

Speculation as Transformation in Chinese Philosophy: On Speculative Realism, “New” Materialism, and the Study of Li (理) and Qi (氣)

LEAH KALMANSON

Drake University, USA (leah.kalmanson@drake.edu)

This article makes the following comparative claims about the contributions of Song- and Ming-dynasty Chinese discourses to recent work in the related fields of new materialism and speculative realism: (1) emerging trends in so-called new materialism can be understood through the Chinese study of qi (氣), which can be translated as “lively material” or “vital stuff”; and (2) the notion of “speculation” as this is used in recent speculative realism can be understood as the study of, engagement with, and ultimate transformation by li (理), a term meaning “principle” or “structure.” However, the focus of the article is as much polemical as it is comparative. By arguing that these contemporary Western movements be categorized by Chinese schools, I challenge and reverse the tendency to subsume non-Western philosophies under Western categories and intervene in the academic practices that continue to define the “new” on Eurocentric models alone.

Key words: Chinese philosophy; *lixue*; neo-Confucianism; speculative realism; new materialism

In his introduction to *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, Steven Shaviro explains: “In this book, I both reconsider Whitehead’s thought in the light of speculative realism and new materialism and suggest revisions to these latter trends from a Whiteheadian standpoint” (Shaviro 2014: 11).¹ Given the amount of comparative work on Alfred North Whitehead and Chinese philosophy,² it stands to reason that speculative realism and new materialism, when viewed from a Whiteheadian angle, might also participate in such a cross-cultural conversation, which is in part what the present study accomplishes.

However, in arguing that we should understand speculative realism and so-called new materialism through the lens of Chinese philosophical discourses, my focus is as much polemical as it is comparative. Clinton Godart has written: “when speaking about ‘Asian philosophy,’ the burden of proof is placed on the Asian traditions. Questions are posed such as ‘was Confucianism philosophy,’ not ‘was Hegel a Confucianist’ or ‘did he complete the Way?’ Thus Westernization has created a cultural imbalance of categories and representations” (Godart 2008: 76).³ By reversing this trajectory and posing the question of whether contemporary Western philosophical movements might be characterized by Chinese “categories and representations,” I do not ignore the cultural context in which the Chinese discourses developed, but I do recognize that Western philosophy is not the only tradition to presume that its major terms and concepts have cross-cultural scope. By rejecting the idea that the burden of proof rests on me to justify this move, I aim to intervene in the academic practices that continue to define the “new” on Eurocentric models alone.

That said, the comparative dimensions of this project are compelling in their own right. As we will see, Chinese categories can accommodate many of the moves that those working in speculative realism and new materialism wish to make, including providing an alternative to

“correlationism” and challenging the presumed divide between inert matter and living beings. In particular, Chinese discourses challenge Western philosophical assumptions about the parameters of subjective experience, allowing us to understand “speculation” itself *not* as the interior ruminations of a subject looking out on the world but rather as a *dynamic activity that transforms both selves and their environments*. When we allow our traditional understanding of philosophical speculation to be re-categorized on Chinese models, we find resources for taking the innovative contributions of speculative realism and new materialism from theory to practice. As we will see, even the most speculative Chinese philosophies of the Song and Ming dynasties were ultimately concerned with enacting real-world changes to promote familial, social, and environmental harmony.

Due to the scope of work associated with the loosely defined fields of object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and new materialism, I limit my discussion to an engagement with two key (though not necessarily representative) works by Shaviro and Jane Bennett. Following Shaviro, I read all of these movements as closely aligned in their critique of a certain parsing of the subject-object divide: new materialism inquires into the agency of matter itself, not the relation of mind to matter as formerly debated by the materialists and vitalists of the nineteenth century; similarly, speculative realism addresses the solipsism that lingers even in recent phenomenology, which rejects mind-matter dualism while still privileging a sense of interiority special to subjective experience. While obviously not a comprehensive study, this preliminary investigation into a cross-cultural speculative realism serves, I hope, to invite further conversation on both its comparative and polemical claims.

1 Qi-Realism and the “New” Materialism

Rujia (儒家) or “scholarly lineage” is the Chinese term for the tradition that includes what has come to be called “Confucianism” in the West. I use the alternative English word “Ruism”⁴ to better approximate the Chinese, in part because my aim is to highlight generic categories within Chinese philosophy—such as *ru* (儒), meaning “scholar” or “literati”⁵—that might be applied cross-culturally. Recalling Godart’s comment above, it may sound odd to ask if Hegel was a Confucianist but less strange to inquire whether he was a “scholar.”

Ruism itself is a diverse tradition marked by important historical periods and practiced according to different and often competing methodologies. Here we focus on the Ruism of the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. This vibrant time period saw the rise of various Ruist fields including, for example, *kaozhengxue* (考證學) or “evidential learning,” which we might compare to “philology”; *xinxue* (心學) or “heart-mind-learning,” which overlaps with what we might today consider phenomenological methods; and the investigations into *qi* (氣) and *li* (理) such as *daoxue* (道學) and *lixue* (理學) (i.e., “dao-studies” and “li-studies”), which are the subject of this comparative engagement with speculative realism and new materialism.⁶

The term *qi* has been translated into English variously as “vital stuff,”⁷ “psychophysical stuff,”⁸ and “lively material.”⁹ *Li* refers to the “principles,” “patterns,” or “structures” observable in the behavior of *qi*. Sophisticated theories of *qi* and *li* grew to prominence under the influence of the above-mentioned Song-Ming philosophical movements that posed questions such as: Given the creative potency of *qi*, why does it configure itself into the world as we know it, as opposed to other possible configurations? Does a certain order (*li*) govern the behavior of *qi*? If so, then what is the best way to study this *li*? Some philosophers assert that *li* has no independent existence but only describes the tendencies inherent in *qi* itself. Others seem to suggest that *li* is a governing principle

that does exist on its own and can be studied as such. Many others take a position somewhere in between, speaking of the mutual dependence of the two terms. In the words of famed philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200): “In the cosmos there has never been any psychophysical stuff without principle nor any principle without psychophysical stuff (天下未有無理之氣，亦未有無氣之理)” (Zhu Xi 2011: 理氣上).¹⁰

One of the common English translations for *qi* mentioned above, i.e., “lively material,” is also a turn of phrase that Bennett employs throughout her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, in which she challenges the “habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (Bennett 2010: vii).¹¹ In her Preface, she says: “I will turn the figures of ‘life’ and ‘matter’ around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape” (Bennett 2010: vii). But, in the Chinese tradition at least, we need no such incantations to conjure the space for this vital materiality. As JeeLoo Liu writes: “[*qi*] is the *stuff* of animate and inanimate things alike” (2013: 33).¹² Or as Daniel K. Gardner explains: “Psychophysical stuff is the matter and energy of which the entire universe and all things in it, including functions and activities of the mind, are composed. It is the relative density and purity of each thing’s psychophysical stuff that gives the thing its peculiar form and individual characteristics” (1990: 90).¹³ Roger Ames and David Hall describe this as a “vital energizing field and its focal manifestations” (2003: 61).¹⁴

Compare this to Bennett’s description of the “field” of vital materiality where “portions congeal into bodies [...], an ontologically diverse assemblage of energies and bodies, of simple and complex bodies, of the physical and physiological” (Bennett 2010: 117). Bennett’s overall picture of vital materiality seems at home in the highly resonant world of *qi*, where the “lively material” of mental awareness and the “lively material” of the body and physical environment all mutually influence and respond to each other. Here, there are no categorical differences between sentient and insentient, organic and inorganic, physical and biological, and so forth; there are only different configurations of *qi* at microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, which can, under optimal circumstances, be productively attuned to each other.

I borrow Liu’s term “*qi*-realism” to account for this resonant activity of mind and matter. As Liu says, under *qi*-realism: “1. *Qi* is permanent and ubiquitous in the world of nature. There is nothing over and above the realm of *qi*. 2. *Qi* is real in virtue of its causal power. It constitutes everything and is responsible for all changes” (Liu 2011: 62).¹⁵ This *qi*-realism, as a framework for understanding the behavior of matter itself, is distinct from vitalism, animism, or panpsychism, as these are conventionally understood. As Ames and Hall explain: “*Qi* has to be distinguished from either ‘animating vapors’ or ‘basic matter’ because it cannot be resolved into any kind of spiritual-material dichotomy” (2003: 61). That is to say, *qi* is not the animating force or consciousness somehow “inside” inert matter; rather, as the above discussion shows, animating forces (such as the mind) and physical matter (such as stones and rocks) are all different configurations of “lively material.” To repeat Liu’s definition, *qi* “constitutes everything and is responsible for all changes,” and hence no additional “spirit” is needed to account for phenomena such as intelligence or sentience.¹⁶

Qi-realism, then, accommodates many of Bennett’s key philosophical claims. For example, she locates her precedents in “critical vitalists” such as the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and biologist Hans Driesch (1867–1941), whose notions of *élan vital* or entelechy “came very close to articulating a vital materialism” (Bennett 2010: 63). But, as she says “they stopped short: they could not imagine a *materialism* adequate to the vitality they discerned in natural processes. (Instead, they

dreamed of a not-quite-material life force.)” (Bennett 2010: 63). As should be clear by now, *qi* is not a “not-quite-material life force” distinct from material objects; to the contrary, physical objects are dynamic concentrations of “lively material” that are themselves “vital” even when not combined with non-physical phases of *qi*.

In addition, Bennett sees similarities between her idea of vital materiality and certain “historical senses of the word *nature*” not as a “stable substrate of brute matter” but as an exuberant, generative fecundity, which she finds in thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and the American transcendentalists (Bennett 2010: 119). But, as she laments, this undercurrent of *natura naturans* in Western intellectual history proves elusive: “Even if, as I believe, the vitality of matter is real, it will be hard to discern it, and, once discerned, hard to keep focused on [...]. What is more, my attention will regularly be drawn away from it by deep cultural attachments to the ideas that matter is inanimate and that real agency belongs only to humans or to God [...].” (Bennett 2010: 119). Bennett is perhaps correct to say that vital materiality will be obscure to us if we remain immersed in the Western cultural tradition alone. But, in the Chinese tradition, *qi* informs the dominant paradigms—far from being elusive, it is impossible to miss.

As mentioned above, theories of *qi* became increasingly complex under the philosophical influence of various Song-Ming Ruist movements. Of particular relevance to Bennett’s work are disagreements between those whom Liu classifies as *qi*-realists, such as Luo Qinsun (1465–1547), Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544), and Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), and those in the so-called Cheng-Zhu school of *li*-studies (*lixue* 理學) associated with Zhu Xi and his predecessor Cheng Yi (1033–1107).¹⁷ As Liu explains: “What separates Neo-Confucian *qi*-realists from the school of Zhu Xi is their insistence on the status of *li* as the inherent, not transcendent, principle of *qi*’s movements. *Li* is not a formal cause of *qi* as Zhu Xi depicts the relationship; there is also no top-down determination from the realm of *li* to the realm of *qi*. The fluctuation of *qi* itself has inevitability, or we might say, an internal logic” (Liu 2011: 65). Other scholars place Zhu Xi’s own position much closer to *qi*-realism, separating him from later developments in *li*-studies. For example, in *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi*, Yung Suk Kim claims that, for Zhu, *li* does not exist independently of *qi* at all; in this sense, it functions not causally but descriptively: “*li* has little additional content beyond the object or phenomenon of which it is the *li*. In a sense, *li* is very much like a definition” (Kim 2000: 26).¹⁸ Only later, says Kim, did *li*-studies become associated with the idea that *li* can be treated as an independent principle (Kim 2000: 27).

Compare these Song-Ming developments with Bennett’s critical vitalists, who debated whether “vital force could have any existence apart from the bodies in which it operated” (Bennett 2010: 66). Ultimately, Bennett says, they attribute vitality not to matter itself but to “a moment of transcendence in the form of *élan vital* or entelechy” (Bennett 2010: 93), which is the move that she wishes to avoid. Not only do the *qi*-realists avoid this “moment of transcendence,” but Song-Ming Ruism in general allows us to reorient the terms of the critical vitalism debate: as we have seen, the relation between *li* and *qi* is not reducible to the relation between the material and non-material. That is to say, *li* may be non-material, but so are certain phases of *qi*. Accordingly, the material/non-material divide is not the central dilemma in Ruism, for either the Cheng-Zhu school or the *qi*-realists. Rather, the key problematic concerns how the manifold configurations (*li*) of *qi* can be negotiated and nurtured to promote the mutual flourishing of selves, societies, and environments. This places us very close to where Bennett wishes to be, i.e., in “a universe of this lively materiality that is always in various states of congealment and diffusion, materialities that are active and creative without needing to be experienced or conceived as partaking in divinity or purposiveness” (Bennett

2010: 93). In picking her way through the thicket of materialism and vitalism in Western thought, Bennett has unknowingly veered close to strands of Ruism whose roots are in China's Song dynasty and whose branches extend throughout East Asia (for example, in the Four-Seven and Horak debates of Joseon-period Korea, and the various responses to *lixue* in Tokugawa-period Japan).¹⁹

2 *Li-Studies and Speculative Realism*

Attendant to the discourses of new materialism is the question of how human beings know or even perceive the world “outside” their own minds. Quentin Meillassoux and others associated with speculative realism have identified this as the problem of “correlationism.” In short, as the argument goes, since at least the time of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) distinction between noumena and phenomena, philosophers have accepted the thesis that our understanding of reality is correlated with our capacity for understanding, that is, with our own perceptual and cognitive abilities and limitations. Meillassoux makes the even stronger claim that philosophers (especially phenomenologists) correlate being, or existence itself, with the experience of being, which produces what “could be called a ‘species solipsism’, or a ‘solipsism of the community’, since it ratifies the impossibility of thinking any reality that would be anterior or posterior to the community of thinking beings” (Meillassoux 2008: 50).²⁰ As a result, we lose access to the “great outdoors” (Meillassoux 2008: 50), which is to say, we lose the ability to make any sense of mind-independent reality. Here, Meillassoux's speculative realism calls for a renewed investigation into the great outdoors—i.e., speculation—without returning to the assumptions of a naïve realism in which we simply have unimpeded access to what we know and perceive.

In *The Universe of Things*, Shaviro claims that the speculative realists leave us with a choice: either accept the nihilistic elimination of all the qualities that the mind apparently endows on experience (values, morals, meaning, and so forth), or instead challenge the presumed dualism between the psychical and physical:

If we are to reject correlationism and undo the Kantian knot of thought and being, no middle way is possible. We must say either (along with [Graham] Harman and [Iain Hamilton] Grant) that all entities are in their own right at least to some degree sentient (active, intentional, vital, and possessed of powers) or else (along with Meillassoux and Brassier) that being is radically disjunct from thought, in which case things or objects must be entirely divested of their allegedly anthropomorphic qualities. When we step outside of the correlationist circle, we are faced with a choice between panpsychism on the one hand or eliminativism on the other (Shaviro 2014: 83).

Shaviro, for his part, is more comfortable with panpsychism and argues convincingly that many of the speculative realists' concerns can be addressed through the philosophies of Whitehead and William James (1842–1910):

What is needed to overcome the bifurcation of nature and to re-place value and sense within immanent experience is to find an alternative way of unbinding the Kantian knot of thought and being. And this is what Whitehead offers us, following William James. Rather than brutally purging the physical universe of anything like thought—an enterprise as absurd as it

is ultimately impossible—James and Whitehead urge us to recognize the commonness and ordinariness of thought (Shaviro 2014: 78).

As Shaviro goes on to describe, both James and Whitehead (and, today, Galen Strawson) give us relatively sophisticated accounts of how some level of consciousness must be accepted as pervasive, unless we are to bifurcate reality based on our ultimately unjustifiable tendency to accord some aspects of experience (rationality and intentionality, for example) to ourselves alone.

This is largely where Bennett ends up in her own book, arguing in her conclusion that we might hesitantly indulge in anthropomorphism, that is, to allow ourselves to believe in the sentience of things as a way to overcome the old habits of modernity and its dualisms (Bennett 2010: 120). Echoing Bennett's discussion of the "elusive" counter-currents in Western philosophy, Shaviro points out: "From the pre-Socratics, on through Spinoza and Leibniz, and down to William James and Alfred North Whitehead, panpsychism is a recurring underground motif in the history of Western thought" (Shaviro 2014: 86). Again, by comparison, this "underground motif" is front-and-center in many areas of Chinese thought. Just as we might classify Bennett's work in terms of her affinity with the *qi*-realists, we find that Shaviro's turn toward panpsychism can be fruitfully analyzed with reference to the related (but, as we saw, sometimes competing) Cheng-Zhu school of *li*-studies. For example, Zhu Xi says that the "heart-mind of the universe" (*tian di zhi xin* 天地之心) does possess a sort of "numinous awareness" (*ling* 靈), which nonetheless differs from the "deliberative thought" (*silu* 思慮) of humans (Zhu Xi 2011: 理氣上),²¹ elsewhere he affirms that even the smallest existing things have some degree of "heart-mind" (*xin* 心), though they may lack the power of "perception" (*zhi jue* 知覺) (Zhu Xi 2011: 性理一).²² As with the discussion of vitalism above, we should question whether Zhu Xi's comments, in the context of his beliefs about *qi*, map neatly onto "panpsychism" as defined by Western discourses. For this reason alone, rethinking new materialism and speculative realism through *li*- and *qi*-studies seems to offer the reorientation against certain strands of Western metaphysics that both Bennett and Shaviro seek.

That said, Bennett and Shaviro already have their own intellectual heritage, albeit one that has been marginalized by the dominant paradigms of Western thought. Given that at least these two key figures in recent speculative philosophy give us grounds to consider a Whiteheadian approach as a workable solution to the "Kantian knot," then why in the world would we indulge in the needlessly complicated task of re-categorizing their work under Chinese terms? For one, the line that Shaviro draws from the pre-Socratics to Whitehead is defined by the master narratives of European modernity and is overshadowed—despite everyone's best intentions—by what happens before and after Kant. This is not to say that new materialism and speculative realism are simply reactionary, but the risk of being reactionary is precisely what we must constantly guard against, especially when we remain confined within a rather insular philosophical lineage. Song-Ming Ruism offers a greatly expanded vista beyond the parameters of the pre- and post-Kantian narrative. Moreover, in addition to simply gesturing toward such an expanded view, Ruism provides, as I will discuss below, a program of practice for enacting philosophical speculation in a realist vein.

3 The Solipsism of Petty People

The "Kantian knot," which is tangled up with the question of how we have access to the interiority of other entities, is not answered simply by asserting that all existing entities "have insides as well as outsides," as Shaviro puts it (2014: 104). That is, even a sophisticated Whiteheadian panpsychism

does not necessarily solve the solipsistic dilemma in which individual sentient entities may find themselves. As a result, Shaviro concludes: “My own version of speculative realism therefore focuses not on epistemological questions at all but rather directly on aesthetics, for aesthetics is the realm of immanent, noncognitive contact” (2014: 148). On the final page of his book, he says: “[T]hrough aesthetics, we can act in the world and relate to other things in the world without reducing it and them to mere correlates of our own thought. This is why I propose a speculative aesthetics as an alternative both to Meillassoux’s vision of radical contingency and to Harman’s vision of objects encased in immutable vacuums. Such a speculative aesthetics is still to be constructed; Kant, Whitehead, and Deleuze only provide us with its rudiments” (Shaviro 2014: 156). In contrast, in Song-Ming Ruism, we find a fully developed program for the aesthetic cultivation of sagehood or *shengren* (聖人), which is characterized by, among other things, virtuosity in philosophical speculation.

One key feature of a general *qi*-cosmology that enables this program of aesthetic cultivation is the recursive behavior of *qi*, or its ability to interact with itself in its different phases to produce increasingly complex manifestations of structure (*li*). As Yung Sik Kim says: “Mind, for Zhu Xi, was really nothing but *qi*, its ‘essential and refreshing’ (*jingshuang* 精爽) or ‘numinous’ (*ling* 靈) portion, to be more specific. Thus, *qi* was endowed with qualities of mind, and could interact with the mind. The mind-*qi* interaction was not restricted to man’s *qi* and his own mind, but was extended to the *qi* of the outside world and to the minds of others” (2015: 129).²³ However, not all people attain such access to the “great outdoors” (to borrow Meillassoux’s term). Petty or “small” people (*xiaoren* 小人) barely understand themselves, let alone the outside world and other people. Joseph Adler explains:

Zhu Xi argued that it was very difficult to achieve self-knowledge directly. Since the mind is composed of *qi*—albeit the most refined and pure *qi*—this physical nature of the mind obscures or clouds one’s self-awareness of the principle of the mind, giving rise to selfishness (*si*) and partiality or one-sidedness (*pian*). These are the basic Neo-Confucian ‘evils.’ It is because of the difficulty of overcoming the cloudiness of one’s *qi* and achieving self-knowledge directly that Zhu, drawing directly on Cheng Yi, stressed “the investigation of things” (*gewu*), including the need to rely on the wisdom of sages recorded in the classics, in his program for becoming a sage (Adler 2004: 131).²⁴

Through careful investigation of *li* in the behaviors of things and in the words of classic texts, the heart-mind apprehends principle (*li*) and is transformed, such that even the petty person (*xiaoren*) can become a sage (*shengren*). Adler stresses: “Although all people [...] have the potential to become sages, very few actually do. Only sages have minds that can penetrate and comprehend the totality of the natural/moral order. This ability also gives them ‘talents,’ such as precognition, that make them appear ‘like spirits’ to ordinary people” (Adler 2004: 141).

In particular, as the *qi* of the sage’s mind becomes increasingly refined, sensitive, and agile, the sage gains extraordinary access to the surrounding environment: “When the mind’s capacity for psycho-physical intercourse with things—its ability to penetrate, enter into, or pervade things, even in some cases the minds of others—is developed to the highest degree, it is called ‘spiritual’ (*shen*), or ‘spiritual clarity’ (*shenming*)” (Adler 2004: 134). Sagely skills may at first appear to be supernatural, but Zhu Xi tends to explain apparent precognition as simply the natural power of the mind to accord with *li* and hence become sensitive to the ways things tend to go, as it were. Or, as Adler says, “The sage, by virtue of his spirituality, can spontaneously respond to the incipient signs of good fortune

and misfortune, or the subtle tendencies of events, and can thus know their direction of change without using divination” (Adler 2004: 137–38).

In his commentary on the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), Zhu Xi describes the moment at which the mind is transformed beyond the limited inner awareness of the petty person: “When he reaches the point where he has exerted effort for a long time, one day [everything] will suddenly interpenetrate (*quantong*). Then the external and internal, subtle and gross [qualities] of all things will be apprehended [...]” (qtd. in Adler 2004: 134). At this point we can better appreciate the resources that the Chinese tradition brings to the dilemmas of speculative realism: if we are looking for a mode of speculation that grants us access to the “great outdoors,” then this sudden interpenetration of internal and external—this resonant attunement of mind-*qi* through the apprehension of *li*—is speculation par excellence. So, when speculative realists reflect on problems such as solipsism in Western thought or the seemingly inaccessible interiority of other entities, even entities under a sophisticated panpsychism,²⁵ we might respond that—no offence—these are the limitations of petty people.

But let us, following Zhu Xi, not overstate an apparently paranormal capacity for mind-control. That is, access to the *qi* of other minds should not be imagined in simplistic combative terms,²⁶ as if the sage’s mind crosses the boundary of her skull and takes over the minds of others. Here is where Ruism offers, perhaps, the most radical intervention in the discourses of Western thought, which do tend to obsess over the issues generated by an “inner/outer” model of the private mind and the external world—a model responsible for dilemmas such as solipsism, subjective idealism, and now, correlationism. The Ruist tradition at large presents a different way of framing the relation between people and worlds, which has been called a “microcosm/macrocosm” model.²⁷ This model holds that there are basic congruences between smaller and larger structures (*li*)—in the case of Song-Ming Ruism, this refers to congruences between the *li* of the human heart-mind, the social community, the earthly environment, and the cosmos.

What some in Chinese philosophy call “correlative thinking”²⁸ is evident in this microcosm/macrocosm model, but such correlativity does not map onto “correlationism” as the speculative realists define it. For example, Jana Röscher, in her book on *li*, describes such congruences as “the structural compatibility of mind and the external world” (2012: 103).²⁹ In contrast to Meillassoux’s “species solipsism,” this “structural compatibility” marks an open channel by which the mind of the sage attunes to the surrounding world, and the surrounding world, in turn, responds to the mind of the sage. Access to the great outdoors is a foregone conclusion, not because the sage’s mind seeps out into the environment, but because all phases of *qi*—the sage’s mind, other minds, things in the world—can, under optimal conditions, be mutually attuned through unifying structural congruences. Such structural attunement is dynamic, resonant, and transformative; it is not a mushy monism, nor is it simply a matter of discrete entities communicating politely at a distance. Thus Röscher concludes that *li* is “a concept which, both in terms of its basic attributes, as well as overall meaning, clearly has no direct equivalent in any of the dominant discourses of the Western intellectual tradition” (Röscher 2012: 148). This is why subsuming new materialism and speculative realism within the *li-qi* framework makes a fruitful philosophical difference.

4 The Non-Naïve Practice of Speculation

The sudden interpenetration (*quantong* 貫通) that Zhu Xi describes above is possible because of the malleability of the heart-mind in response to the transformative effects of structure (*li*). As Adler says:

The distinctive feature of mind-*qi* is that, because of its exceptional purity and refinement it is capable of conforming itself or “responding” to any *li*, thus becoming further ordered, or ordered in greater detail, or on a higher level of complexity. Knowledge of a particular principle, then, is the ordering or conforming of mind-*qi* to that principle, so that when a principle is known it is concretely embodied by the mind. That is, when mind penetrates and responds (or conforms) to the order or principle of a thing, the mind itself is transformed in the process. This is how mind-*qi*, or the physical nature, is transformed by learning (Adler 2004: 133).

As a result, some Song-Ming philosophers suggest that *li*-studies might best be approached through *xin*-studies (*xinxue* 心學), that is, the study of the human heart-mind (*xin* 心). Philip J. Ivanhoe associates the Cheng-Zhu school with a “recovery” model of *li*-studies, as when Zhu Xi instructs us to observe the many manifestations of *li* through empirical investigation, textual study, and reflective introspection. Accordingly, Ivanhoe associates the Lu-Wang school with a “discovery” model, as when Wang Yangming (1472–1529) instructs us to prioritize reflective introspection to discover *li* for ourselves, i.e., to experience it directly in the heart-mind (2000: 102).³⁰ Despite differences between these approaches, all of these philosophers agree that self-cultivation—to be exact, the cultivation of the *qi* of the human heart-mind—is crucially important to the study of *li*. Structure will not be effectively transformative if the heart-mind is in a state of disarray.

According to Zhu Xi, for example, students cannot hope to understand the meaning of a classical text, let alone the commentarial tradition, without engaging in body-mind practices to settle and attune the *qi* of the heart-mind: “When the mind isn’t settled, it doesn’t understand principle. Presently, should you want to engage in book learning, you must first settle the mind [...]” (Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] 1990: 145).³¹ Certain techniques—such as deep breathing, quiet humming, and textual recitation—will have a positive effect on the *qi* of the heart-mind and hence aid in scholarship. Of course, the larger goal is not simply the comprehension of principle (*li*), but the enactment of philosophy in daily life such that principle pervades the conditions under which we live. As Zhu Xi’s favorite text the *Daxue* (大學) tells us, optimal attunement throughout the family, the state, and the whole world begins with mental orderliness (*xin zheng* 心正) and self-cultivation (*shen xiu* 身脩) (*Daxue* 2011).³²

Zhu Xi’s particular focus on investigating things and studying texts is rooted in a much broader tradition of aesthetic training for sagely transformation evident across many Chinese philosophical schools. For example, in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the author(s) of the syncretist text *Guanzi* describe how the sage can settle his or her *qi* into a calm but potent state of rest (*jing* 靜), such that the heart-mind is composed but poised to act. And, the text goes on to say, aesthetic appreciation is a particularly effective technique for modulating the state of the heart-mind to achieve *jing*: “If joy and anger are excessive, deal with them in a planned manner (忿怒之失度, 乃為之圖) [...], for arresting anger, nothing is better than poetry. For getting rid of sorrow, nothing is better than music (是故止怒莫若詩, 去憂莫若樂)” (*Guanzi* 2011: 內業).³³ Reading poetry and listening to music work effectively on the mind’s *qi* much in the same way that Zhu Xi ascribes to activities of

reading classic texts and observing *li* in the behaviors of things—in all cases, the heart-mind is restructured to manifest more potent, more efficacious, and ultimately more sagely levels of awareness and insight. All such subtle conditioning of the heart-mind is “aesthetic” under Shaviro’s definition of aesthetic speculation as “immanent, noncognitive contact” (Shaviro 2014: 148).

In a comment that supports Shaviro’s turn from epistemology to aesthetics, Hall and Ames write in *Thinking through Confucius* that “knowing (*chih* [知]) cannot be separated from judging,” and therefore “the act of understanding is most plausibly modeled upon aesthetic rather than rational-cognitive activities” (Hall, and Ames 1987: 268).³⁴ They go on to dedicate the third chapter of their book to “the primacy of the aesthetic order” in the Ruist tradition at large. More recently, Eiho Baba has argued that the word usually translated as “perception” (*zhijue* 知覺) in Zhu Xi’s work “is not a passive ‘seeing,’ as it were, of a predetermined reality, but a participatory determination, if not artistic production of the world through cultivated skills of appreciation and realization” (Baba 2017: 302).³⁵ The Chinese terminology helps to push the notion of aesthetic speculation in a more dynamic direction—rather than reflecting states of mind or modes of awareness, the Chinese terms for knowing and perceiving all indicate the creative, mutually transformative interplay between the sage’s consciousness and the world.

This all goes to say that, on the one hand, sagely acuity does not rest on a “naïve realism” in which we have, as mentioned above, unimpeded access what we know and perceive. But, on the other hand, sage-consciousness is not “non-naïve,” as it were, due to its reliance on sophisticated realist theories; rather, it is due to the discipline required on the part of the sage to restructure the heart-mind and achieve numinous awareness. Indeed, to become adept at this sagely philosophical speculation, we must commit ourselves to such discipline. Far from the “rudiments” of a speculative aesthetics that Shaviro finds in the Western tradition, Ruism provides us with a robust training course of philosophic-aesthetic practices of which, in this essay, we have barely scratched the surface.³⁶

5 A Polemical Conclusion

So far, this article has made the following two main comparative claims about the contributions of *li*- and *qi*-studies to recent work in speculative philosophy: (1) Bennett’s “vital materiality” and other new approaches to materialism can be fruitfully understood through the Chinese concept of *qi*, and (2) the notion of “speculation” as this is used in recent speculative realism can be understood as the study of, engagement with, and ultimate transformation by *li*. The last point especially calls for further discussion. As noted, the solipsistic feeling of one’s consciousness being limited to one’s own subjective perspective is what Ruists might characterize as the smallness (*xiao* 小) of mind, which can indeed be expanded through philosophic-aesthetic training. A different sort of consciousness is possible. This claim cannot help but be controversial within the context of Western philosophy, which devotes so much attention to the dilemmas generated by a certain set of assumptions about the parameters of the first-person perspective, the self’s privileged access to its own interior life, and the transcendental conditions of human conscious experience.

But, moreover, this claim pushes us beyond a theoretical study of philosophical topics and asks us to rethink what it means to “do” philosophy. If we were to take the advice of Zhu Xi and others, then we should support our scholarly studies with a range of physical, contemplative, and aesthetic practices. After all, without such practices, our minds remain small, and we are quite simply unable to do our work. This last claim may be controversial in some areas of Western thought, but it

aligns well with, for example, Michel Foucault's inquiries into "technologies of self" as well as more recent work on philosophy and practice by philosophers such as Richard Shusterman and Pierre Hadot.³⁷

The potential controversies surrounding the above claims are thought provoking and, I hope, invite further discussion. But, beyond such controversies, my polemical agenda here is even larger. I began researching this essay in part as a response to the (at times vitriolic) online discussions that appeared in the wake of Jay L. Garfield's and Bryan W. Van Norden's op-ed "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is," which appeared in May of 2016 in *The New York Times* philosophy forum The Stone.³⁸ The debates that ensued on various philosophy blogs³⁹ seemed dominated by two pervasive assumptions: (1) diversification means that Western philosophy must carve out room for other voices, which often amounts to the idea that we will cede precious space on the syllabus to a few non-Westerners; and (2) the non-Westerners in question will most likely be Kongzi (i.e., Confucius), Laozi (legendary author of the *Daodejing*), and the Buddha.

My response to the first assumption is that other philosophical traditions—in this case, the Chinese traditions—are also capacious and can make room for other voices. That is, we tend to subsume non-Western philosophies under Western categories, but this particular trajectory can be challenged and reversed. Like Röscher, I do not see *li* mapping well onto any existing Western philosophical concepts, and hence I do not see either *li*-studies or *qi*-realism matching up exactly with Western disciplinary categories. Are they a type of "metaphysics?" Or "epistemology?" Or some sort of moral training à la "virtue ethics?" The complexity, diversity, and capaciousness of these fields make them well suited to cross-cultural applications. Rather than asking Western philosophy to make room for non-Western contributions, I have shown here that not only can the study of *li* and *qi* accommodate non-Chinese philosophical discourses but that such re-categorizing serves to expand philosophical research in these areas.

My response to the second assumption is that philosophy can no longer afford to be ignorant of the richness of non-Western traditions. To "diversify" philosophy by including the aphoristic sayings of Kongzi is not only inadequate, but it perpetuates the persistent stereotype that Asian philosophy is "poetic," lacks argumentation, and simply dispenses wisdom from authority figures. Imagine if someone had only read Plato's dialogues and therefore assumed that this thing called "philosophy" is written in the manner of a screenplay. Here in this article, I have only barely hinted at the complexity of the interactions between the philosophers affiliated with the *lixue* of Zhu Xi, those affiliated with what Liu calls *qi*-realism or *qi*-naturalism, and those affiliated with *xinxue*, such as Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1193) and the above-mentioned Wang Yangming. Nor have I done nearly enough to engage all the excellent contemporary work on *li* and *qi* that (for a variety of reasons having little to do with quality of scholarship) tends to circulate only among specialists in Chinese philosophy. But I do hope that even this preliminary study is sufficient to indicate the depth and breadth of philosophical conversations that might be possible if "new" work in speculative philosophy were to take a decisive cross-cultural turn.

Leah Kalmanson is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa, USA). Her research areas include Asian philosophies and postcolonial studies. Her articles appear in the journals *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, *Continental Philosophy Review*, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, *Hypatia*, *Philosophy East and West*, and *Shofar*. She has edited multiple collections including, most recently, *Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion* (with Tim Knepper, Springer, 2017) and *Comparative Studies in Asian and Latin*

American Philosophies (with Stephanie Rivera Berruz, Bloomsbury, 2018). She currently serves as Assistant Editor at the *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*.

-
- 1 Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
 - 2 See, for example, John Berthrong, *Concerning Creativity: A Comparison of Whitehead, Neville, and Chu Hsi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), ed., Wenyu Xie, Zhihe Wang, and George E. Derfer, *Whitehead and China: Relevance and Relationships* (Frankfurt: Verlag, 2006), and ed., Li Chenyang and Franklin Perkins, *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
 - 3 Gerard Clinton Godart, “‘Philosophy’ or ‘Religion’? The Confrontation with Foreign Categories in Late Nineteenth Century Japan,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1, (January 2008): 71–91.
 - 4 Here I follow the precedent set by scholars such as Robert Eno in *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); and Michael Nylan in *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
 - 5 Such translations highlight the academic aspects of the Ruist tradition, which has indeed been strongly associated with book-learning, institutions of higher education (*shuyuan* 書院) in dynastic China, and scholarly preparation for the civil service exams. We should note, however, that the full sense of *ru* (儒) or “literati” extends well beyond academic affairs, referring to cultivated people who are literate in a range of arts, sports, and rituals, including both government ceremonies and the rites of ancestor worship. Some recent scholars such as Bin Song have sought to re-vitalize this fuller sense of *ru* in both academic and popular forums. See, for example, Bin Song, “Dr. Bin Song on the Meaning of Ru 儒 for Confucianism,” *Huffington Post* (August 3, 2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dr-bin-song-on-the-meaning-of-ru-儒-for-confucianism_us_59793cf7e4b09982b7376212; last accessed on April 9, 2018).
 - 6 These are commonly referred to in English under the umbrella term “neo-Confucianism,” which I avoid for the same reasons that I avoid “Confucianism.” Scholars of the Song and Ming would simply have considered themselves Ruists, but would have associated the terms *lixue* and *daoxue* with Zhu Xi’s pedagogical and curricular reforms. Later, the *xinxue* movement would come to be associated with Wang Yangming, widely seen as a scholar who diverged from Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. *Kaozhengxue*, as a turn back to textual authority, was a reaction against what was perceived to be the ungrounded speculation of both the *lixue* and *xinxue* camps. For an excellent overview of *lixue*, *xinxue*, and *kaozhengxue*, as these developed throughout East Asia, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Three Streams: Confucian Reflections on Learning and the Moral Heart-Mind in China, Korea, and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
 - 7 E.g., Stephen C. Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).
 - 8 E.g., Daniel K. Gardner, trans., *Learning to Be a Sage* by Chu Hsi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
 - 9 E.g., Ivanhoe (2016).
 - 10 Zhu Xi, *Zhuxi yulei* 朱子語類, in *Chinese Text Project*, ed., Donald Sturgeon, <http://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/zh> (2011; last accessed on April 9, 2018). The specific passage can be located at <http://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/1/zh#n586150>. My translation follows Gardner (1990: 90), with my modifications.
 - 11 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
 - 12 JeeLoo Liu, “In Defense of Qi-Naturalism,” in *Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems*, ed., Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33–53.

- 13 trans., Daniel K. Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage* by Chu Hsi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- 14 trans., Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).
- 15 JeeLoo Liu, “The Is-Ought Correlation in Neo-Confucian *Qi*-Realism: How Normative Facts Exist in Natural States of *Qi*,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 42, no. 1, (Fall 2011): 60–77.
- 16 Note, however, that earlier uses of *qi* do seem to be restricted to non-material manifestations (breath, spirit, life-force, and so forth). As mentioned earlier, it is in the Song dynasty that *qi* becomes a philosophical framework applied more generally to refer to everything that exists.
- 17 Liu (2011: 60). These “*qi*-realists” were all influenced in part by Zhu Xi’s predecessor Zhang Zai (1020–1077). Some recent scholars have adopted the term *qixue* (氣學) or “*qi*-studies” as a way retroactively to distinguish these investigations into *qi* from the dominant Cheng-Zhu school. For an extended discussion of the relations between *lixue* and *qixue* in the Song and Ming dynasties, see Jung-Yeup Kim, *Zhang Zai’s Philosophy of Qi: A Practical Understanding* (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 5–10.
- 18 Yung Suk Kim, *The Natural Philosophy of Chu Hsi 1130–1200* (American Philosophical Society, 2000). Thanks goes to my anonymous reviewer for pointing me toward this resource.
- 19 See Ivanhoe (2016).
- 20 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008).
- 21 My translation; the passage can be located at <http://cext.org/zhuzi-yulei/1#n586160>.
- 22 My translation; the passage can be located at <http://cext.org/zhuzi-yulei/4#n586426>. See a fuller discussion of these degrees of awareness in Zhu Xi’s thought in Jana S. Rösler, *Traditional Chinese Thought and the Paradigm of Structure (Li 理)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 132.
- 23 Yung Sik Kim, “Zhu Xi on Scientific and Occult Subjects: Defining and Extending the Boundaries of Confucian Learning,” in *Returning to Zhu Xi: Emerging Patterns within the Supreme Polarity*, ed., David Jones and Jinli He (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 121–46.
- 24 Joseph A. Adler, “Varieties of Spiritual Experience: *Shen* in Neo-Confucian Discourse,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, Vol. 2, ed., Tu Wei-ming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad, 2004).
- 25 See especially Shaviro (2014), the fifth chapter “Consequences of Panpsychism.”
- 26 For an extended critique of the use of combat metaphors in philosophy, with an emphasis on the contributions of Chinese traditions, see Sarah Mattice, *Metaphor and Metaphilosophy: Philosophy as Play, Combat, and Aesthetic Experience* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).
- 27 This is often the terminology used in discussions of Chinese medicine as well as aesthetic practices such as gardening or architecture. See, for example, Graham Parkes, “Winds, Waters, and Earth Energies: *Fengshui* and Awareness of Place,” in *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 185-209, or James Miller, “Daoism and Nature,” in the same collection, 393-409.
- 28 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames attribute the first sinological use of “correlativity” to Marcel Granet’s 1950 *La pensee chinoise*; see Hall and Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 295, n22.
- 29 Jana S. Rösler, *Traditional Chinese Thought and the Paradigm of Structure (Li 理)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
- 30 Philip J., Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).
- 31 Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi], *Learning to Be a Sage*, trans., Daniel K. Gardner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

- 32 My translation from the *Daxue* 大學, in *Chinese Text Project*, ed., Donald Sturgeon, <http://ctext.org/liji/da-xue> (2011).
- 33 Guanzi, “Nei Ye” 內業, in *Chinese Text Project*, ed., Donald Sturgeon, <http://ctext.org/guanzi/nei-ye> (2011). My translation follows trans., W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 52.
- 34 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987).
- 35 Eiho Baba, “Zhiyue as Appreciation and Realization in Zhu Xi: An Examination through Hun and Po,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2, (April 2017): 301–17.
- 36 As Robert Eno says, “The heart of Ruism lay outside its texts in a detailed training course of ritual, music, and gymnastics” (9). See Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).
- 37 See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed., Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1998); Richard Shusterman, “Soma and Psyche,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 3, (2010): 205–23, and “Somaesthetics and C. S. Pierce,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23, no. 1, (2009): 8–27; and Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).
- 38 Jay L. Garfield, and Bryan W. Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” *The New York Times* (May 11, 2016) <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html>. Van Norden has followed this up with his most recent book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (Columbia University Press, 2017).
- 39 See especially the discussions at *The Daily Nous*, <http://dailynous.com/2016/05/11/philosophical-diversity-in-u-s-philosophy-departments/> and <http://dailynous.com/2016/05/13/when-someone-suggests-expanding-the-canon/>.