# Global Thinking

*Karyn Lai on new waves in Anglo-Chinese philosophy*

We live in exciting times. The growth of international networks in academic philosophy is encouraging discussion between geographically distant philosophical traditions. Of these, my focus here is the work being done in Anglo-Chinese philosophy. I will not be able to capture all the wonderful research being produced, but I hope to give a flavour of the topics, and a sample of the stimulating new debates that have arisen from Chinese-western philosophical engagements.

Consider personhood. In Confucian philosophy, personhood is conceived fundamentally in terms of a person's *relationships*. This means that a person's chosen pursuits, and their failures and achievements, can only really be understood if we take account of their interactions with others. The Confucian tradition tells us that we should think of ethical life not only in terms of whether a person has fulfilled their moral obligations or acted to maximise good consequences. Instead, perhaps, we can understand the self in terms of the roles a person has, for instance, as daughter, friend, employee, and so on. (For more on this idea, see *Confucian Role Ethics* by Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger Ames,). According to this view, we might reflect on whether, say, as a friend, we have been a supportive confidant. Thinking in this way, we open up new perspectives from which to understand morality, for example, where there are no clear lines between duties, rights and affection in a mother's role. This innovative account of morality offers insights on the concrete and practical aspects of moral life.

If we adopt a Confucian account of relational personhood, how do we *develop*, as moral persons? How do we learn to act well and, at the same time, avoid being entrapped by our networks of relationships and submerged within specific cultural, historical and political contexts that may be limiting? These concerns might have spurred Confucian thinkers across different periods, including Mengzi (c. 385 BCE–312 BCE), Xunzi (c. 310 BCE–219 BCE), Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529), to propose programs for moral cultivation. The cultivation process involves the development and refinement of ethical dispositions through moral practice so that individuals can act reliably in the different scenarios they encounter in life. Practice is a major component of Confucian cultivation. For instance, in smiling or nodding at a person we know, in looking at the other person when we speak with her, or in standing aside for an elderly person to board a bus, we learn about respect, and we *learn to respect*, in these practices. The Confucian debates included deliberations about the resources that were needed for cultivation – highlighting how difficult it can be for someone to develop dispositions, or character, in such a way that his moral commitments are con-



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018

sistently realised in his actions.

Interestingly, similar issues have arisen in an encounter between philosophical and psychological studies, in a debate labelled the *situationist challenge* to virtue ethics. Briefly put, virtue ethics understands moral life in terms of a person's dispositions or character: it is these that motivate or explain her morally-good actions. A challenge to this conception of ethics is presented by empirical data from psychological studies, which suggest that how a person acts in a situation is affected by circumstantial factors more than by aspects of his virtue or character. The number of factors that may influence a person's moral decision-making – for example, peer pressure or desire for financial gain – is indeterminate and infinite. This makes reliable, virtuous action *difficult*. The data from psychology puts pressure on virtue ethicists to consider whether we should be using concepts of virtue and character to explain and predict how a person might act in a particular situation, and even questions whether a theory of virtue is needed.

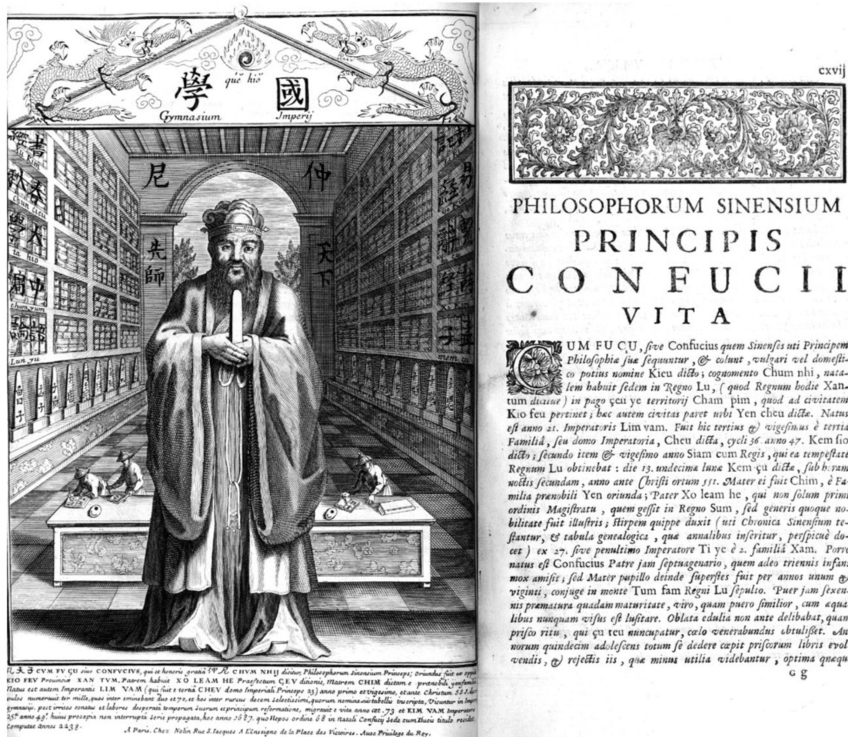
Can Confucian virtue ethics help resolve this issue? Contemporary proponents of Confucian virtue ethics suggest that early Confucian thinkers understood situational challenges to moral life. For example, the Confucian attentiveness to cultivation, a lifelong process, *implicitly* recognises that many conditions in life can pull us away from virtuous conduct. Therefore, it emphasises practice as a way to attune oneself to situational contingencies. Philosophers Eric Hutton and Deborah Mower have developed substantial arguments along these lines. Robust discussions of Confucian virtue ethics can also be found in *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, edited by Steven Angle and Michael Slote.

In the same way that Chinese ethical debates prompt us to focus on practice, Confucian political philosophy can point us to the development of a political model built upon liberal democratic values, but with Confucian characteristics, that may be better suited to the beliefs and practices of populations shaped by Confucian thought. For example, Steven Angle offers "Progressive Confucianism"' a version of Confucian philosophy grounded in three strands: ethical virtue, social ritual practices and political norms.. Other approaches, such as that proposed by Joseph Chan, combine elements of Confucian philosophy – such as its emphasis on meritocracy – with a selection of liberal democratic values. If philosophy is to be *genuinely global*, projects like these are crucial in sharpening our sensitivity to different ways of conceiving political society, thereby enriching our philosophical reflections.

We have so far seen how Chinese philosophy attends to practice and how, in ethics and politics, its debates turn to how people should interact with others to make for better lives. Fascinatingly, Chinese philosophy's discussions about *knowledge* also give prominence to practice. Perhaps this is not so surprising; after all, this same tradition has produced distinctive and celebrated visual and performative art forms, including calligraphy and the martial arts. Might we even suggest that, in the Chinese philosophical tradition, knowledge is performance? In other words, to have knowledge is to be able to act in certain ways, or to be able to perform specific tasks. This conception of knowledge, called "knowing-how", is often contrasted to intellectual knowledge,



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018



cxvij

PHILOSOPHORUM SINENSIUM

PRINCIPIS

CONFUCII

VITA

CUM FU CU, *sive* Confucius *quem Sinenses uti Principem Philosophiae suae sequuntur, & colunt, vulgari vel domestico potius nomine* Kieu *dicto; cognomento* Chum nhi, *natalem habuit sedem in Regno* Lu, *( quod Regnum hodie* Xantum *dicitur ) in pago* çeu ye *territorij* Cham pim, *quod ad civitatem* Kio seu *pertinet; haec autem civitas paret urbi* Yen cheu *dictae. Natus est anno 21. Imperatoris* Lim vam. *Fuit hic tertius & vigesimus è tertia Familiâ, seu domo Imperatoria,* Cheu *dicta, cycli 36. anno 47.* Kem sio *dicto; secundo item & vigesimo anno* Siam cum *Regis, qui ea tempestate Regnum* Lu *obtinebat: die 13. undecimae lunae* Kem çu *dictae, sub horam noctis secundam, anno ante Christi ortum 551. Mater ei fuit* Chim, *è Familia praenobili* Yen *oriunda; Pater* Xo leam he, *qui non solum primi ordinis Magistratu, quem gessit in Regno* Sum, *sed generis quoque nobilitate fuit illustris; stirpem quippe duxit ( uti Chronica Sinensium testantur, & tabula genealogica, quae annalibus inseritur, perspicuè docet ) ex 27. sive penultimo Imperatore* Ti ye *è 2. familiâ* Xam. *Porro natus est* Confucius *Patre jam septuagenario, quem adeo triennis infans mox amisit; sed Mater pupillo deinde superstes fuit per annos unum & viginti, conjuge in monte* Tum fam *Regni* Lu *sepulto. Puer jam sexennis praematura quadam maturitate, viro, quam puero similior, cum aequalibus nunquam visus est lusitare. Oblata edulia non ante delibabat, quam prisco ritu, qui* çu teu *nuncupatur, caelo venerabundus obtulisset. Annorum quindecim adolescens totum se dedere caepit priscorum libris evolvendis, & rejectis iis, quae minus utilia videbantur, optima quaeque*

G g

*Pages from Confucius Sinarum Philosophus by Prospero Intorcetta, Philip Couplet, Rougemont, and Herdtrich (1687)*

or “knowing-that”. The view of knowledge in terms of *pieces of information* (which we then seek to *acquire* with our intellect) has shaped, and continues to influence, western philosophy’s discussions in the area of epistemology .

Stephen Hetherington and I use Chinese texts such as Confucius’ *Analects* and the *Lushi Chunqiu*, to propose the view that knowledge is intelligent action. For example, when, in the *Analects*, it is said that the ruler “knows men”, the statement does not mean that the ruler has details about particular officials. The text is, rather, talking about the ruler’s *judicious selection* of the right people for particular offices. Unlike the picture of knowledge *as* knowing-that, this conception of knowledge does not focus on a person’s *possession* of information, but on her ability to enact it.

Well, most of us will probably not be selecting officials to fill positions. But we all have goals, and we try to attain them. But perhaps we should not be trying so hard. We should instead be relaxed and act spontaneously, says Edward Slingerland, in *Trying Not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science and the Power of Spontaneity.* Slingerland argues that spontaneity lies at the heart of knowledge and action. It is expressed across the different Chinese philosophical traditions but especially in *wuwei* (commonly translated as “non-action”) in Daoist philosophy. “Spontaneity” refers to action that is intui-



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018

tive, relaxed, affective and "in the flow". To act spontaneously is to act with the *embodied mind*, a mode of thought-and-action that involves the entire body. This may be set against a widely-held view of mind in western philosophy, which sees rational thinking and effortful control of the self as key activities of the mind. In case we are tempted to think that the idea of the embodied mind sounds quaint and fanciful, Slingerland's argument for spontaneity leans on recent research in cognitive science. He develops themes such as "hot cognition" to support a Chinese-inspired account of mind, broadened and anchored in a person's embodied engagement within the world.

What is it that motivates Chinese philosophy's focus on action and practice? A common theme in the Chinese philosophical traditions is that *change* is the only constant in life. This view of the world stands in contrast to a dominant strand in western metaphysics, that reality is unchanging, independent and transcendent. Of course, not all thinkers in the western tradition hold a notion of reality conceptualised in this way, but many positions were and continue to be defined in relation to or in response to variants of the account of reality offered by the Platonic tradition.

Insofar as the ancient Chinese thinkers considered questions about "reality", they reflected on a world in which change was constantly happening, and this provided an impetus for them to ask questions about relationships between entities, beings and (cosmic) forces. For the Chinese, given that everything changes, it was critical for them to understand processes, causalities, cycles and the patterns of change so as to *respond* to them. They sought answers to questions about a world that is not one step removed from life but, rather, is the locus of life.

Here, we have a picture of dynamism; and its potency is accentuated by the fact that all things stand in some relation to other things. For instance, changes in other individuals, or within the surroundings, may impact on the self, causing the self to resonate in response (*ganying*: literally, feeling-response). Two key themes in Chinese philosophy – dynamism and interconnectedness – are expressed in a seminal Chinese text, the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*). The text lays out sixty four hexagrams, which serve as a conceptual platform for mapping out changes, correlations and relationships in the world. This view of *reality* cannot be uncomplicatedly expressed using the terms available in western metaphysics, which explains why *Chinese metaphysics* is a more recent development in comparative philosophy. In fact, *Chinese Metaphysics and its Problems*, edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins and "Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy" by Frank Perkins in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, both appearing just in 2015, are the first extended investigations of Chinese metaphysics in English-language literature.

Buddhist philosophy – introduced from India during the first century CE – pushed these inquiries about the nature of reality much further. One of Chinese Buddhism's most intriguing ideas is that the *self is empty* (*kong*). What does this mean? Chinese Buddhist thought holds that all things are devoid of an independent, intrinsic nature. We might *think* that we exist independently, but this is only *illusory*. Causality and interdependence, rather than stability and substance, framed this worldview. Chinese



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018

Buddhist thinkers developed *distinctively Chinese* views of self, as well as of mind, interdependence, and the principles and patterns of causality.

The flourishing of Buddhist thought during the Tang dynasty (618-907) prompted some thinkers during the Song dynasty (979-1279) and after to revitalise Confucian thought. The result of these efforts – a fascinating hybrid of Buddhist metaphysics, Daoist cosmology and core Confucian ideas of moral cultivation – was Neo-Confucian philosophy, which has been influential in shaping beliefs and practices in China, Japan and Korea into the modern period. The subject's *appropriate appreciation* of a self-world relation and her orientation arising from that awareness, were at the centre of Neo-Confucian questions about self and world. (If you want to read more about this, Brook Ziporyn has made major contributions to scholarship in Chinese Buddhist intellectual history and philosophy, and Jeeloo Liu's *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind and Morality* covers key elements of Neo-Confucianism.)

So far, I have given a taste of the very stimulating debates currently going on in Anglo-Chinese philosophy. They show not only that Chinese philosophical inquiry has distinctive and valuable insights, but also that Chinese-western dialogue *broadens* philosophy.

In recent years, there have been exciting developments for those who work in the field, including the discovery of unearthed texts. These discoveries have profoundly altered the landscape of Chinese intellectual history. As some of these texts were previously unknown, and some are different versions of existing texts, they introduce new dimensions into existing debates and change the way we understand the interactions between the different schools of thought. (For more on these discoveries, see Sarah Allan's *Buried Ideas*, Edward Shaughnessy's *Unearthing the Changes*, and Scott Cook's *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*).

Other encouraging developments include slow, but noticeable, increases in the number of reputable specialist journals; graduate students in the field; scholarly societies; more reliable translations of more texts; and enthused undergraduate students (as, for instance, in Michael Puett's packed classes at Harvard University).

I would like to end with two examples of how Chinese philosophy is attracting the attention of leading western philosophers – Michael Slote and Owen Flanagan – who are using distinctively Chinese philosophical insights to extend their views.

Rich and stimulating debates on *emotion* are offered by the Chinese tradition. Chinese philosophy does not typically draw a distinction between the intellectual or rational capacities, on the one hand, and emotions or affect, on the other. This has important implications: because it does not articulate a fine line between cognition and emotion, whether in its discussions about ethics, metaphysics or epistemology, both capacities tend to be engaged in interplay. So here are two examples of how the engagement plays out.

In *A Sentimentalist Theory of the Mind*, Michael Slote gives emotion a central place in moral action, drawing on Chinese views of moral life that do not prioritise rational control at the expense of emotion.. In his theory, "Moral Sentimentalism", actions are morally right only if they do not exhibit or



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018

reflect a lack of empathic concern for others.

Slote has also extended Chinese philosophy's spotlight on emotion into the area of virtue epistemology – a field that underscores an agent's (or a community's) embodiment and expression of virtue in accounts of knowledge. Within these debates, the focus is often on "intellectual" virtues, such as good memory and intellectual humility. Slote introduces the idea of *receptivity*, inspired by *yin-yang* complementarity in Daoism, to these discussions. As *yin-yang* are *complementary and interdependent polarities*, Slote suggests both open-mindedness (*yin*) and rational assessment (*yang*) are key pillars of knowledge and understanding. He argues that, as far as knowledge is concerned, lack of receptivity to others' views is a mark of "non-virtuous and irrational dogmatism".

*Emotions are an irreducible facet of human well-being*, a thesis which, for Owen Flanagan, is supported by recent research in the human sciences, including cognitive science, evolutionary biology and anthropology. Flanagan orchestrates a dialogue between Chinese philosophy and a range of these human sciences in a chapter in *The Geography of Morals*. He demonstrates how, in a text associated with the thinker Mengzi (and bearing his name), the idea of all humans being born with four moral "sprouts" – compassion, shame, deference, and a sense of right and wrong – is worth a second look. When properly developed, these four natural dispositions will form the fundamental elements of a virtuous life, respectively: benevolence, rightness, propriety and wisdom.

Not only are these *concepts of virtue* worth exploring; Flanagan encourages us to see their *practical relevance* in our interactions with others. He proposes that the four sprouts be understood as "biological adaptations" that contribute to a person's fitness for survival, a view that draws from anthropology and evolutionary biology. Furthermore, the *Mengzi's* agricultural metaphor of cultivated sprouts indicates some understanding of complex dynamical systems: the four sprouts have a potential trajectory, that is, when they are cultivated under the right conditions, virtue develops. When virtue develops, the human condition is seen not merely in terms of fitness but in richer and more optimistic terms, of human flourishing. What a thought-provoking way to think about an ancient text by employing it to expand our thinking on moral life!

I have used a number of examples to demonstrate some of the wonderful, stimulating debates in philosophy, made possible through consideration of ideas and approaches in the Chinese philosophical traditions. What is more, the scholars and their work mentioned here represent only a small sample of Anglo-Chinese philosophy. We have seen how the engagements in this field afford opportunities for challenging assumptions, scrutinising dichotomies, pushing boundaries and opening up new ways of thinking. This is *philosophy*, enriched, globalised.

*Karyn Lai is associate professor of philosophy at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Her primary research area is in early Chinese philosophies, often with a comparative focus. Her most recent book is* Introduction to Chinese Philosophy, *2nd ed., Cambridge University Press. She is grateful to Steve Angle for suggesting the idea of Global Philosophy.*



Printed for k.lai from The Philosophers' Magazine - 1st Quarter 2018 at exacteditions.com. Copyright © 2018