Remarks in Panel Discussion at Academia Sinica's
"Language and Practice in East Asian Thought" Conference

When I received the invitation to speak at this panel, about the relevance of Chinese philosophy and the path forward for research in Chinese philosophy, I was extremely honored and excited.

But as I thought more about it, I realized that I do not have expertise or authority to speak about these questions.

I have strong opinions about the *history* of Chinese philosophy as it is done in *analytic philosophy* in the *English-speaking world*. But these strong opinions don't obviously extend to other approaches to Chinese philosophy, to the history of Chinese philosophy in Political Theory, History and East Asian Studies, to the institutional situation at Academia Sinica, or to the situation in Taiwan, or East Asia more generally.

I sometimes wish that we could address the questions raised by our texts and their history in the ether, free of our political and social context, but we can't. Who we teach, and who we talk to, matters. The significance of Chinese philosophy—and in particular of Song-Ming *lixue*, which is my own focus—is very different here in Taiwan than it is in the United States.

So my goal here today is to listen and to ask questions. In my view, you here at Academia Sinica are carrying one of the brightest torches of learning about Chinese philosophy in the world. My great hope for my visit is that I might bring a small part of your flame home, to share it with my colleagues, students and friends.

In a way, then, that's the end of my remarks. I want simply to bow and ask for your instruction.

But it would be rude to come all the way to Taiwan, to eat your delicious food, and then to say in one minute that I know nothing. So, while I want to emphasize that I simply do not know whether what I say now is relevant outside my narrow experience, I will say a few words about what I see as a good path forward for the historical study of Chinese texts in analytic philosophy in the English-speaking world. I'll put my points bluntly—some of what I'll say is far too blunt—but I want to lay out the case for a particular approach to the subject as forcefully as I can, in the hope that it will spur discussion and debate.

There is a famous story—it's in Aesop's fables, but I think in some Buddhist versions as well—about a dog and his meat. The dog has a piece of meat in his mouth, when he sees his reflection in the water. He thinks the reflection is another dog carrying a better piece of meat, so he opens his mouth to get the better piece. The dog's own meat falls into the water, and he ends up with nothing at all.

The meat that scholars of Chinese philosophy have in our mouths are these curious, beautiful, and inspiring texts. As I see it, our job as scholars is to tell the story of these texts: to understand the people who wrote them as well as the people who read them; to bring to life their ideas, regardless of whether they seem familiar or unapproachably strange; and to determine as best we

can which of these ideas are plausible and which are not. Our job is to teach students to read these texts with care, with reverence 敬, but also with a critical, skeptical eye. In both our writing and in our teaching, our job, like the impersonator 尸 of the dead at a ritual, is to bring these ideas to life in a very literal sense, to make it possible for others to have a real conversation with them, in the hope that all of us can better understand their authors' beliefs and the challenges they faced as they sought to live virtuous lives in often quite challenging political circumstances.

I am afraid that this job is not glamorous or easy. It requires humility, patience, and an exacting discipline. The texts often do not speak to the most exciting recent trends. But our job is still to impersonate them, even when they don't talk about what we most wish they did. This job can be a lonely one. We wake up in the morning and wonder if we really need to re-read hundreds of pages of challenging, confusing passages again, and the only person who says we need to is ourselves. The job is also slow. We watch our colleagues (or perhaps another half of ourselves) produce dozens of papers or books in other areas. But our jobs cannot be done quickly—we cannot write those dozens of books—since we must respect, reread, and rethink, our texts. Our work has only the slow glory that belongs to the miniaturist, a glory realized in details, which appears in long-labored works only to those who are willing to look closely themselves.

As I see it, then, this is the meat that scholars of Chinese philosophy have in our mouths. (I'm a vegetarian so I'm finding this metaphor a little revolting, but I'm stuck with it now.) In the reflection of the river, by contrast, many people see large tempting images. In the US, in analytic philosophy departments, scholars of Chinese philosophy want philosophers to respect them, and pay attention to them. Some think the best way to get their attention to find a way that the texts add something to a contemporary debate. Some think it is to get the texts to speak to a pattern of ideas they know philosophers respect, like consequentialism or virtue ethics. And some seek for ways in which the texts might offer self-help in the world today.

None of this is anywhere near as bad as dropping one's piece of meat clean into the river. There is undeniably some nutrition in it, and I think that, in an ideal world, some of us would be doing some of this work some of the time. But in my view, right now, today, we're spending too much time on these approaches, and our emphasis on them is, well, based on an illusion.

Each of the three ideas seems to me wrong in different ways. For the first, scholarly reading of a historical text (Chinese or Western) is in my view almost never the most effective way of making progress on contemporary philosophical questions. (This sentence will make me a lot of enemies, but there it is.) For the second, there are already many excellent textbooks on utilitarianism or virtue ethics. Collapsing the variety of ideas in Classical Chinese philosophy into a curriculum of well-known ideas threatens to lose much of interest in our subject, while failing to add anything to the existing philosophical landscape. And for the third, if what one wants is the respect of analytic philosophers, who value abstract theoretical inquiry above all, developing self-help guides is not the way to go.

Practically speaking—and this is my main, firmly held view—if scholars of Chinese philosophy want to win the respect of analytic philosophers, we will do it most effectively by doing our jobs, as I described them above: by reading the texts with rigor, care, and precision. We will do so most effectively by formulating genuine problems in our understanding of these texts, and then

resolving them. Many of my colleagues who study Chinese philosophy are frustrated by what they see as a lack of recognition for their work. But many of my colleagues in "core analytic" philosophy are frustrated by what they see as a lack of rigor, care, and precision in scholarship on Chinese philosophy. We will win these philosophers' respect most effectively by doing our jobs as I described them above. We lose their respect when we try to change our job, falling over ourselves to try to win their attention.

Less pragmatically but in a way more importantly, I also believe that if we give up on our job, we lose something of intrinsic value that it was our job and no one else's to preserve. In the US, at least, we are the guardians of this tradition; we are its impersonators in our generation. It's true: our texts are not easy to understand, and they resist paraphrase. But their difficulty and resistance to paraphrase is a virtue, both for us and our students. It is in part owing to their difficulty that the discipline of reading them closely is a good way to teach and learn the virtues of respect, reverence, and charity. It is in part owing to their resistance to paraphrase that they help us to teach and learn precision and care in understanding others, even (in fact, especially) when we disagree passionately with them. The texts can be alluring, inspiring, and compelling. But they can also be sexist, inegalitarian, and ugly. Part of what makes it worth reading and teaching them is that, when you think you know what they will or should say next, they say something different. Reading them carefully and closely teaches us to come to terms with this possibility. It teaches us to keep listening, because even when we think we know what someone else will say, they may surprise us.

It would be silly to suggest that Chinese philosophical texts are the *only* texts that can be used to teach and learn these virtues. It would also be silly to suggest that reading old books is the only way to teach or learn them. But it is our job to teach the students who come to us the virtues that it is ours to teach, and, in my view, these are some of the greatest ones.

Of course, there are also many other reasons to read our texts in particular. Many of my American students do not realize that one could believe in a cosmic "moral metaphysics" like that of Song-Ming *lixue* without believing in a creator God. Some have never considered how a form of meritocracy could co-exist with, and even be supported by, a dictatorship. Few have pondered seriously and in detail the challenges which face those who wish to be moral, but who live under arbitrary and often vicious autocratic rule. These texts help to open their eyes.

So I think this is the meat, such as it is, that it is our job as scholars of Chinese philosophy to digest. As I have said, the slow, precise work of the careful impersonator is not likely to land us on the front page. It will not be recorded in the annals of future centuries as one of the great accomplishments of our generation, or even of philosophers in our generation. But even if the role we have to play is small, it is still a role that is worth playing, a role that brings to life in our age virtues of a different one, virtues which are of great value to human life in any social and political system, and whose extinction we should do what we can to avoid. It is far better to be nurtured by this tough meat than to open our mouths and end up with nothing at all.

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2023.09.22