these two tasks, one that involves our making sense of the ideas extracted from the texts in a way that relates to the life experiences of ours that bear an affinity to those of the Confucian thinkers. Only by undertaking this additional task can we appreciate the experiential basis and practical import of these ideas, thereby acquiring a better sense of how to elaborate on them in a way continuous with the perspectives of the Confucian thinkers. I referred to this additional task as one of articulation, as it is an attempt to articulate the ideas and insights of past thinkers. Accordingly, I proposed a three-staged approach to replace the initial two-staged approach. It involves *textual analysis*, which is directed to approximating the ideas of past thinkers as recorded in past texts, *articulation*, which is directed to articulating the import of these ideas by moving back and forth between these past ideas and our present concerns and experiences that bear an affinity to those of the past thinkers, and *philosophical construction*, which is directed to elaborating on these ideas in a more systematic way that is intelligible and relevant to us nowadays and that engages with

¹ I presented this methodological approach in Shun (1997), 5-13.

contemporary philosophical inquiry.²

The second observation concerns the pervasive tendency to interpret ideas of Chinese thinkers in terms of western philosophical frameworks. While that tendency is clearly discernable in the Anglo-American context, it could have been explained in terms of the influence of certain habits of inquiry within such a context. What makes the phenomenon particularly perplexing is that it is equally prevalent in Chinese academic communities. Furthermore, in any of these communities, we rarely find attempts to do the reverse, interpreting western philosophical ideas in terms of conceptions and frameworks of Chinese traditions of thought. I have referred to this phenomenon as a “perplexing asymmetry”, and argued that there is no intellectual grounding for such a phenomenon.³ This phenomenon highlights the importance of finding an alternative and intellectually appropriate method of building a linkage between Chinese and western traditions of thought.

The third observation concerns the potential tensions we face in the study of Chinese thought. The tension I referred to earlier, that between approximating the ideas of early Chinese thinkers and elaborating on their ideas in a way that engages with contemporary philosophical inquiry, actually combines two potential tensions that can in principle be separated. One is that between the past and the present, between approximating ideas of the past thinkers and drawing out their contemporary relevance. The more we work toward one goal, the further we move away from the other. The other is that between China and the west, between preserving what is distinctive of Chinese traditions of thought and relating them to western philosophical traditions. The more we do in relation to the second goal, the greater the risk of allowing western philosophical conceptions shape our understanding of Chinese traditions thereby missing their distinctive features. These two potential tensions can in principle be separated since the first can be present without the second when we work entirely within a Chinese context without attempting to build a linkage to western philosophical traditions.⁴

The fourth observation concerns the longstanding question whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy or, using the corresponding Chinese term, whether there is *zhe xue* 哲學 in China. Early in the twentieth century, Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, in their pioneering works on the history of Chinese philosophy, made deliberate

² I described the details of this three-staged approach in Shun (2009).

³ See Shun (2009).

⁴ I discussed these two potential tensions in Shun (2012).

efforts to defend the view that there is philosophy in China because Chinese thought shares certain characteristics that supposedly define western philosophical thought. More recently, yet another debate surfaced in mainland China concerning the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” (*zhongguo zhexue de hefaxing* 中國哲學的合法性). In light of the persistent interest in such a question, I proposed that we step back and first ask the ‘meta-question’ about the point of raising such a question. Once we have addressed the kind of interest that lies behind such a question, whether we use the label “philosophy”, or *zhexue*, to describe Chinese thought no longer has an independent significance. One kind of interest particularly pertinent to a methodological discussion is whether, and if so how, the study of Chinese thought can be conducted in a way that fruitfully engages contemporary philosophical inquiry. Put differently, the question is whether, and if so how, the philosophical study of Chinese thought is possible. I have defended an affirmative answer to this question, while emphasizing that such a study has to adequately address the two potential tensions just described.⁵

In the third phase, I focused on a theme highlighted in the New Asia tradition. It emphasizes the preservation of Chinese culture in a way that does justice to its distinctive features without viewing it through the lens of western frameworks. Tang Junyi is particularly emphatic on this point, lamenting the trend of interpreting and assessing elements of Chinese culture through the perspective of western frameworks, thereby distorting our understanding and missing out on what is distinctive and of value in one’s own culture. This trend still continues in present times, as illustrated by the asymmetrical tendency I referred to earlier. Tang’s sentiments are shared by Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan. These Confucian thinkers are all closely associated with New Asia College, which was founded in Hong Kong upon the communist takeover of the mainland, with the mission of preserving and promoting Chinese culture.

The trend that Tang laments runs much deeper than just the explicit deployment of western philosophical frameworks in the study of Chinese thought. It is at work in the language we use and the questions we ask. I have argued, for example, that thinking of the Chinese notion of *jing* 敬 in terms of the contemporary notion of respect can distort our understanding of *jing*.⁶ I also argued that regarding Confucian thinkers as engaged in the activity of ethical justification, of the kind that we are familiar with in western philosophical discussions, fails to do justice to the kind of activity they are actually engaged in, and can lead to a misunderstanding of their

⁵ See Shun (2012).

⁶ Shun (2013).

views on *xing* 性.⁷ What we need to do is to properly contextualize our study of Confucian thought, taking into account the historical, cultural and individual context within which the Confucian thinkers propound their ideas.

To summarize, my proposed methodological approach is guided by three goals. The first is to approximate the ideas and perspectives of Confucian thinkers, the second to draw out the relevance of their ideas to our present day concerns and experiences, and the third to establish a linkage to contemporary western philosophical inquiry. Two potential tensions are generated by these three goals, one between the first goal and the second, and one between the first goal and the third. In relation to the first goal, the focus is on preserving what is distinctive and of value in Confucian thought by viewing it in its historical and cultural context, and on avoiding distortions in our understanding due to the unreflective deployment of western conceptions and frameworks. In relation to the second goal, the assumption is that shared human experiences across cultures and times account for an affinity between our present day concerns and experiences and those of the Confucian thinkers, so that our attaining the first goal also provides the basis for drawing out the relevance of Confucian thought to the present. In relation to the third goal, the focus is on establishing the relevant linkage in a way that is continuous with the perspectives of the Confucian thinkers, and on addressing a general question about the relation between Chinese thought and western philosophical inquiry that is often framed in terms of whether there is such a thing as Chinese philosophy.

Similar goals and interests can be discerned in methodological discussions among twentieth century Chinese intellectuals. This is a testimony to the fact that these goals are broadly shared, and the potential pitfalls and tensions they generate go fairly deep.⁸ I turn now to a review of the methodological discussions among these Chinese intellectuals.

2. Two Perspectives on the Study of Chinese Thought

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars of Chinese thought have devoted efforts to showing that Chinese thought exhibits features that characterize western philosophical inquiry or that it can be approached in a way similar to western

⁷ Shun (2015a).

⁸ In the Anglo-American context, David S. Nivison's work provides one example of an attempt to accomplish these goals while addressing the potential pitfalls and tensions. See Shun (2015b).

philosophical studies. Hu Shi characterizes philosophy, or *zhe xue*, in terms of a reflective study of the fundamental problems of human life, and argues that China has philosophy in this sense.⁹ Feng Youlan believes that philosophical activity has to do with a rational process of argumentation, and argues that Chinese thinkers such as Mencius and Xunzi engage in this kind of activity and hence that there is philosophy in China.¹⁰ However, he adds, because of their practical orientation, Chinese thinkers are inferior to western philosophers in this regard.¹¹ Both Hu and Feng seek to identify defining features of western philosophical inquiry and to show that such features are also present in Chinese thought.

Lao Siguang, by contrast, focuses more on the way to study Chinese thought. 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 if such methods are not developed by Chinese thinkers themselves.¹² Unlike Hu and Feng, Lao's observations are about how to study Chinese thought rather than about the nature of Chinese thought. As such, his observations are reasonable, especially if they are not intended to rule out other equally legitimate ways of approaching Chinese thought.

However, in response to criticisms that he has imposed western philosophical frameworks onto Chinese thought, he makes other more debatable observations. He proposes that the content of the teaching of a Chinese thinker can be separated from the historical, cultural, and individual context in which the thinker propounds the teaching, and that the former can be studied without regard to the latter. It can be studied and assessed as a body of ideas in the same way that we view a body of ideas in a western philosophical theory, as ideas that make a claim to universality rather than ideas to be understood in their historical and cultural context.¹³

It is doubtful that the content of a teaching can be so separated from its context. Lao cites and criticizes the Marxist-inspired approach, common among mainland scholars for the few decades after the communist takeover, which interprets the teachings of traditional Chinese thinkers, especially Confucian thinkers, as ideologically informed and implicitly motivated by a desire to defend the feudal

⁹ Hu, 1.

¹⁰ Feng, 4-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 8-11.

¹² Lao (1974), Preface, 20-21.

¹³ *Ibid.* 360-363.

system and the associated privileges of the upper class.¹⁴ But the problem with this approach is not that it views the content of a teaching in a historical and cultural context. The problem is that it has *imposed* a certain implicit motive on the basis of ideological preconceptions rather than on the basis of historical evidence. That this Marxist-inspired approach is flawed in no way shows that we can understand the content of a teaching without regard to its context.

By contrast to Lao, Confucian thinkers such as Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan emphasize the importance of grasping the distinctive nature of Chinese thought in their historical and cultural context, and the need to avoid artificially imposing western philosophical frameworks onto Chinese thought. Just as Lao is so criticized, Mou also criticizes Feng Youlan for committing this error.¹⁵ For both Tang and Mou, it is important to take into account the practical orientation of Chinese thinkers, which has shaped the way their thinking evolved.

For example, Tang points out that Chinese thinkers, in reflecting on fundamental human concerns and experiences, are rarely interested in understanding the nature of such concerns and experiences in the abstract. Their interest is in the practical differences their inquiry makes to actual human lives, including their own and others', and the understanding they seek are instrumental to this practical concern. This is reflected in the downplaying of the importance of understanding (*zhi* 知) by the Daoist and the priority given to action over understanding by the Confucians. In later Confucian thought, this is reflected in the priority given to moral understanding (*de xing zhi* 德性之知) over empirical understanding (*wen jian zhi* 聞見之知).¹⁶

Similarly, Mou points out how Chinese thought is centered in a practical way on human life, and can be summarily described as an 'inquiry into human life' (*shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問).¹⁷ Its primary focus is not an intellectual understanding that takes human life as its object, but the practice (*shi jian* 實踐) of what one gets out of such inquiry.¹⁸ The inquiry is rooted in a profound moral concern with both one's own life and human lives in general, a concern conveyed in the terms *jing de* 敬德, which refers to a serious and dedicated concern for one's own

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 361.

¹⁵ Mou (1978), 2-4.

¹⁶ Tang (1936), 52-53.

¹⁷ Mou (1978), 5-6; Mou (1980), 18; Mou (1983), 15, 45. The term "inquiry into human life" is the title of the collection of essays in Mou (2011).

¹⁸ Mou (1980), 21; Mou (1983), 46-49.

moral cultivation, and *you huan yi shi* 憂患意識, a sense of mission and a dedication to the moral transformation of the social and political order.¹⁹

This practical orientation leads to another distinctive feature, namely, the nature of the kind of understanding the Confucian thinkers seek. The point is put by Mou in terms of ‘subjectivity’ (*zhu ti xing* 主體性) and by Tang in terms of ‘intuition’ (*zhi jue* 直覺), both emphasizing an unmediated relation between oneself and what is understood, a kind of personal resonance that differs from the kind of conceptual understanding in which one stands in a subject-object relation to what is understood.²⁰ As Tang notes, Confucian thinkers have a special vocabulary for describing such understanding. What is understood is something that one silently (viz., not via language and conceptualization) resonates with (*mo shi* 默識), personally experiences (*ti yan* 體驗), and whose validity one personally recognizes (*ti ren* 體認). The practical orientation and the special form this understanding takes account for a lesser emphasis on argumentation and reasoning as well as the absence of the more systematic and theoretical kind of discourse characteristic of western philosophical traditions.

The difference between these two perspectives on the study of Chinese thought, one represented by Lao Siguang and the other by Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan, results in different concerns that one might have for the other. In explicit criticism of Tang, Lao observes that Tang’s emphasis on preserving the distinctive features of Chinese traditions of thought runs the risk of rendering them of only historical and local interest – in Lao’s own words, it has the implication that they “will find their place only in the museum.”²¹ While acknowledging its practical orientation, he insists that Chinese thought can be studied in an analytic fashion and in abstraction from its historical and cultural context.²²

Tang, on the other hand, is emphatic on the importance of studying Chinese thought in its proper historical and cultural context thereby preserving its distinctive features, and warns against inappropriately imposing western frameworks and standards. The preservation and promotion of Chinese culture is the driving mission of New Asia College, which he cofounded with Qian Mu in 1949 upon the communist takeover of mainland China. According to him, the idea of New Asia signifies the rebirth of China and Asia in the context of a history of colonization and domination

¹⁹ Mou (1978), 10-15.

²⁰ Mou (1978), 4; Tang (1936), 54-55.

²¹ Lao (2007), 9.

²² *Ibid.* 7-9.

by western power.²³ In two well-known papers published in the sixties, he notes how the political situation on the mainland poses a severe threat to traditional cultural values, and laments what he perceives as a failure of overseas Chinese to take their own cultural heritage seriously, tending to view what is western as superior.²⁴

This theme is also found in an earlier paper of his on the proper attitude in the study of Chinese thought. In that paper, he points out that traditions of thought are cultural products, and their proper understanding requires one to attend seriously to the historical and cultural context in which they evolved so as to do justice to their distinctive features. He notes the tendency of some scholars to impose western 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. According to him, we need to have confidence in our own cultural heritage, and make a sincere and serious effort to draw out its distinctive characteristics.²⁵ In yet another paper on the future direction in the study of Chinese thought, he emphasizes the need for *jing* 敬, a serious and cautious attitude genuinely dedicated to proper understanding of the early Chinese thinkers.²⁶

As noted earlier, the method to study Chinese thought depends on the investigator's goals and interests. If one's primary goal is to make Chinese thought accessible and of interest to a western philosophical audience, perhaps it is less important to properly understand the perspectives of Chinese thinkers in their cultural context. Or if one's primary goal is to engage in western philosophical inquiry while looking to Chinese thought for some stimulation, perhaps it is not important whether one has properly understood the ideas of the Chinese thinkers, as long as one's construal of these ideas, however removed it might be from their perspectives, does stimulate one's thinking on the philosophical issue at hand. In projects of this kind, it is still important to make clear that one is not seeking to approximate the perspectives of the Chinese thinkers. Otherwise, as Tang notes, the attempt to fit Chinese traditions into western frameworks will make them appear as if they were variants, likely of an inferior kind, of western philosophical thought. Feng Youlan, as we saw, actually makes some such observation about the inferiority of Chinese thought as philosophical inquiry in the western sense.

²³ Tang (1952).

²⁴ Tang (1961), Tang (1964); see Shun (2013) for a discussion of Tang's views.

²⁵ Tang (1940), 390-391.

²⁶ Tang (1966), 385.

However, to the extent that one's study does purport to approximate the perspectives of Chinese thinkers, it will be important to engage in the appropriate historical and textual studies and attend to the cultural context in which these ideas evolved. Indeed, even if one's primary interest is in the exploration of certain philosophical issues and one is looking to Chinese thought only as a source of stimulation, working toward a proper understanding of the Chinese thinkers will still make it more likely that this inquiry into Chinese thought will make a genuine contribution. Otherwise, one will just be framing one's purported understanding of these thinkers in terms of one's own conceptions, and any new perspective on the philosophical issue at hand would be due primarily to one's own conceptions. It is only through a serious inquiry into the ideas of the Chinese thinkers that one can grasp the distinctive features of their thinking, thereby stimulating new perspectives that one might not have arrived at on one's own.

Our discussion highlights two apparently incompatible perspectives on the study of Chinese thought. From Tang's perspective, we should conduct a serious inquiry into the ideas of Chinese thinkers in their historical and cultural context to do justice to their distinctive features. To seek to establish the relevance of these ideas to the present and to western philosophical inquiry without regard to their historical and cultural context demonstrates the mindset that Tang criticizes, one that fails to take seriously the cultural heritage of China. On the other hand, from Lao's perspective, approaching these ideas in this manner would render them of only historical and local interest. Given the very different historical and cultural context within which the Chinese thinkers work, the form their ideas take will be quite removed from our present day concerns and experiences and from those of western philosophical traditions which have evolved independently. The more we seek to approximate the perspectives of the Chinese thinkers, the further their ideas will be removed from the present and from western philosophical traditions.

This apparent incompatibility illustrates the potential tensions that I referred to earlier, that between the past and the present and that between China and the west. To resolve the tensions, we will need an approach that does justice to the two sets of goals that point in apparently opposite directions. We need to show how we can *both* take seriously the historical and cultural context in which the ideas of the Chinese thinkers evolved, *and* establish a linkage to our present day concerns and experiences and to western philosophical inquiry.

A way to do so is to adopt a multi-staged approach. We start by understanding the ideas of these thinkers in their cultural context through careful historical and

textual work, and then use this understanding *as a basis* for a further elaboration on their ideas that will establish their relevance to the present and to western philosophical inquiry. This further elaboration should be rooted in a proper understanding of their perspectives and, in a sense to be described, continuous with their perspectives. This multi-staged approach is implicit in the writings of Tang Junyi and Xu Fuguan as well as in Zhu Xi's views on the way to study the Confucian classics. I will consider their views before turning to my own proposed approach.

3. A Multi-Staged Approach

Accordingly to Tang Junyi, the study of Chinese thought should involve both philological and textual studies (*xun gu* 訓詁) and studies that focus on ideas (*yi li* 義理), the former providing the basis for the latter. Understanding the language and key terms used by the thinkers we are studying, and closely examining the texts that record their ideas, provide the foundation for further explorations that focus on these ideas. We need to take these tasks seriously, approaching the thinkers with *jing* 敬, a serious and cautious attitude genuinely dedicated to proper understanding.²⁷ Xu Fuguan similarly emphasizes the need for *jing* in approaching the Chinese thinkers; we should do our best to approximate their ideas and be careful not to impose our own conceptions onto the relevant texts. To do so, we need to pay careful attention to the context in which they propound their ideas, engage in serious and careful philological and textual work, and on that basis, move on to an investigation of their thoughts and ideas. In the process, we should keep in mind that their ideas are rooted in their life experiences and we should do justice to such experiences. Though their own exposition of their ideas might be unsystematic, they are reflective in developing their ideas and such reflectivity gives reason to expect a reasonable degree of coherence in the ideas they espouse, making possible a more systematic presentation by us.²⁸

That the study of early texts involves these multiple tasks is also part of Zhu Xi's 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 item in the context of the whole text, and consulting various annotations and commentaries.²⁹ This corresponds

²⁷ Tang (1966), 382-388.

²⁸ Xu, 2-6.

²⁹ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Yulei*, 162, 192-3.

to the kind of philological and textual work that Tang and Xu emphasizes, and just like them, Zhu Xi emphasizes the importance of the posture of *jing*.³⁰ As part of this posture, we should maintain an open mind (*xu xin* 虛心) that is unbiased and receptive, and avoid imposing our own personal opinions (*si yi* 私意), artificially making the text say what we wish it to say.³¹

Such careful and detailed textual work is in itself of secondary importance, as the goal of studying the classics is to enrich our understanding of and provide guidance to our own lives.³² Accordingly, we need to personally experience (*ti yan* 體驗) the ideas they contain to make them personally relevant to ourselves (*qie ji* 切己).³³ By doing so, we come to personally recognize their validity (*ti ren* 體認), and our mind and body can enter into what we read.³⁴

In speaking of personally experiencing the ideas in the classics, Zhu Xi makes certain assumptions that we might no longer endorse. For him, the classics are records of the pattern (*li* 理) that the ancient sages have discerned in themselves; the same pattern resides in us, and studying the classics helps us discern within ourselves the pattern that the sages have transmitted through the classics. While we might no longer work with this idea of pattern, the fact that we nevertheless seek the relevance of the ideas of the Confucian thinkers for the present does assume that their ideas, which reflect their concerns and experiences, also have bearing on our own concerns and experiences. This in turn assumes some affinity between the concerns and experiences of theirs and those of ours. Setting aside the idea of pattern and the related assumptions, a reformulation of Zhu Xi's point is that his contemporaries, in studying the classics, should relate ideas in the classics to their own life experiences that bear an affinity to those of the early thinkers. And extrapolating his point to our present circumstances, it means that in seeking the present relevance of a past text, we should also relate ideas in the text to our own concerns and experiences that bear an affinity to those of the thinker whose ideas are recorded in the text.

Thus, for these Confucian thinkers, the study of a past thinker's ideas as recorded in the relevant texts should proceed in stages. It starts with close attention to the language and the textual details, seeking to make sense of the texts and of the ideas

³⁰ *Ibid.* 168, 176.

³¹ *Ibid.* 179, 180, 185.

³² *Ibid.* 161, 162.

³³ *Ibid.* 165, 179, 181.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 173, 176, 177, 179.

they contain on the basis of textual evidence. This provides the basis for the next task, which seeks to make sense of the ideas of the thinker by relating them to the concerns and experiences of ours that bear an affinity to his. These two tasks correspond roughly to the first two of the three tasks I described earlier. I turn now to a discussion of these three task.

4. Three Tasks in the Study of Chinese Thought

In textual analysis, we seek to approximate the perspectives of past thinkers whose ideas are recorded in past texts. In doing so, 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, by working with textual evidence, we can make conscious efforts to minimize the influence of our present perspective and conceptions. The fact that we are basing our conclusions on evidence means that our mentality is primarily one of *receptivity* and *responsiveness* – we keep our minds open to the evidence and respond accordingly, letting our conclusions follow wherever the evidence might lead. Such a mentality corresponds to the state of open-mindedness (*xu xin*) that Zhu Xi emphasizes, and the preconceptions whose influence we consciously seek to minimize correspond to what he refers to as personal opinion (*si yi*).

In textual analysis, we also attend to the historical, cultural and individual context in which a thinker develops his ideas. Doing so is necessary for us to properly understand the key terms used in the text, the specific way the thinker is using such terms, and the nature of the ideas being conveyed. For example, we might conclude that Xunzi was deliberately redefining the use of the term *xing* 性 for certain purposes, if we situate his use of the term in the intellectual climate of the fourth and third century B.C., including both the evolving connotations of the term, the range of views on *xing* expressed during this period, as well as Xunzi's attempt to respond to Mencius and Zhuangzi.

Lao Siguang claims that the ideas of a thinker can be separated from the context in which the thinker develops such ideas. Taken as a claim that we can understand these ideas without regard to context, this cannot be correct. To the extent that we seek to approximate the perspective of the thinker, we do need to take seriously the historical and social context in which he develops such ideas, and his concerns and experiences that are conveyed through them. If the thinker were a contemporary who

shared with us a similar social and cultural background and who spoke a common language, there would have been sufficient common ground for us to ascertain the content of what he communicated without probing the context further, unless something in his individual circumstances gave reason to believe otherwise. But in studying the ideas of past Chinese thinkers who lived in a different culture and intellectual climate and who communicated their ideas using key terms whose connotations still need to be deciphered, the attention to context is crucial.

At best, Lao's claim is correct in the sense that, *after* we have determined the content of the ideas having taken into account the context in which they have evolved, we can *then* discuss and perhaps even assess these ideas without further reference to their context. But *before* we can determine the content of these ideas, we do need to take their context into account; this is part of what it is to approach the early thinkers with *jing*.

The next task, articulation, seeks to draw out the relevance of the thinker's ideas to us in the present, with the assumption that their ideas have significance not just for them but also for us. This in turn assumes that there is an affinity between their concerns and experiences and those of ours, of a kind that renders articulation a fruitful exercise. This assumption is reasonable as there are presumably fundamental human concerns and experiences that are shared across cultures and times, such as how to confront death and hardship or how to bring about social harmony.

In articulation, we move back and forth between the past and the present in an attempt to assess the present 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 present significance, 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 present significance. By moving back and forth between the past ideas and our own present concerns and experiences in this manner, we identify those past ideas that indeed have present significance.

Because of the attempt at linking up with the present, the way we elaborate on the past ideas will often go beyond what is supported by the textual evidence. At the same time, our elaboration should be continuous with the text in meeting a number of constraints. It should be consistent with, though not necessarily supported in all its fine details by, the textual evidence, in that it does not contain elements that obviously conflict with the textual evidence or require some forced reading of certain parts of

the text. It should also fit in with the text as a whole in that various aspects of this elaboration are corroborated by other ideas that can be ascribed to the text on the basis of textual evidence. And while this elaboration seeks to relate the ideas to our own present concerns and experience, we can also see how it relates to the kind of concerns and experiences that the early thinkers might have, such as the challenges they face in the political realm.

Thus, the process of articulation involves both an element of *receptivity* and an element of *creativity*, the former in that we have to take seriously the textual evidence and the constraints that it imposes, and the latter in that, while working within such constraints, we provide a further elaboration on the ideas that relates them to our own life experiences. In textual analysis, we expect a significant degree of convergence in our conclusions as the conclusions are based primarily on textual evidence. In articulation, because of the element of creativity involved, we would not expect the same degree of convergence, though the element of receptivity also gives reason not to expect a radical divergence in our conclusions

In articulation, we look to the experiences of the past thinker and seek to relate his ideas to relevantly similar experiences of ourselves. This corresponds to Zhu Xi's observation that, in studying the classics, we need to personally experience (*ti yan*) the ideas they contain and make them relevant to ourselves (*qie ji*), so that we can come to personally recognize their validity (*ti ren*). Setting aside Zhu Xi's assumptions about pattern, a reformulation of his point is that we come to recognize the validity of these ideas not necessarily in the sense that we actually endorse and seek to live up to them. But we do so at least in the sense that we can appreciate the attractiveness of these ideas in relation to our own experiences, and can understand how they might inform the life of the Confucian thinkers in their own times, and perhaps also of our contemporaries who have been brought up in a culture influenced by such ideas.

Textual analysis serves as the basis for articulation in that articulation takes the outcome of textual analysis as its starting point and proceeds in a way that respects the textual evidence. But in the process of articulation, our elaboration on a certain idea extracted from the text might draw our attention to other parts of the text that potentially contain other ideas that corroborate this elaboration. To see if there is such corroboration, we will need to attend to the textual evidence furnished by these other parts of the texts to see if they do contain such ideas. So, articulation might lead to further work in textual analysis, though it will not affect the outcome of the analysis which should be based on textual evidence. Thus, the two tasks mutually inform each other, the outcomes of textual analysis providing the basis for and constraints on articulation, and the direction of articulation shaping the agenda for textual analysis.

The distinction between these two tasks corresponds roughly to the distinction Tang Junyi and Xu Fuguan draw between philological and textual studies (*xun gu*) and studies that focus on ideas (*yi li*). But articulation provides only a general direction for our further elaboration on the ideas of the Confucian thinkers. The next step is to build on this direction and develop a more reflective and systematic account of a nature that characterizes the philosophical approach we work with, engaging with contemporary philosophical agendas and frameworks. Zhu Xi himself engages in a similar activity when he reframes the ideas from the Confucian classics in terms of the

conceptual frameworks familiar to him and his contemporaries, such as the distinction between pattern (*li* 理) and material force (*qi* 氣). This is the task of philosophical construction, whose goal is to bring the ideas of a past thinker into dialogue with a contemporary philosophical community.

Textual analysis involves a mentality that is directed maximally to the past and minimally to the present, while articulation involves an imaginary interplay between the past and the present. By contrast, philosophical construction involves a mentality that is directed maximally to the present and minimally to the past. In philosophical construction, using the outcomes of textual analysis and articulation as a starting point, we no longer need to go back to the relevant texts, and our attention is now focused primarily on the present – we seek to build a reflective and systematic account that we, from our present perspective, regard as appealing and that meets the criteria of excellence that characterize the philosophical approach we are working with. Like articulation, there is little reason to expect the same degree of convergence in outcomes as in textual analysis, though there is a limit to divergence since the outcomes of the preceding two tasks provide the parameters within which we work.

As mentioned when discussing Lao Siguang's views, our undertaking such a task does not assume that the thinker under investigation is himself engaged in an activity similar to that of this philosophical approach. Indeed, the outcome of philosophical construction will likely appear alien to what we find in the texts in which the thinker's ideas are recorded. But that outcome will still be related to his ideas in a way that warrants our describing it as being inspired by these ideas, as long as philosophical construction builds on the outcomes of textual analysis and articulation.

As a final comment, we should note that 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 perspectives shape the outcome increases as we move from textual analysis to articulation and then to philosophical construction. There are certain potential risks in combining the three tasks in a single project, arising from the fact that the three tasks are directed to different goals that point in different directions. A failure to clearly distinguish between these goals might, for example, lead one to ascribe to the thinker under investigation a certain elaboration of his ideas that is not textually supported and that is quite removed from his perspective. Still, it is possible to combine the different goals in a single project without incurring such risk as long as one is sufficiently self-conscious about which task one is undertaking at which point in the overall project. Thus, the 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.

5. Resolving the Potential Tensions

With this discussion in hand, we may now return to the disagreement between Tang Junyi and Lao Siguang. Tang emphasizes the importance of viewing the ideas of Chinese thinkers in their historical and cultural context, while Lao thinks that doing so will render these ideas of only historical and local interest. The disagreement makes it seem as if there were an incompatibility between taking seriously the thinker's historical and cultural context and relating his ideas to the present and to other traditions of thought. What I have proposed is that we can combine these projects in such a way that the latter builds on the former.

This disagreement between Tang and Lao reflects two potential tensions between different goals in the study of Chinese thought, that between the past and the present, and that between China and the west. The first potential tension is between approximating the ideas of past thinkers and making these ideas relevant to us nowadays. These two goals point in opposed directions – the more we do with these past ideas to make them relevant to the present, the further we will be removed from the perspectives of the past thinkers. The potential risk in combining these two goals is that we might thereby be led to impose on past thinkers our present perspectives. To minimize this risk and address the potential tension, what we can do is to work toward the two goals separately but sequentially. On the approach I proposed, textual analysis is directed to the first goal, philosophical construction to the second, while articulation bridges and makes the latter continuous with the former.

The second potential tension is that between doing justice to the distinctive features of Chinese traditions of thought and establishing a linkage to western philosophical 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. The approach I proposed minimizes this risk and addresses this potential tension by proceeding in stages and by paying careful attention to the use of western philosophical concepts. In textual analysis, we deliberately avoid or at least minimize the use of such concepts, and seek to approximate the perspectives of Chinese thinkers. In philosophical construction, though we might invoke such concepts, we should do so in a way that does not do violence to the Chinese traditions of thought we are working with. Instead of making these concepts our focus, we can attend directly to the phenomena that they highlight, and describe them in more ordinary language that does not carry presuppositions specific to western philosophical traditions. We can then explore the perspectives of the Chinese thinkers on such

phenomena, by drawing on their ideas as recorded in the relevant texts and by elaborating on these ideas in a way that is continuous with the texts.

A similar distinction between goals can be found in the literature on the study of the history of western philosophy. For example, Richard Rorty describes two different approaches to the study of historical figures in the history of western philosophy. In what he calls ‘rational reconstruction’, we impose enough of our problems and vocabulary on them to make them our conversational partners. In ‘historical reconstruction’ we seek to gain historical knowledge of the intellectual scene in which these figures lived, thereby attaining an understanding of forms of intellectual lives different from ours, though at the expense of rendering these figures no longer our conversational partners. According to him, both are legitimate tasks that we can undertake separately for different purposes.³⁵

On the approach that I proposed, the two kinds of activities are not just separate legitimate activities, but are actually continuous with each other. Textual analysis seeks to approximate the past perspective of an early thinker in a way that does justice to the intellectual scene in which he lived, while philosophical construction seeks to develop the thinker’s ideas in a way that engages with contemporary philosophical discourse. Philosophical construction does not proceed independently of textual analysis, but is based on the ideas extracted through textual analysis and elaborated on through articulation. This ensures that it is continuous with the efforts at historical understanding.

Another common distinction in the contemporary philosophical scene is that between the study of the history of philosophy and philosophical inquiry as such, the former being directed to understanding the past with only incidental relevance to the philosophical present, and the latter being directed to our present philosophical concerns and issues. But, as Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, the supposed philosophical present will itself become part of history. Instead of viewing our own present philosophical inquiry as of future irrelevance, it would be more fruitful to view the history of philosophy as itself of present philosophical relevance, so that it can be studied not just historically but also philosophically.³⁶ On my proposed approach, as we move from textual analysis to articulation and then to philosophical construction, we view the ideas of past thinkers not just as history, but as something that can engage with contemporary philosophical inquiry.

The influence of our present perspectives is present to an increasing degree as we move from textual analysis to articulation and then to philosophical construction. In philosophical construction, we seek to build an account that speaks to contemporary philosophical agendas. This is a task that Confucian thinkers themselves often engage in, as exemplified in the way Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming

³⁵Rorty, 49-51.

³⁶MacIntyre, 39-40.

elaborates on ideas in the *Lunyu* or the *Mengzi* in terms of the conceptual apparatus of their times. Indeed, in our own elaborations on an earlier text such as the *Lunyu* or the *Mengzi*, we ourselves also draw on the elaborations by commentators such as Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming, or by more recent scholars such as Tang Junyi or Xu Fuguan. So, for any such early text, what we have is a history of elaborations, each reflecting the influence of the intellectual climate and conceptual apparatus of its own times, and with earlier elaborations often influencing later elaborations. In this way, efforts dedicated to the understanding of the past are of continuing and evolving relevance to the present.

Finally, let us return to the question whether there is philosophy, or *zhe xue*, in China. One approach to the question, as exemplified by Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, is to seek some defining characteristics of the activity of philosophy and then ask whether Chinese thinkers themselves engage in such activities. This kind of approach invokes two broad generalizations, one about the nature of philosophical inquiry in the west and one about the nature of Chinese thought, and each runs the risk of oversimplification. If the question that motivates such an inquiry is about the nature of Chinese thought and how it compares with western philosophical traditions, we will need to engage in detailed and sustained studies of individual thinkers on both sides to address the question. After having done so, the question that motivates the inquiry will have been addressed, and the additional question whether Chinese thought can be described as “philosophy” no longer has any independent significance.

There can be other kinds of interest behind such a question. For example, one might be interested in the place of Chinese thought in institutionalized setups in the contemporary educational and professional context, such as its place in an undergraduate philosophy curriculum or its representation in professional philosophy organizations and conferences. Or one might be interested in whether Chinese thought can be studied in a way that is related to contemporary philosophical inquiry in some intellectually promising way. The two questions are related as an affirmative answer to the latter gives reason for an affirmative answer to the former. On the approach I proposed, the process of philosophical construction is precisely one of drawing out the intellectual relevance of traditional Chinese thought to contemporary philosophical inquiry. To the extent that philosophical construction is possible, we will have an affirmative answer to the latter, and hence also to the former, question.³⁷ But this affirmative answer does not depend on our addressing the terminological issues surrounding the use of the term “philosophy”, or *zhe xue*. Instead, it depends on our successfully undertaking the task of philosophical construction.

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³⁷ For further elaboration, see Shun (2012).

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