"Better Late than Never:  
Translating Chinese Philosophy into the Western Academy"

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An Interpretive Strategy

In this essay, I want to reflect back upon the challenges I have encountered in preparing the new *Blackwell Sourcebook in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. The last generation of sourcebooks for non-Western philosophy consist primarily of original translations of excerpts from selected, representative texts, with an attempt by the editors at a broad coverage of each of the several traditions under review. In Wing-tsit Chan’s contribution to this important initiative, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, 1963), his choice was to provide his readers with a considerable volume of translated textual materials organized chronologically, with a minimum of philosophical commentary and little by way of an interpretive context. The Chan Source Book is foundational in the sense that, in what it includes and what it excludes, it has set a high standard in the quality of its translations, and has circumscribed the parameters of the corpus for a generation of students of Chinese philosophy. Importantly, it has also galvanized a specific formula of renderings of key philosophical terms, promoting what scholars have since come to regard as a standard if not “literal” translation of the classical Chinese philosophical vocabulary. For its time, it was a quantum advance both in coverage and in quality on what had serendipitously been translated from the Chinese philosophical canons.

In the decades that have ensued since the initial publication of Chan’s *Source Book*, substantial and sometimes complete translations of many of the traditional philosophical works included in it have appeared. Although these new translations are usually more comprehensive than the sometimes brief excerpts found in Chan’s *Source Book*, the fuller translations with some notable exceptions have in many respects provided the student of Chinese philosophy with more of the same. That is, many of the more recent publications have expanded the coverage of the selected philosophical corpus and have, with differing degrees of success, aspired to match the quality of the translations found in Chan’s *Source Book*. But as good as these new contributions might be, they have for the most part not been self-conscious about some of the basic issues in translation.

As one important example, these new translations have usually uncritically perpetuated the same formula for rendering key philosophical terms that has been proffered in the earlier
effort. It will be argued in this new anthology that this now standard vocabulary encourages a
sense of literalness and familiarity with a “Chinese” philosophical vocabulary while at the same
time relocating the same Chinese corpus within a worldview and a commonsense not its own.

Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* reflects upon how a specific worldview is
sedimented into the very language that speaks it:

> The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing
is explained easily enough. Where there is an affinity of languages, it cannot fail,
owing to the common philosophy of grammar—I mean, owing to the
unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions—that
everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of
philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other
possibilities of world-interpretation.¹

Nietzsche is certainly not endorsing a theory of strong linguistic determinism—that is, the idea
that our languages necessarily constrain us to think a certain way. Rather, he is simply observing
that a language and its syntax are over time invested with a particular culture’s insights into what
makes the human experience meaningful. Natural languages and their structures tend to reveal the
default worldview and distilled common senses of the cultures they speak. Said another way, our
languages "speak" us as much as we speak our languages, disposing us to entertain experience in
one way as opposed to another, and prompting us to ask some questions and not others.

Reflecting on how languages such as French and German came to be gendered—"la
table" and "le soliel"—for example, Nietzsche allows that “when man gave all things a sex he
thought, not that he was playing, but that he had gained a profound insight . . ."² In fact, the
corpus of Nietzsche himself is an object lesson in the very interpretive problem that he ponders.
Our languages are conservative in wanting to speak from their own narratives, and tend to resist
new ideas in proportion to the disjunction that these ideas have with what has gone before.
Common sense is obstinate. Thus, when Nietzsche attempts to critique a persistent
transcendentalism within the cultural experience of the Abrahamic traditions that has become
entrenched in its languages—“God is dead”—he must himself turn to and rely heavily upon
rhetorical and literary tropes rather than the more “literal” language precisely because he is

² Nietzsche (1977), p. 86.
frustrated, compromised, and even betrayed by the heavily committed language in which he is attempting to give voice to his revolutionary ideas.

There is an important distinction we might borrow from the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, between langue (language) and parole (speech), between the evolved, theoretical, and conceptual structure of a language system that is shaped by an aggregating cultural intelligence over millennia and that makes organized speech possible, and the application of any natural language in the individual utterances we make.³ We pluralists need this langue and parole distinction to reinforce our claim that the Chinese language has not developed and does not have available to it either an indigenous concept or a term that can be used to capture the Abrahamic notion of “God,” while at the same time allowing us to insist that the same Chinese language has all of the semantic and syntactic resources it needs to give a fair and robust account of such an idea. And likewise there is no vocabulary available in our Western languages to do justice to the conceptual structure of Confucianism. We cannot say “li 禮” in English, or in German either, although we can say lots about it in both European languages, and get pretty clear on what it means.

Recently, and specifically in reference to the classical Chinese language, the distinguished British sinologist Angus Graham concludes that in reporting on the eventful flow of Chinese qi cosmology, “the sentence structure of Classical Chinese places us in a world of process about which we ask . . . “Whence?” and also, since it is moving, “At what time?”⁴ What Graham is saying here is that any perceived coherence in the emergent order of things that is assumed in Chinese cosmology tends to be historicist as well as being abstract and theoretical, and hence has to be qualified by a location, by a particular time in its evolution, and also by its applications. When Graham asks after human nature within the context of Chinese cosmology, for example, because human nature is conceived of as an ongoing and evolving process rather than as some essential “timeless” property or endowment, beyond the question of “what is it?” he must also ask “where was it thought of in this way?” “when did it mean this?” and “how did it serve the human experience for it to be thought of in this way?” Indeed, a cosmic order and all that emerges within it while certainly being understood in general and persistent terms (tong 通),

³ I am "borrowing" this distinction from Saussure because I do not want to endorse the kind of structuralism that would allow for any severe separation between langue and parole, instead siding with the sentiments of Mikhail Bakhtin who would see these two dimensions of language as mutually shaping and evolving in their always dialectical relationship. Utterances gradually change the structure of language, and the changing structure orients and influences the utterances that it makes possible.
⁴ Graham (1990), pp. 360-411.
must also be qualified by the local, the specific, and the transitory (bian 變). For Chinese

cosmology, in the ongoing transformation of the world around us, the temporal, the spatial, and
the quality of life achieved must all be registered as aspects of the ineluctable process. The
implication of Graham’s insight into Chinese cosmology is that all of the rational structures that
might be appealed to in expressing an understanding of the human experience—that is, whatever
theories, concepts, categories, and definitions we might reference—are themselves all ultimately
made vulnerable to change by the always shifting organs and objects of their application. Making
sense of a changing world is itself a changing process.

In fairness to the new translations that have appeared over the past generation, we must
ask the question: At the end of the day, can European languages, freighted as they most often are
with a historical commitment to substance ontology—what Jacque Derrida has called
“logocentrism” and “the language of presence”—actually “speak” the processual worldview that
grounds these Chinese texts? Can texts such as the Book of Changes (Yijing) and the Daodejing
be translated into English and still communicate the worldview that is invested in them? And
more to the point, given the project presently at hand, how does this new Blackwell Sourcebook of
Classical Chinese Philosophy propose to address the problem of attempting to locate the Chinese
texts within their own implicit worldviews?

Resources for Developing a Basic Chinese Vocabulary

If Ludwig Wittgenstein is insightful in asserting that the limits of our language are the
limits of our world, then in order to understand Chinese philosophy on its own terms, perhaps we
need more language. The self-conscious strategy of this Blackwell Sourcebook then, is to go
beyond word-for-word translation and attempt to enable students of Chinese philosophy to read
the seminal texts by providing these students with a means of developing their own sophisticated
understanding of a set of critical Chinese philosophical terms. The premise is that there is no real
alternative but to cultivate a nuanced familiarity with the key Chinese vocabulary itself. Indeed,
word-for-word translation can in the long run be counterproductive to the extent that it
encourages students in reading these texts to inadvertently rely upon the usual implications of the
translated term (i.e. “Heaven”) rather than on the range of meaning implicit in the complex and
organically related Chinese terms themselves (i.e. 天). When one reads tian 天 as “Heaven”
rather than as 天, one reads the text very differently.

By way of analogy, if we reflect on our best efforts to read Greek philosophy, in
developing a detailed understanding of some of the classical Greek philosophical terms—logos,
nomos, nous, phusis, kosmos, eidos, psyche, soma, arche, alethea, and so on—we are able with imagination to get behind our own uncritical Cartesian assumptions and at least in degree read classical Greek texts on their own terms. In a similar way, by seeking to understand and appropriate the key philosophical terms that serve as the axis for the Chinese texts, students will be better able to locate these seminal works within their original intellectual landscapes.

The only alternative to attempting as best we might to take the tradition on its own terms is to participate in a further colonializing of Chinese philosophy and the truncating of its long history. We have to resist the unconscious assumption that this tradition’s fairly recent encounter with the vocabulary of the Western academy has been its defining event. Such an uncritical approach places the uniqueness, heterogeneity, and intrinsic worth of the local aesthetic and cultural narrative of Chinese philosophy at real risk.

It is in this effort to take Chinese philosophy on its own terms then, that the first portion of this Blackwell Sourcebook is an attempt to explicate the tradition's own indigenous presuppositions and own evolving self-understanding. A careful reading of the introductory “Chinese Natural Cosmology: An Interpretive Context” will hopefully sensitize the reader to some of the ambient, persistent assumptions that have given the Chinese philosophical narrative its unique identity over time. It is these presuppositions that inform the philosophical vocabulary and set parameters on their meanings.

Are we then to understand these generic cultural assumptions as essential and unchanging conditions of Chinese cosmology? Of course not. But as I will argue in setting out this interpretive context, making cultural comparisons without the hermeneutical sensitivity necessary to guard against cultural reductionism is undertaken at the risk of overwriting these texts with our own cultural importances, and in the process, making a world familiar to us that is not familiar at all.

As one way of respecting the unique cultural milieu, we—David Hall, Henry Rosemont, and I—have over the years compiled a rather substantial glossary that describes the evolution of a set of key philosophical terms that has been expanded upon herein for students to return to regularly as they proceed in their readings. But let me be clear. The project in this Blackwell Sourcebook is not to replace one set of problematic translations with yet another contestable series of renderings. Rather, in order to prompt and encourage students to reference the explanatory glossary, I have included the characters and romanization for these key terms along with their “placeholder” translations in the texts themselves, allowing that sometimes the same Chinese term is better served by a different translation in a different context. The goal is to encourage students to move between the translated texts, the philosophical introduction, and the
glossary of key terms with the hope that in the fullness of time they will begin to appropriate the Chinese terminologies themselves—天 tian, 道 dao, 仁 ren, 義 yi—and so on—and thereby develop their own robust understandings of them. Ultimately for students who would understand Chinese philosophy, 天 tian must be understood as 天 tian, and 道 dao must be 道 dao.

The Interpretive Nature of Translation

In our earlier forays into translating the Chinese canons, Hall, Rosemont, and I have developed a structure in these translations that like this Blackwell Sourcebook includes a philosophical introduction, an evolving glossary of key philosophical terms, and self-consciously interpretive translations. I have given the rationale for including the extensive introduction and the glossary above. In describing our translations as “self-consciously interpretive,” I am not allowing in any way that we are recklessly speculative or given to license in our renderings, nor that we are willing to accept that we are any less “literal” than other translators. On the contrary, I would insist first that any pretense to a literal translation is not only naïve, but is itself an “objectivist” cultural prejudice of the first order. Just as each generation selects and carries over earlier thinkers to reshape them in their own image, each generation reconfigures the classical canons of world philosophy to its own needs. We too are inescapably people of a time and place. This self-consciousness then, is not to disrespect the integrity of the Chinese philosophical narrative, but to endorse one of the fundamental premises of this commentarial tradition—that is, textual meaning is irrepressibly emergent, and that, like it or not, we translators are integral to its growth and as such, are not passive in the process of interpretation.

At a general level, I would suggest that English as the target language carries with it such an overlay of cultural assumptions that, in the absence of the “self-consciousness” that is herein represented by the introduction and glossary of terms, the philosophical import of the Chinese text can be seriously compromised. Further, a failure of translators to be self-conscious and to take fair account of their own Gadamerian “prejudices” with the excuse that they are relying on some “objective” lexicon—a resource that, were the truth be known, is itself heavily colored with cultural biases—is to betray their readers not once, but twice. That is, not only have they failed to provide the “objective” reading of the text that they have promised, but they have also neglected

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-) uses “prejudices” not in the sense that prejudice is blind, but on the contrary, in the sense that our prejudgments can facilitate rather than obstruct our understanding. That is, our assumptions can positively condition our experience. But we must always entertain these assumptions critically, being aware that the hermeneutical circle in which understanding is always situated requires that we must continually strive to be conscious of what we bring to our experience and must pursue increasingly adequate prejudgments that can inform our experience in better and more productive ways.

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to warn their unsuspecting reader of the cultural assumptions that they have willy-nilly insinuated into their translations.

Reading Philosophical Texts Philosophically

The preparation of any new sourcebook in Chinese philosophy must take account of a recent confluence of circumstances that is promoting a reevaluation of the classical Chinese corpus. First, a continuing series of truly dramatic archaeological digs in China are providing us with earlier versions of extant texts that have not suffered the distortions unavoidable in some two thousand years of transmission. These finds are also offering us access to recovered textual materials that disappeared from sight millennia ago. In many cases, the documents as they surface are requiring a reassessment of our previous understanding of the principal philosophical works that are defining of the classical period and have served as canonical texts ever since.

At the very least, these newly available resources provide a compelling reason for the retranslation of the selected excerpts from the seminal texts included in this present volume. However, if possible, in addition to the reevaluation made necessary by these new and exciting archaeological finds, there is yet an even more compelling reason to take up the project of offering a new sourcebook in Chinese philosophy. Until recently, most professional Western philosophers have had little interest in claims on the part of proponents of Chinese philosophy that there is much of philosophical significance in the texts of ancient China. Indeed, it can be argued that geographical rather than philosophical criteria, and an exclusive dialectical narrative rather than family resemblances among philosophical traditions, continue to be invoked as reasons to exclude entire philosophical traditions from a proper investigation, and as a consequence, profoundly “philosophical” texts are not being treated as such within the sanctum of professional philosophy.

That “philosophy” as a professional discipline has historically defined itself largely as Anglo-European is a claim that is as true in Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Delhi, Nairobi, and Boston, as it is in Cambridge, Frankfort, and Paris. For many reasons—certainly economic and political factors included among them—philosophers who go about their business within the academies outside of Europe have themselves not only acquiesced in the exclusive claim of Anglo-European philosophy to have a monopoly on their discipline, but have moreover worked assiduously to make European philosophy the mainstream curriculum in the best of their own home institutions. In this sustained process of self-colonization, indigenous traditions of philosophy—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, South Asian, African, and yes, American too—have been marginalized, while the heirs to British Empiricism and Continental Rationalism have continued to wage their battles
on foreign soil. That is, if indigenous Asian, African, and American philosophies have been ignored by Western philosophers, they have also been significantly marginalized within their home cultures. William James was almost right when he began his 1901 Gifford lectures at Edinburgh by admitting that “To us Americans, the experience of receiving instruction from the living voice, as well as from the books of European scholars, is very familiar... It seems the natural thing for us to listen whilst the Europeans talk.” The only caveat offered here is that James would have reported on the self-understanding of professional philosophy more accurately—a perception that is in important degree alive and well a century later—if he had included the Asian and African philosophers along with the Americans as the seemingly “natural” audience for European philosophy.6

**Chinese Philosophy as “Eastern Religions”**

Given this marginalization of indigenous philosophical traditions, philosophy as a professional discipline has an unfulfilled responsibility to our academy and to the community as well that is only very recently beginning to be addressed. An essential occupation of philosophers is to identify and describe the generic traits of the human experience and to thereby locate the problems of the day within their broadest possible contexts. Through rigorous critique and persuasion they are responsible for producing the social intelligence needed to address these problems, and for recommending solutions to issues that will win the allegiance of the communities they serve. And these defining generic characteristics of the human adventure are significantly different as we move from one cultural and epochal site to another. Indeed, given the complexity of our contemporary world, philosophers as producers of knowledge have the responsibility to seek out and to come to an understanding of the uncommon assumptions that distinguish cultures, and to thereby prevent a pernicious cultural reductionism and the misconceptions that such ethnocentrism entails. Thus it is that the relative absence of philosophers in the interpretation of Chinese philosophy—a tradition that is the legacy of something near a quarter of the world’s population—has come at a real cost in knowing the world around us.7 We can only hope that the recent turn of professional philosophy toward a more inclusive understanding of the discipline will continue.

The interpretive consequences of this historical lacuna are serious. It has become a commonplace to acknowledge that, in the process of Western humanists attempting to make sense

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7 The population of China proper is over 22.5%, with greater China and the various diasporas making China what Lucian Pye has called “a civilization pretending to be a country.” Indeed, China is a continent—an Africa or Europe—rather than a France or a Nigeria.
of the classical Chinese philosophical literature, many unannounced Western assumptions and
generic characteristics have been inadvertently insinuated into the understanding of these texts,
and have colored the vocabulary through which this understanding has been articulated. To the
extent that Chinese philosophy has become the subject of Western philosophical interest, it has
often in not usually been analyzed within the framework of categories and philosophical
problems not its own.

Indeed, over the last several centuries of cultural encounter, the vocabulary established
for the translation of classical Chinese texts into Western languages has been freighted by an
often unconscious Christian framework, and the effects of this “Christianization” of Chinese texts
are still very much with us. There are numerous examples of grossly inappropriate language
having become the standard equivalents in the Chinese/English dictionaries that we use to
perpetuate our understanding of Chinese culture: “the Way” (dao 道), “Heaven” (tian 天),
體), “principle” (li 理), “material substance” (qi 氣),” and so on. Can a Western student read the
capitalized “Heaven” as anything other than a metonym for the familiar notion of a transcendent
God? Is living a life as someone’s son or daughter a “rite?” Should we reduce what is quite
literally the image of cultivated, consummate human beings in all their aspects—cognitive, moral,
aesthetic, religious, somatic—to a single psychological disposition: “benevolence?” When and in
what context would a native English speaker ever utter the word “righteousness?”

Chinese philosophy understood through this existing formula of translations has been
made familiar to Western readers by first “Christianizing” it, and then more recently, by
“orientalizing” it and locating it within a deprecating poetical-mystical-occult and religious
worldview as a boundary on our logical-rational-enlightened and decidedly secular self-
understanding. The classics of Chinese philosophy in most American and European bookstores
and libraries are usually located between the bibles and the New Age, and if given any specific
designation at all, are likely to be shelved under some variant of “Eastern Religions.” Even
though this present volume is clearly entitled the Blackwell Sourcebook of Classical Chinese
Philosophy, I would chance that you did not find it in the “philosophy” section at all.

Many of the more philosophically-inclined sinologists who have been involved in the
recent translation of canonical Chinese works are now acknowledging that a fuller inventory of
semantic matrices might be necessary for the translation of these philosophical texts, and are
struggling to get beyond the default, “commonsensical” vocabularies of their native cultural
sensibility. As a matter of fact, the recent recovery of new versions of existing philosophical texts
and the further discovery of many others that have been long lost, in occasioning the retranslation
of many of the classics, has provided both a pretext and an opportunity for philosophers to step up and rethink our standard renderings of the philosophical vocabulary. Most importantly, it has presented us with the challenge of trying, with imagination, to take these texts on their own terms by locating and interpreting them within their own worldviews.

**An Interpretive Asymmetry: Vernacular Asian Languages and the Language of Modernity**

There is a profound asymmetry that continues to plague our best attempts to make responsible comparisons between the Chinese and Western philosophical narratives. To state the problem simply, we have been given to relentlessly theorizing the Chinese tradition according to our Western philosophical assumptions, shoehorning Chinese concepts into categories that are not its own. We are given to pondering with philosophical nuance: “Is Mohist utilitarianism agent-neutral or agent relative?” but it would not occur to us to ask if John Stuart Mill is an early or later Mohist. Again, we are given to a penetrating debate on: “Is Confucian ethics an Aristotelian aretæic ethic or a Humean-inspired sentimentalist ethic? but it would not occur to us to ask if Aristotle, and Hume too, are classical or perhaps neo-Confucians. Kwong-loi Shun has recently made much of this asymmetry:

> [T]here is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions. This trend is seen not only in works published in the English language, but also in those published in Chinese. Conversely, in the contemporary literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions.⁸

As Shun observes, this problem is as true of contemporary Chinese and Japanese intellectuals as it is of their Western counterparts, speaking as they do a vernacular language transformed by its encounter with the cultural imperialism of a dominating Western modernity, and thus deploying a largely Western conceptual structure even while speaking their own Chinese and Japanese languages. During the second half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, Japanese and then Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese intellectuals, at once enamored of and overwhelmed by Western modernity, created a sinitic vocabulary to appropriate and give

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voice to the conceptual and theoretical language of Western academic culture.  

**Lost and Found in Translation**

There is another issue that needs to be addressed in these introductory pages. A rather natural question to be asked is: In our attempt to get past earlier culturally reductive readings of the Chinese corpus, are we not in fact just substituting one Western philosophical reading of these texts with another? Are we not rescuing the Chinese tradition from an uncritical Greek, a calculated Christian, or a more familiar Cartesian reading only to overwrite it with our own pragmatic, process assumptions?

Encountering the unsummed richness of the original texts themselves, we as interpreters are always people of a specific time and place. Such an interface in itself is a formula for inescapable cultural reductionism. Certainly our too hastily constructed interpretive strategies and overarching theories—“philosophical” or otherwise—when applied in the practice of cultural and textual translation, cannot help put concrete detail at some considerable risk. When Robert Frost remarks that “what is lost in translation is the poetry,” I think that as an artist he is quite properly concerned that translation is a literary transaction that at best makes different, and that most often, makes less.

Indeed, in order to maximize our efforts in translation, we first and foremost need a commitment to a Heideggerian *Destruktion* in which we struggle to recover the situated, primordial meanings by “polishing” the key terminology. This process is “conservative” in the

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9 In thinking through modern Chinese literature, Lydia H. Liu 刘禾 probes the “discursive construct of the Chinese modern:

I am fascinated by what has happened to the modern Chinese language, especially the written form, since its early exposure to English, modern Japanese, and other foreign languages. . . .The true object of my theoretical interest is the *legitimation of the “modern” and the “West”* in Chinese literary discourse as well as the *ambivalence of Chinese agency* in these mediated processes of legitimation. (pp. xvi-xviii).

Pointedly alluding to Foucault’s concern of the role of power relations and authority in the process of cultural translation, Liu cites Talal Asad as offering certainly an apposite critique of the British ethnographic tradition, but also a critique that has relevance to cultural translation broadly:

To put it crudely, because the languages of the Third World societies—including of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied—are “weaker” in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with Third World countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than Third World languages do. (p. 3)

archaeological sense of recovering as much contextualizing detail as possible, and is “radical” as we pursue the root meanings within the soil of Chinese culture. In spite of our real interpretive limitations, to the extent that we can, we must struggle with imagination to allow a text that belongs to another cultural narrative to reveal its poetry—the unmediated, non-referential bottomlessness of its own detail and particularity. This being said, is such a resolute commitment to recovering the objective specificity of the text enough? Is it possible, or even desirable, to leave off our efforts with grasping as much of the original meaning as we can?

And can there ever be such a thing as purity in translation and cultural interpretation anyway? First, the image of Jorge Luis Borges’ s “Funes the Memorious” leaps to mind, raising the question of whether can we actually “think” particularity. Again to what extent and in what degree is it ever possible to escape our own facticity to read these texts with naïveté and innocence, free from our own cultural assumptions? Perhaps instead of pretending to an impossible objectivity, we need a hermeneutical openness in the project of cultural interpretation. That is, beyond the necessary commitment to respecting the particularity of the text, we are in need of hermeneutical sensibilities that begin from an awareness of our own prejudgments, and that allows for both textual detail and interpretive generalizations in the ongoing and inevitable fusion of horizons.

In fact, it can be argued that “wisdom” emerges analogically through establishing and aggregating a pattern of truly productive correlations between what we know and what we would know. Such correlations are “productive” in that they increase meaning, and we actually achieve wisdom itself when we are able to optimize these meaningful correlations effectively in our life situations.

Of course not all analogies are equally apposite, and as we know from the experience with Chinese philosophy, poorly chosen comparisons can be a persisting source of distortion and of cultural condescension. A heavy-handed and impositional “Christian,” “Heideggarian,” and yes, even “Pragmatic” or “Whiteheadian” reading of Chinese philosophy betrays the reader by distorting both the Chinese tradition and the Western analogue in the comparison. Even so, we have no choice but to identify productive analogies that, with effort and imagination, can in the fullness of time be qualified and refined in such a way as to introduce culturally novel ideas into our own world to enrich our own ways of thinking and living.

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10 In this story, Borges introduces a character who, with perfect memory of every detail of his day, requires fully 24 hours to remember 24 hours. Such completeness turns Greek abstraction on its head, precluding the possibility of rising above the detail to reflect and deliberate on one’s experience.
And we need to be analogically retail and piece-meal rather than working in whole cloth. That is, when turning to the Zhongyong in which the human being is celebrated as co-creator with the heavens and the earth we might find analogy with Whitehead in his concern to reinstate “creativity” as an important human value. At the same time we might be keenly aware that when the same Whitehead invokes the primordial nature of God and the Eternal Objects that primordial nature of God sustains, this long shadow of Aristotelian metaphysics sets a real limit on the relevance of this dimension of Whitehead’s thought for classical Chinese process cosmology.

Further, analogies can be productive of both associations and contrasts, and we can learn much from both. Indeed, while Aristotelian teleology and his reliance upon logic as method might serve as a point of contrast with Chinese philosophy, his resistance to Platonic abstraction in promoting an aggregating practical wisdom does resonate productively with one of the central issues in classical Confucian moral philosophy: a commitment to the cultivation of excellent habits of the heart-and-mind. In this project of cultural translation, we must pick and choose our analogies carefully—but pick and choose we must.

Radial Relationality as an Organizing Structure: The Great Learning (Daxue 大學)

Having argued in the philosophical introduction, “Chinese Natural Cosmology: An Interpretive Context,” for what I take to be an evolving worldview within which these Chinese philosophical terms must be understood, I have then organized the readings thematically in a way that seeks to be consistent with the tradition itself. This is necessary because Chinese philosophy does not parse comfortably into the standard Western philosophical categories such metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so on. For example, in a culture where there is a presumed continuity between knowing as “realizing” and thus a productive “doing,” erstwhile epistemology very quickly spills over into ethics and into social and political philosophy.

Again, Chinese philosophy cannot be accommodated wholesale by appeal to the formal disciplines and areas of cultural interest that have come to define the Western academy: philosophy, religion, psychology, and so on. In the case of religion, for example, the well-intended attempt of some recent interpreters to rescue Chinese philosophy from the overlay of a Judeo-Christian worldview fails utterly if, in the process, this rehabilitation serves to secularize Chinese philosophy by robbing it of its important religious import. After all, there are many different ways of being religious, and while the Abrahamic traditions might assume uncritically that religion necessarily entails an appeal to a concept of God to the extent that “a-theistic religiousness” sounds like an oxymoron, this should not disqualify the entertainment of an alternative Chinese religiousness that does not subscribe to this same presupposition.
Although our familiar categories and disciplines can certainly be qualified, expanded, and reshaped in sufficient degree to permit their reference to the Chinese tradition, I have proceeded on the premise that to invoke these taxonomies as principles of organization would, on balance, be a source of more loss than gain. Indeed, the technical vocabularies that define these disciplines and their categories would only be a persistent and compounding source of equivocation. Of course, the important exception to this decision to abjure most of our formal categories is to retain reference to the discipline of “philosophy” itself. And this is not just a semantic quibble. This is because the use of “philosophy” as opposed to “thought” or “culture” is not neutral—it is a normative term that bestows high value on its object. The designation “philosophy” in the academy is a prize awarded to profound and serious thinking to the extent that many if not most of professional philosophers are disinclined to refer to themselves directly as “philosophers,” usually preferring some more modest variant of “doing philosophy” or of being a “professor of philosophy.” This entire Blackwell Sourcebook, then, as an attempt to extend the term “philosophy” and to bring it into clearer definition when applied to the Chinese tradition, is at the same time an argument for the depth and quality of Chinese thinking with respect to some of the most perennial and important issues that confront us as human beings.

As an organizing strategy, I appeal to the project of unrelenting personal cultivation as a pervasive preoccupation of Chinese philosophy, where the very cosmos is perceived as expanding in meaning by virtue of this continuing human process. A personal commitment to achieving relational virtuosity within one’s own family relationships is both the starting point and the ultimate source of personal, social, and indeed cosmic meaning. In cultivating one’s own person through achieving and extending robust relations in one’s family and beyond, one enlarges the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and in turn, this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of one’s own continuing personal cultivation.

As an example, Confucius himself is adamant that moral motivation is the motor of personal cultivation. Always self-effacing, Confucius not only allows but actually repeatedly endorses one description of himself—that he is a person who “cares deeply for learning” (haoxue 好學). And for Confucius, such learning means quite specifically to have the unrelenting resolve to become consummate in one’s conduct as a person (ren 仁). Becoming consummate in one’s conduct is a lifelong project that quite literally begins at home, and that is irreducibly collateral and transactional—the refined and elegant expression of a relational virtuosity. I have translated the relevant textual materials and assembled these passages thematically in a way that replicates this process of meaning-making that begins with personal cultivation and expands radially outward to fund an enhanced cosmic numinosity.
In exploring Chinese cosmology as the relevant interpretive context for this *Blackwell Sourcebook*, I have tried to find language to distinguish it from the reductive single-ordered, “One-behind-the-many” model more familiar in classical Greek idealism in which I “understand” the many by coming to know the one that lies behind them. Instead, I have argued for the persistence of a more holistic focus-field model perhaps most succinctly illustrated in the *Great Learning (Daxue)*, one of the seminal canons of Confucian philosophy. Indeed, the *Great Learning* provides this *Blackwell Sourcebook* and the student of Chinese philosophy who would use it, with an organizing structure that expresses this focus-field, radial sensibility. I translate excerpts of this short but influential text here as a starting point for considering at least one particular strategy the Chinese philosophical tradition has developed to organize the human experience.

The central message of this canonical document is that while personal, familial, social, political, and cosmic cultivation is ultimately coterminous and mutually entailing, it must always begin from the Confucian project of personal cultivation. Each person stands as a unique perspective within their family, community, polity, and so on, and through a commitment to deliberate growth and articulation, they are able bring the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within family and community into clearer resolution and more meaningful focus. That is, cultivating one’s own person enlarges the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and in turn, this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a flourishing environment for the project of one’s own personal cultivation.

In the *Analects* 14.35, Confucius insists that order starts here and goes there: “I study what is near at hand and aspire to what is lofty.” Again in *Analects* 6.30 Confucius captures the gist of personal articulation in one sentence: “Correlating one’s conduct with those close at hand can be said to be the method of becoming consummate as a person.”

The *Great Learning*, the seminal, foundational canon that sets and anchors this Confucian project early in the tradition, describes the possibilities in the process of becoming fully human, insisting that it is only through committing oneself to a resolute regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the comprehensive intellectual and moral understanding that will make the most of the human experience. In the language of the text itself:

The way of achieving greatness through learning lies in demonstrating real personal virtuosity, in cherishing the common people, and in dedicating oneself to doing what is best. Such a course of learning can only be set once one has made this commitment. Only in having set such a course is one able to find
equilibrium, only in having found equilibrium is one able to become self-assured, only in having become self-assured is one able to be deliberate in what one does, and only in being deliberate in what one does is one able to get what one is after. There is the important and the incidental in things and a beginning and an end in what we do. It is in realizing what should have priority that one approaches the proper way (dao).  

Having endorsed the priority of making a commitment to personal cultivation, the text then continues by rehearsing the cosmic reach and influence of the ancient sage-kings once they had dedicated themselves to this project:

The ancients who sought to demonstrate real virtuosity to the whole world first brought proper order to their states; in seeking to bring proper order to their states, they first set their families right; in seeking to set their families right, they first cultivated their own persons; in seeking to cultivate their persons, they first knew what is proper in their own heartminds; in seeking to know what is proper in their heartminds, they first became sincere in their purposes; in seeking to become sincere in their purposes, they first became comprehensive in their wisdom. And the highest wisdom lies in seeing how things fit together most productively.

In thus cultivating themselves, they contribute to the most efficacious environment not only for their own continuing personal growth, but also by extension for a flourishing cosmos:

Once they saw how things fit together most productively, their wisdom reached its heights; once their wisdom reached its heights, their thoughts were sincere; once their thoughts were sincere, their heartminds knew what is proper; once their heartminds knew what is proper, their persons were cultivated; once their persons were cultivated, their families were set right; once their families were set

11 Zhu Xi (1969 reprint): Daxue 1a-1b: 大學之道，在明明德，在親民，在止於至善。知止而後有定，定而後能静，靜而後能安，安而後能慮，慮而後能得。物有本末，事有終始，知所先後，則近道矣。
12 古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。
right, their state was properly ordered; and once their states were properly ordered, there was peace in the world.\textsuperscript{13}

Each person stands as a unique perspective on family, community, polity, and cosmos, and through a dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, everyone has the possibility of bringing the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within family and community, into clearer and more meaningful focus. The “learning” (\textit{xue} 學) of the \textit{Great Learning} is the cultivation of virtuosic, transpersonal habits of conduct, and the “greatness” (\textit{da} 大) of this learning lies in its cosmic reach.

As the \textit{Great Learning} enjoins us, in the singularly important project of becoming consummate persons, we must get our priorities right:

From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots are not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{Record of Rites} (\textit{Liji} 禮記) version of the \textit{Great Learning} concludes this text by declaring that giving priority to achieving personal virtuosity produces a joyful wisdom. In its own words, “This commitment to personal cultivation is called both the root and the height of wisdom.”\textsuperscript{15} It is important to understand that the “root” and its fruit, “wisdom,” are to be perceived as an organic whole that either grow together, or not at all. The Chinese philosophical narrative has from earliest times sustained a commitment to the production of wisdom by understanding personal cultivation as the ultimate source of cosmic meaning.

\textbf{Selecting the Content of the Sourcebook}

In deliberating on what to include in this \textit{Blackwell Sourcebook}, I too have begun from what is close at hand: that is, the vocabulary most immediately necessary to the project of personal cultivation. I have then extended this terminology out radially to include the cultivation

\textsuperscript{13} 物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。

\textsuperscript{14} 自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本。其本亂而末治者否矣，其所厚者薄，而其所薄者厚，未之有也。

\textsuperscript{15} 此謂知本，此謂知之至也。
of one’s person within the context of the family, the community, the polity, and ultimately, the
cosmos. Surrendering any pretense at being able to represent this long and rich philosophical
tradition in any comprehensive way, I have simply sought to choose representative passages that
define both the terms of art and the problems. I want to highlight some of the philosophical issues
that have been important to this culture’s story as it has, and as it continues, to unfold. It is hoped
that students by developing their own understanding of the vocabulary and the issues defining of
the Chinese philosophical narrative, will thus be inspired to read other available, fuller
translations of Chinese philosophy with a greater degree of nuance and insight.

Reflecting on the actual use of this Blackwell Sourcebook in the classroom, I have
followed The Great Learning and tried to think in terms of the root and branches. I have limited
myself to the formative and foundational pre-Buddhist thinkers who were at times absorbed into,
and at other times remained in tension with, what in the course of time became the orthodoxy of a
continuing philosophical discourse. I have tried to treat the philosophers included as disparate
members of sometimes interconnected but loosely defined lineages rather than as members of
erstwhile “schools” of thought, respecting “the inseparability of continuity and multiplicity”
(yiduobufen 一多不分) and “the ongoing transforming” (tiyong 體用) that are acknowledged and
defining features of the Chinese narrative.

**Philosophy in Revolution: Opening a Space for Chinese Philosophy**

But we do not need to invoke Chinese philosophy to problematize some of the persisting
assumptions within the Western tradition that have excluded Chinese philosophy from
consideration as philosophy. Indeed, it is the revolution currently taking place within the Western
philosophical community that might be described as an attempt to think process and reinstate
wisdom that provides an opening and an invitation to take Chinese philosophy more seriously.
That is, an internal critique continues to be waged within professional Western philosophy under
the many banners of process philosophy, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, postmodernism, neo-
pragmatism, neo-Marxism, deconstructionism, feminist philosophy, and so on, that takes as a
shared target what Robert Solomon has called “the transcendental pretense”—idealism,
rationalism, objectivism, formalism, logocentrism, essentialism, the master narrative, ontology-
theological thinking, “the myth of the given”—the familiar reductionistic “isms” that have
emerged as putatively novel choices to allow philosophers to switch horses on the merry-go-
round of systematic philosophy. In place of a Cartesian philosophical language that privileges the
function of clear and distinct ideas in our quest for an objective certainty, vocabularies of process,
change, particularity, creative advance, and indeed productive vagueness have increasingly come into vogue. These recent developments in Anglo-European philosophy have themselves begun to foreground an interpretative terminology more relevant to the articulation of Chinese culture.

As heir to this legacy of metaphysics and epistemology, the main problematic in a Cartesian dualistic worldview is one of closure articulated in the vocabulary of the quest for certainty guaranteed by clear and distinct ideas, the attainment of objective truth, and the reconciliation and ultimate salvation that follows from it. By contrast, a main problematic in the correlative cosmology we associate with process philosophy in its many varieties, is one of personal cultivation and disclosure—that is, an aestheticism. To use Chinese terminology, the aspiration of such cultivation is wisdom, and the creative extension of an evolving cultural pattern of becoming consummately human (dao道) that is ultimately derived from the uniqueness of those persons who contribute to it. There is a synergy in being shaped by and in turn shaping the world around one. Novelty emerges in the interface between the force of environing natural, social, and cultural conditions, and one’s own creative contribution to one’s context.

One of the most interesting ramifications of the increasing popularity of process language, from the perspective of our present project, is that the stimulation offered by the need to better understand Asian sensibilities, is in fact recursive. While process vocabularies are leading to increasingly productive interpretations of the classical Chinese world, these process interpretations of Chinese texts in turn provide us with new lenses through which to see our own Western sensibilities. Previously ignored or misconstrued elements within our own cultural self-understanding are beginning to receive new and decidedly more coherent interpretations.¹⁶

Classical Chinese cosmology subscribes to the mantra, “the only kind of creativity is situated co-creativity.” And, in the wake of the process thinkers, A.N. Whitehead and John Dewey, a sustained reflection by philosophers on the fact that there is no transcendentalism or the many dualisms that mark its presence in the classical Chinese assumptions about cosmic order may pay us important philosophical dividends. The pervasive Chinese assumption about the always emergent nature of order might at this particular historical moment provide us with a salutary intervention in the Western philosophical narrative. That is, in this classical Chinese worldview there is an alternative nuanced and sophisticated processual way of thinking about cosmology that can join this ongoing internal critique of transcendentalism taking place within

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the discipline of philosophy itself. Simply put, with the present surge of interest in Whitehead and particularly the American pragmatists, this newly emerging Western version of process philosophy as it matures within our own philosophical culture can, with profit, draw both substance and critique from a Chinese tradition that has been committed to various forms of process philosophy since the beginning of its recorded history.

The happy conclusion that may be anticipated from these recent developments is that an era in which philosophy and philosophical thought have been considered essentially Anglo-European monopolies is drawing to a close. Further, while Western philosophy—primarily British, French, and German philosophy—has constituted the mainstream curriculum for the discipline of world philosophy in the twentieth century, the revolution that is taking place within the Western academy itself presages a time when the process sensibilities pervasive in the long Chinese philosophical narrative may well become increasingly relevant in finding our way forward.