

Perspectives on the Methods of Chinese Philosophy

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The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies offers rich, productive discussion of methodological best practices in Chinese philosophy. The participants to this exchange are largely representative of the diverse methodologies currently undertaken in Chinese philosophy, and their contributions illuminate key dimensions of the nature of comparative work and its possibilities. The volume serves as a valuable introduction to the methodological perspectives of established figures in the field, rehearsing influential views and offering diverse insights. The return to shared themes serves well to connect the essays and draw the reader into a rich conversation over how to approach comparative philosophy. Its diversity of methodological views is complemented by variety in the methods of discussing and understanding those methodological views.

Key words: methodology; Chinese philosophy; comparative philosophy; comparative methods; cross-cultural dialogue

Observing my copy of *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*—a sizable anthology of eighteen essays accompanied by a robust introduction—several scholars of Chinese philosophy have posed some form of the following question to me: “Chinese philosophy methodologies, what is that?” The essays that comprise the volume make it clear not only that there exists rich, productive discussion and disagreement over methodological best practices in comparative philosophy, but also that there is no strong consensus on just what issues constitute matters of methodology. What we find in these discussions is instead a quite broad range of concerns regarding what, as scholars of Chinese philosophy, we are doing, how we should do it, and why.

In this collection, Sor-Hoon Tan has assembled a group of discussants largely representative of the diverse methodologies currently undertaken in Chinese philosophy. While it is not a comprehensive treatment of all methodological views—she disavows the aim to be fully representative (30)—Tan has successfully compiled essays that complement, contrast, criticize, and generally engage in rich dialogue with each other. While the editor’s introduction astutely summarizes each contributor’s argument, allowing readers to easily locate ideas of interest to them, perhaps the best way to approach this volume is to read the essays sequentially. The diverse views offered touch so often on common themes and argue often enough against one another that they present the reader with a vibrant intellectual exchange regarding how we ought to understand and undertake substantive questions in Chinese philosophy.

The essays are grouped under four headings. The first section, entitled “Philosophizing with Traditional Chinese Texts,” includes essays by Roger T. Ames, Kwong-Loi Shun, Ronnie Littlejohn, Michael Nylan, and Ming-Huei Lee. It is fitting that the volume opens with Ames, since he is discussed often in the other essays, and his contribution offers a representative sample of his approach. The approach, formulated by Ames and David Hall, emphasizes *ars contextualis*, recognizing that early Chinese thought stresses humans’ practical responsibility as creative collaborators in “world-making” (51–2). In the next essay, Shun and Littlejohn each offer clear and persuasive methodological reflections and advice. Shun proposes a three-stage method for navigating the often competing interests of historical fidelity and philosophical construction while Littlejohn advocates a particular vision of “letting the text speak for itself” that, in line with Shun, holds that a “‘historical reading’ must complement any philosophizing *with* classical Chinese texts” (85, emphasis in original). Nylan points out what, from her perspective as a historian, she wishes philosophers would take into account regarding the nature of the classical texts they so often argue from: their formulation in manuscript rather than print culture, the conceptual and linguistic context in which they were formed, and the social and political uses for which they were meant. Lee embarks on a deeply substantive discussion of the relations between Kant, New Confucianism, and Korean Confucianism’s debate over the “four buddings and seven feelings” (*siduan qiqing* 四端七情); his aim in doing so is to argue, *pave* Yu Yingshi 余英時, for the value and necessity of “decontextualization” in comparative philosophy.

The second section, “Methods from Practice,” comprises essays by Peimin Ni, Sarah Mattice, and Sor-Hoon Tan. The authors focus on the centrality of “practice,” as opposed to mere abstract reasoning or theoretical speculation, in Chinese philosophy, and discuss its implications. Ni promotes the *gongfu* dimension of traditional Chinese thought, which emphasizes “the art of life” in contrast to theoretical knowledge: focusing on this aspect of the tradition allows us to read a text as “life-guiding instructions rather than as a theoretical discourse about truth” (130). This emphasis on dimensions of practice is also truer to the original intentions of traditional texts, our understanding of which may be impoverished or obscured by purely focusing on theoretical knowledge: “using the intellectualist approach to read Confucius is like eating the menu instead of the food” (135). In the next essay, Mattice proposes that in teaching Chinese philosophy we ought to employ pedagogy appropriate to its practical and metaphorical character. She concludes with concrete suggestions for effectively engaging students with Chinese philosophy, such as having them write their own commentaries to the classics; engage in related practices such as Taiji, calligraphy, and meditation; and relate the texts to their daily life (identifying “Cook Ding in the local barista,” understanding the Mohist “critique of ritual in light of reality TV shows like *Bridezilla*,” and finding Zhuangzi in hip-hop) (148–49). In the third essay, Tan examines the value of American Pragmatism as a resource for “the continuation of the Confucian moral mission” by identifying methodological disagreement between Pragmatism and the New Confucianism of Mou Zongsan, and drawing out its philosophical implications (156). In contrast to New Confucianism, moral commitment in a Pragmatist approach does not depend on eternal truths or standards but rather lies in faith that “experimental thinking will have a better chance of realizing Confucian ideals” (174). By doing so she illuminates what is

at stake in one of the principal methodological disagreements among contemporary Chinese philosophers.

The third group of essays, “Adapting Borrowed Methodologies,” presents the arguments of Franklin Perkins, Bo Mou, Yiu-Ming Fung, David Jones, and Eva Kit Wah Man. Perkins’s article is especially representative of the kinds of themes and critically engaged discussion that run throughout the volume. He argues that the way in which people conceive of the nature of existence determines what questions can come to define a metaphysic. From this arises a core problem of comparative philosophy, and one discussed among a number of the contributors: how to navigate the dangers that ensue from defining “philosophy” according to traditional Western philosophical views. He identifies dual dangers of defining “metaphysics” in such a way, that is, by reference to traditionally Western views on the nature of existence. The first, “exclusion,” denies that Chinese thought has metaphysics, and the second, “assimilation,” affirms that Chinese thought does have metaphysics, but in the Western sense. Neither recognizes distinctively Chinese metaphysical questions and thus both preclude us from properly understanding the questions and answers particular to the Chinese tradition’s view of the nature of existence. This further precludes the form of intercultural dialogue with Western philosophy that is necessary for valuable philosophical comparison. Perkins argues that a more productive approach is to first identify areas of agreement on concrete issues and then look at how their metaphysical counterparts differ, thereby allowing for evaluation of the significance of these differences. His final section targets recent research on mind-body dualism by Paul Goldin and Edward Slingerland, author of the volume’s penultimate article, which exemplifies the kind of critical engagement among fellow contributors that makes the volume a site of constructive exchange.

Yiu-Ming Fung takes a stance even more sharply critical in presentation than Perkins, and likewise includes a fellow author among his targets. The position he argues is one of particular import: that the method of analytic philosophy can and should be applied to Chinese philosophy. He denounces three groups opposed to such application of the analytic method—New Confucian “transcendentalists,” “pan-scientific” Chinese historians such as Hu Shi 胡適, and the “comparatists” A. C. Graham, David Hall, and Roger Ames, who argue for the incommensurability of philosophical traditions. His arguments against the transcendentalists touch indirectly on the discussion of the previous group of essays as well, since a central facet of these thinkers is the importance of cultivation through *gongfu* moral practice and reliance on metaphor, which support three bases for rejecting the analytic method that Fung aims to overturn: a mystical notion of private access to truth, the “paradoxical” assertion that ultimate reality is both immanent and transcendent, and the embrace of ineffability (229–30). Fung, however, relies on arguments that have earlier been robustly challenged in work by Graham Priest, who argues that such paradox and ineffability can be affirmed by employing non-classical logic.¹ Nevertheless, this ultimately also supports Fung’s larger thesis regarding the value of the method of analytic philosophy. Fung’s argument against the “incommensurability thesis” has more critical shortcomings. These stem from Fung’s quick association of conceptual relativism—Graham’s embrace of culturally and linguistically relative conceptual schemes, which Hall, Ames, and others, including several contributions in this volume, work with—with incommensurability and “essential difference” between ways of thinking, which Fung asserts there is simply no

evidence to support (237). Fung argues that we cannot explain the difference between conceptually relative schemes “without a common ground between them” since they still must “coordinate in the rational space” (237–38). If conceptual relativism did imply such insurmountable barriers then Fung would have a strong point. However, “comparatist” conceptual relativism may merely entail the need for greater attention to the terms in which comparison and coordination in the rational space takes place; it may merely reject the universal validity and superiority of the terms of a certain particular scheme, not assert insurmountable barriers between different rational spaces.² Whether or not the method of analytic philosophy is compatible with or stands in opposition to such a version of the “comparatist” view is a question of deep importance to methodological concerns of comparative philosophy, and one that Fung’s argument raises but does not clearly or adequately address.

Mou provides a detailed account of his particular methodological principles, which he dubs “constructive engagement,” as they aim to allow different philosophical traditions to engage constructively and critically with one another. A particularly interesting facet of this theory is Mou’s call for and description of an “adequate methodological guiding principle” for evaluating, applying, and relating methodological perspectives, for which he gives adequacy conditions. Jones shifts toward a more speculative and hermeneutic tone, discussing the importance of comparative encounters with the “other” in coming to understand ourselves, while Man mines potential support for feminist theory from the *Mengzi* and New Confucianism while also emphasizing the value of case studies, such as her own work on female Chinese literati and women’s fashion in Hong Kong.

The fourth and final set of essays, “Critiques and Future Possibilities” includes the work of Leigh Jenco, Alexis McLeod, Lisa Raphals, Edward Slingerland, and Hagop Sarkissian and Ryan Nichols. Jenco argues for the contemporary value of recognizing ways of thought internal to Chinese tradition in an approach readers might recognize as combining Jones’s encounter with the “other” with the need to avoid assimilation as stressed by Perkins and others. This approach deepens cross-cultural understanding and broadens the possibilities for intellectual discourse. For example, she shows that recognizing the particular form of contrast that Chinese views draw between rule by virtuous individuals and rule by law or institutions offers resources for better making sense of modern Chinese intellectual and political discussions, allowing us to better understand those arguments on their own terms. This is precisely the aim that Shun, Littlejohn, and others promote, only this time with greater focus on modern rather than classical Chinese thought. McLeod asserts the value of Anglophone Chinese-Indian comparative philosophy, noting the present institutional academic barriers to such study and arguing for the need to overcome them. McLeod points out that the greater comparison between Chinese and Indian philosophies may open up potential for further exploring the philosophical value of their traditional texts. He also emphasizes the value of comparison among an increased diversity of traditions more generally, which offers alternatives to established Western ideas and the possibility for stronger and more fruitful hybrid theories. Raphals gives voice to the call for a more inclusive, rather than predominantly Confucian, understanding of Chinese tradition. She expounds on the value of other, principally Daoist, “fundamentally important” aspects of Chinese tradition that fall beyond and even stand in opposition to Confucian teachings, including China’s scientific legacy, strategic thinking, and individualistic ideals of the good

life, which provide alternative Chinese ethical visions (307, 309). The methods of scholarship in Chinese philosophy should recognize both the historical significance of non-Confucian dimensions of Chinese intellectual life, as well as the ability of non-Confucian resources to contribute to contemporary discourse in Chinese philosophy.

The final two essays propose scientifically supported methodological practices of empirical and experimental philosophy respectively. Slingerland discusses his research on mind-body dualism through quantitative textual analysis, which aims to avoid potential unconscious psychological bias in more traditional individual and subjective textual analysis. His findings lend “relatively objective” support to the presence of certain historical trends in the use and conception of the term *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”) in early Chinese texts, which in turn supports the notion that Chinese and likely all people think in a “weak” mind-body dualism (334). The methodological import is that philosophical understanding of Chinese thought can be better informed by such scientific methods and practice. Slingerland also delves into the “kernel of truth” that lies in contrasting more dualistic Western philosophy with more holistic Chinese thought, although he ultimately concludes that the contrast is actually between the general human psychology of weak dualism and the more radical and “counter-intuitive” substance dualism of Cartesian thought (338, 340, 342). Sarkissian and Nichols advocate the adoption of experimental methods in Chinese philosophy that test the level of cultural and psychological impact of traditional Chinese philosophical ideas or the veracity of claims made within Chinese philosophy. These innovate on the currently established methods of experimental philosophy in ways especially relevant to Chinese philosophy.

The volume exhibits, then, not merely diversity of methodological views but also diversity in the methods of discussing and understanding methodological views. Some of the essays are more substantive, some are more formal; some provide more speculative ruminations and reflections on the nature of comparative philosophy, and others provide more creative takes on the possibilities for teaching and engaging in comparative philosophy. The substantive engagement with issues in Chinese philosophy is often compelling and insightful in itself, but more importantly serves to contextualize and provide concrete examples of points made regarding matters of methodology. Among the more common topics of discussion are New Confucianism, especially Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi, as well as Feng Youlan and Roger Ames. The return to these and other shared themes serves well to connect the essays and draw the reader into a rich conversation on how to approach comparative philosophy.

Overall, the essays illuminate important dimensions of the nature of comparative work and its possibilities. Some bring important but occasionally well-trodden and less contested methodological views and issues into the discussion, while others shed valuable light on less familiar dimensions of how scholars of Chinese philosophy approach their craft and discourse (I think especially of Nylan and Perkins here). For those less familiar with the predominant discourse in Anglophone Chinese philosophy, this will serve as a valuable introduction to the various perspectives on and major issues of comparative work, while for more seasoned scholars it rehearses key views and offers diverse insights while engaging the reader in a stimulating and sometimes provocative discussion among established scholars.

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- ¹ Priest's long-standing promotion of dialetheism affirms that there are true contradictions. On the ineffable, see especially "Speaking of the Ineffable [...]" in *Nothingness and Asian Philosophy*, eds. JeeLoo Liu and Douglas L. Berger (New York: Routledge, 2014), 91–103; "Speaking of the Ineffable, East and West," *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 11, no. 2, (2015): 6–20.
 - ² Henry Rosemont, Jr., "Against Relativism," in *Interpreting across Boundaries*, eds. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 36–70; "Beyond Post-Modernism," in *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, ed. P. J. Ivanhoe (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1996), 155–72. Rosemont, a leading proponent of conceptual relativism, distinguishes it from the "impassable barriers claim" of incommensurability, arguing that the two are logically independent and that incommensurability does not follow from conceptual relativism. This allows him to defend conceptual relativism while rejecting the impassable barriers claim as "worse than worthless as a methodological assumption" (1996: 159). Fung's argument relies on a conflation of the two under the title "incommensurability thesis."