Opening Chinese Philosophy

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Much of academic philosophy is narrow. There are several ways to understand what narrow means in this context. One aspect is the focus of academic publications and presentations, which is often exceedingly limited, in terms of both the scope of scholarship included in the discussion as well the ideas considered. Relatedly, the primary orientation in academic philosophy surrounds dissecting concepts and considering ideas, relationships, and the world according to smaller and smaller parts. In this paper we would like to draw attention to another type of philosophizing, one which is also practiced but is less welcomed in some academic settings. We call it "open philosophy." Open philosophy invites new ways of thinking about the world, and generally welcomes a wider set of experiences within its scope. Rather than striving for atomization and hyper-specialization, open philosophizing appreciates multi-disciplinary versatility and introduces approaches to problems for people to consider for themselves in contemporary society. In particular we will explore how, despite the increasing disciplinization in the field, research on Chinese Philosophy that is more open does, and could further contribute to comparative and post-comparative perspectives.

Key words: global philosophy; comparative philosophy; post-comparative philosophy; transcultural philosophy; world philosophy; Chinese philosophy

1 Introduction

There are many prominent Aristotelian scholars today; Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Sandel are among the most well-known. Interestingly, while they all draw heavily on Aristotle's work, utilizing his foundational general philosophical approach, they rarely delve into specific passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* or *Metaphysics*, nor do they routinely enter into philological or textual debates regarding the details of interpreting Aristotle. To describe what they do in broad strokes, we might say that they more or less assume the validity of an Aristotelian approach and reflect on contemporary issues such as identity, education, or justice, from this standpoint. There is, of course, not one "Aristotelian standpoint" and they each have their

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own versions. Their respective differences, however, are most apparent not in their interpretations of what "Aristotle thought," but in their arguments for what works best when reflecting on contemporary issues.

Textual and philological academic literature on Aristotle is of course still healthy and thriving, yet the abovementioned scholars have made it possible to also contribute to a separate discursive space in which an Aristotelian *approach* to thinking about problems is made relevant precisely by avoiding a narrow focus on its historical and textual underpinnings. Generally speaking, we can describe the Aristotelian approach utilized by these contemporary scholars as exploring a social issue starting from a set of guiding orientations which are based on Aristotle's philosophy. This Aristotelian philosophic approach is not emancipated from the tradition that gives it meaning, as competency in the utilization of its philosophic approach presupposes expertise in textual, philological, and historical considerations relevant to the Aristotelian tradition. Rather, it becomes extended beyond the narrow confines of its textual, philological, and historical context to contemporary social problems, beyond the restricted discourse dedicated exclusively to Aristotle to a wider audience. Accordingly, we can understand these scholars as doing a certain type of philosophy. Their works represent reflections on life, on familiar practices, ways of thinking or speaking and are framed according to what works well, what makes sense, or the best way to deal with an issue. Their philosophy is not a philosophy that speaks specifically in terms of what Aristotle did or would think about some issue. Rather, they learn from Aristotle, practice philosophical reflection with an Aristotelian foundation, and apply this form of reflection to contemporary social problems. Importantly, this also means that their audience is beyond that of Aristotelian scholars.

Contemporary scholarship on Chinese philosophy, especially in Anglophone academic discourse, is not often done in this way. While there do exist examples that resemble the application of classical Chinese philosophical approaches to contemporary issues for a wider audience, it is most often done in ways which limit the discourse to historically contextualized issues not particularly relevant to contemporary society, written for and read by a niche group of specialists. While some of the more limiting trends are certainly present in Chinese language academic literature and perhaps that of other languages, we are limiting the scope of our critique to Anglophone discourse.

There are four major methodologies commonly found in this scholarship. First, scholars pit different schools or texts against one another; Daoism versus Confucianism or *Zhuangzi* contra *Analects* are some prime examples. Second, Chinese thought is considered from a comparative angle; Confucian ethics becomes one version of (Aristotelian) virtue ethics, or as essentially different such that a Chinese monism is interpreted in contradistinction to the dualism of western thought. Third, analytic dissections of classics turn them into something quite contrary to how they were written and traditionally understood up until very recently; e.g. articles can decontextualize discussions of shame in the *Analects* without referencing any scholars from the over two millennia long commentarial tradition, or even connecting the discussion to other parts of the text. A fourth way of discussing Chinese philosophy somewhat resembles the 'applied' nature of the Aristotelians

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discussed above, but remains limiting insofar as it seeks instead to speak *for* ancient thinkers, asking if one can know that Confucius would accept gay marriage, Mencius would support liberalism and democracy, or the *Zhuangzi* would bemoan reliance on fossil fuels.

In pointing out their potentially limiting or narrowing aspects, this paper does not intend to disparage any of these methods of researching Chinese philosophy and the authors fully admit to engaging in them as well. In many contexts using methods that historically contextualize such that an issue is of little relevance to contemporary society, limit the possible audience to a niche group of experts, or otherwise narrow our focus is both appropriate and necessary. The argument we want to make is that we can *also* do something different. We could step outside of the four categories mentioned above, all of which reflect various limiting tendencies as a result of the over-disciplinization of the field. While the articulation of specific, practical methodologies remains scant, the growing amount of literature calling for a reconceptualization of comparative philosophy, whether it be in the form of post-comparative (cf. Chakrabarti and Weber 2023),[1] cross cultural (cf. Jenco 2007),[2] or trans-cultural (cf. Rošker 2022;[3] Heubel 2011)[4] philosophy, bears witness to the need for a more open way of doing Chinese philosophy. A more open way might be to develop philosophical reflections based on what we have learned about *doing* philosophy ourselves from these texts. In other words, scholars who concentrate on Chinese and comparative philosophy could address issues directly utilizing philosophic *approaches* from the texts they research in the same manner the contemporary Aristotelians mentioned above do. The focus here would be on learning from these texts, adopting and internalizing useful approaches found therein, and using these approaches to contribute one's own views on how to think about the social, political, and philosophical problems that confront us today. This implies discussing issues in a way that is broadly convincing, accessible, and productive, without (direct) appeals to authority, making comparisons, or otherwise obscuring one's own thoughts about an issue. This is what we are calling an "open" way of philosophizing; it opens philosophical reflections to a wider audience, and opens the world in terms of providing novel ways to think about it.

In this way philosophizing would furthermore require scholars to stand behind what they argue. Although analyses emphasizing or even limited to the specifics of the ancient world are of course vital to learning philosophical approaches *from* ancient Chinese thinkers, we do not have to stop here. Scholars could also use what they have learned from these approaches and extend them beyond the text's specific historical context. Accordingly, by discussing the implications and potential effects of legalizing gay marriage, assessing nuanced assumptions behind liberalism and democracy, or critiquing the discourse surrounding global warming scholars express their own ideas, without shrouding them in the guise of previous works. Having a foundation in early Chinese philosophy requires one to be aware of the early Chinese historical context, but does not entail that responses to a problem must be constrained therein. It is not always necessary to imagine how a classic text might react or to put arguments in the mouths of others, methods which minimize personal risk, but also shirk (some degree of) responsibility. In reaction against these methods that tend to narrow both our discourse about Chinese philosophy and its usefulness in the world today, the aforementioned extension of philosophical approaches—from classical texts to contemporary

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problems, broadening the intended audience, and making one's own arguments (and calling them such)—can be considered as ways in which the field of Chinese philosophy could be made more open.

The benefit of having a background in early Chinese philosophy and extending its approaches to contemporary problems is that it offers an approach to problems distinct from those offered by thinkers influenced by Aristotle, for instance, and might thus open new possibilities in current social and political discourse. An approach to problems distinct from those offered by thinkers influenced by Aristotle, for instance, might thus open new possibilities in current social and political discourse. The potential value of Chinese thought will continue to be questioned if its historical value cannot be made apparent in relation to contemporary problems and if the discourse continues to be directed towards a very small community of scholars dedicated to classical Chinese thought. In other words, what value does this field have if it remains a "narrow" discourse operating in an echo chamber?

Some of these tendencies which narrow discourse in Chinese philosophy are unique to Chinese philosophy or comparative philosophy, but many are in fact a product of the academic disciplinization of philosophy, and can be seen as effecting all fields of the humanities. Indeed, many of these concerns are likewise reflected in the longstanding debate surrounding the tensions between Area Studies and the disciplines (cf. Kuhn 1984).[5] The following will address some of the limiting tendencies of the disciplinization of academic philosophy in general, detail a few of the more specific manifestations of this narrowing process within (Anglophone) Chinese philosophy, and present some tentative suggestions for how some of these more counterproductive trends might be resisted.

2 Academic Narrowing of Philosophy

One of the initial observations which frames this paper concerns the fault lines between contemporary academic philosophy, especially the Anglophone discourse, and older philosophical styles. In terms of structure and content, there are significant disparities between most philosophical articles and books published today and the classics they engage with or philosophers they exalt. The way many academic philosophical arguments are made today, including their scope, content, and intended audience, is not only different from earlier forms of philosophizing, but in many ways actually contrary to what other thinkers saw as the function of philosophical discourse. In this section we will note some of these differences in order to establish critical distance from how academic philosophy is practiced today, and argue that more space can be made for writing about philosophy in some of the more classical senses.

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An important feature of most papers and books published today is the requirement of detailed overviews of relevant literature. Nearly anything published in an academic context must include something akin to a "literature review," where key persons and works are summarized. The intention is to frame one's own insights within a discourse and against the background of "the literature." However, only literature within the confines of a particular discipline and relevant in a very limited sense should be included. Too many references to or discussion of literature outside of the narrow disciplinary discourse one intends to enter is discouraged. There is of course some space for flexibility. Writing about free will, for example, one can make some reference to biologists or neuroscientists, but even this would only be considered acceptable if citing contemporary science in defense of one's argument were already an established convention in the discourse to which one is responding. In sum, contemporary academic philosophy demands that works be loaded with references, but to a very specific and limited body of literature that speaks to an increasingly specialized and niche discursive community.

On the basis of this literature review, one must furthermore claim that their argument makes an original contribution. "Original" here is meant in the sense of being truly from the individual themselves. Somehow what one offers should be so unique that no one else has already said it, professed and acknowledged as more or less completely of one's own making. If one says "this is a perspective on the *Analects* that most literature ignores, but Wang Bi makes a great argument…" then, unless one offers an "original" argument about Wang Bi's commentary, this is not an "original contribution." Contemporary academic philosophy expects that one's original contribution to the literature comes from their own genius.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the scope of discussion in contemporary academic philosophy remains relatively narrow, with scholarly debates frequently hinging on fine-grained distinctions amongst a small group of specialists within an already specialized discipline. The expectation for academic papers is that a single aspect of a broader topic is isolated and extensively examined, the object of research often being so esoteric and examination so meticulous that it alienates any audience looking for more general philosophic inquiry. If one is not already well informed about the free will debate, for example, it is unlikely that one would be able to make sense out of most papers on free will—only those steeped in a specific discussion can fully appreciate the nuanced contributions made in such academic papers. It is rare, though not impossible, to publish a paper that speaks to issues broad enough for a non-academic to take interest in. Increasingly specific topics are intended for increasingly niche audiences of specialists, and thus there exists in academic literature a proclivity for narrow topics like "resultant luck" or "moral luck in the *Mencius*" over broader frameworks to understand "moral luck" that extend beyond the writer's sub-discipline. Generally, the more focused a topic is, the more likely it is to get published. Narrowly focusing on theoretical considerations can often foster excessively abstract and decontextualized discussions. Conversely, over-contextualization, such as the tendency to turn philosophical reflections into philological considerations, can likewise lead to equally narrow orientations. This style of academic literature that slowly and carefully builds, maintains, and improves incrementally over many years, sometimes by very small communities of specialists, to establish a secure

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foundation for future generations is beneficial and even necessary; however, its limitations must be recognized as well.

One necessary consequence of these features is that the work produced is not only narrowly focused, but also of interest for only a limited audience. If someone works in moral motivation from an analytic perspective, they likely have little interest in moral motivation in the *Mencius*, especially since it is not something they are expected to cite. A classical Confucian version of moral motivation might be considered intriguing ornamentation for their argument, but it is not considered important according to the current academic expectations. As a result of the standards and conventions that have emerged out of modern academic institutions, even discourses about the same concepts do not overlap if they use different traditions of thought as their reference material. Perhaps more problematically, the result is that basically none of these arguments are interesting for non-philosophy specialists, not to mention non-academics. Most books published on Chinese philosophy, for example, are read by graduate students and scholars of academic Chinese philosophy. Even if they are written in a more popular style, it is very rare that they communicate in such a way that people who do not have this interest are attracted to them. (Some exceptions will be mentioned below, and there are of course others as well.)

The majority of classic texts and figures quoted by academic philosophy do not share these features. There are certainly some overlaps, but it is easy to recognize that nothing Plato wrote, none of Nietzsche's notes, or even Kant and much of Wittgenstein, would be accepted into any academic journal today. And the luminaries from other areas, such as Confucius and Zhuangzi, Buddha or Nagarjuna, would not stand a chance either. This is especially paradoxical because these figures have god-like status in contemporary academia. References to them take whatever they have written as authoritative, and there is an implicit agreement that if what one says is endorsed by one of these texts, this is already solid philosophical grounding—many exceptions notwithstanding.

Even more paradoxically, much of what we have discussed above as major features of philosophy in the contemporary academic context was flatly rejected by the heroes of contemporary academic philosophy. The style of Plato's dialogues is something few academics today would dare to emulate, and it is more than likely that the great student of Socrates would regard philosophy conferences today as a gathering of so many sophists than a meeting of true lovers of wisdom. Aristotle too would probably find himself without a publisher and cast scathing criticism at any academic philosophy journal he picked up—the nature of most discussions therein being so different from his own. For students of the *Analects* or *Zhuangzi*, there are even more obvious problems. In these texts, anything approaching today's excessive reliance on rationalistic argumentation, lack of consideration of context, and preoccupation with abstractness and universality is harshly ridiculed.

We can then note that classical ways of philosophizing and contemporary Anglophone academic philosophy are quite different. This is not to suggest that classical ways of philosophizing are uniform. Various traditions have produced distinct ways of philosophizing, and even within a single tradition we can find examples of thinkers whose ways of philosophizing differ greatly from

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one another. Pointing out the dissonance between contemporary academic philosophy and its classical varieties does not imply a call to replicate classical methodologies in the modern context. Rather, simply noting these differences from a broad perspective might be enough to provide a critical distance from academic philosophy as it is practiced today, providing a fresh set of eyes to recognize the ways in which it limits how we think about issues and make room for a re-consideration of how we can do philosophy if not better, at least differently. In the following section we will look more closely at Chinese philosophy—this paper's main target in its call for a more open methodology.

3 Narrowing (in) Chinese Philosophy

In addition to the narrowing effect due to the academic disciplinization of philosophy, the field of Chinese philosophy exhibits its own particular methodologies which can further constrict the production of philosophic significance and otherwise narrow discourse in the field. The four methods previously mentioned can be summarized as a projection of partisanship between schools of thought, comparisons along the lines of sameness and difference, analytic dissection according to historically and culturally foreign frameworks, and masters as mouthpieces. While each of these methods has its own merits and can function in opening new meanings to classical texts, without a reflexive recognition of their potentially limiting and narrowing aspects, they might serve as obstacles to generating meaning and prevent robust reflection on philosophic problems. It is thus important to detail how these four methods of doing Chinese philosophy within Anglophone academic discourse might limit how we think about doing philosophy in ways that are harmful to the field itself.

Projection of partisanship: Beyond the historical distortions this method often leads to, framing Chinese thought as characterized by partisan debate between various schools can result in a number of implications that narrow how we do philosophy. The framework itself encourages us to characterize texts associated with Confucianism, Daoism, or Legalism according to singular responses to problems defined in contradistinction to those other schools with whom they argue—which are in turn generalized across all thinkers associated with that school. For instance, we may be led to simplistically categorize Confucianism as promoting the hierarchical system of "ritual and music" to govern the state or Daoism promoting the dissipation of these hierarchies and systems through *wuwei* (non-action) governance. This use of generalizations is certainly sometimes appropriate, as there were significant disagreements among influential masters (and later, schools) on specific socio-political issues that represent major themes in the history of Chinese thought. However, an emphasis on specific *responses* to issues from different schools overlooks the particular *approaches* to issues exemplified in Masters texts. By reading these masters and schools primarily as advocating specific solutions to social and philosophic problems, we prioritize what these texts

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say *about* philosophical ideas and overlook a considerable amount in terms of how they *do* philosophy.

Comparisons of sameness and difference: The comparative method of researching Chinese philosophy exhibits similar problems as found in the projection of partisanship, but rather than characterizing schools of thought according to responses to philosophical problems defined in contradistinction to one another, Chinese thought itself is often defined according to being either the same as or different from western thought. This is a (perhaps unavoidable) characteristic of comparative philosophy exhibited throughout the history of the field, as "with the emergence of the field of comparative philosophy in the 20th. century, two camps developed: one focusing on difference and the other on sameness" (Moeller 2022: 201).[6] "Western thought" thereby functions as the standard according to or against which we must define "Chinese thought." Accordingly, traditional comparative philosophy in some sense illustrates our preconceptions about western thought more than it provides any new ways of thinking from Chinese thought. Starting off from the position of the search for sameness is a *fait accompli*, and whether this sameness is *discovered* or *interpreted into* Chinese thought, the universality of western philosophy is nevertheless reaffirmed, albeit a somewhat paler version. Chinese thought thus becomes a cry for the same type of freedom, justice, and equality as advocated by Kant or Rousseau, but simply wearing different robes. From the perspective of difference, Chinese thought is likewise defined by western thought, but in contradistinction. Chinese thought thus functions in either displaying how western thought is superior (e.g. Hegel) or how western thought is deficient (e.g. Leibniz). The search for difference exoticizes Chinese thought and transforms it into the inverse of western thought—a Rorschach test into which one reads one's own national or cultural superiority or inferiority complexes. Whether through sameness or difference, this method often reaffirms our biases and prejudices derived from western thought rather than teaching us new philosophical approaches that we might adopt from Chinese thinkers.

Analytic method: Using an analytic method to discuss Chinese thought—that is, one which ignores the historical, cultural, and traditional (commentarial) background of these classics—utilizes pre-existing models, frameworks, and hermeneutic devices derived from the western philosophic traditions to analyze classical Chinese texts. Rather than read the *Xunzi*, for example, as representative of the importance of practicing the ways of the early kings and transmitting the tradition, it becomes a form of rationalistic virtue ethics. While such approaches that are novel to the tradition of reading the *Xunzi* or other classical texts might reveal certain aspects of the text heretofore un-recognized and may help deepen the field of, say, virtue ethics, we must not ignore how the use of these western models is a substitution of the *Xunzi*'s own approach to thinking about philosophical problems. Indeed, in some respects this is the most specious methodology applied to Chinese thought because it directly contradicts the content of the major arguments of the tradition and, perhaps more importantly, it completely excludes and supplants the native philosophical approaches used to address those arguments with western varieties.

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Masters as mouthpieces: Despite this method being used to apply what has been learned about the masters depicted in classical Chinese texts to contemporary political, cultural, and philosophic problems, the question "what would X say" often compels us to revert to the role of a time-travelling detective. When we ask what Confucius would say about one problem or another, the initial impulse is often to sift through the evidence of what Confucius said about related issues in order to cobble together a case for what Confucius the historical figure might say about the issue at hand. While there are certainly examples of this method bringing about valuable insights or discussions, there are also problematic employments of it. At its worst, this method obscures the very act of philosophizing and relegates the text to a series of statements stuck in their historical context which, when creatively re-organized, can be made to appear to offer a new statement on a new problem in a new historical context. Some of the more glaring problems with this framework arise from it lending itself toward confirmation bias or even consciously "making the evidence fit" one's own personal bias because of its purely speculative nature. While one scholar might cherry-pick certain quotes to argue that Confucius would support gay marriage, another could assemble a pastiche of different examples, or interpret the same quotes differently, to argue that he would not base on equally speculative grounds. More importantly, regardless of which view is more accurate—as if that could ever be known in the first place—it does not contribute to developing ways of thinking about gay marriage in today's context. Using historical figures as mouthpieces compels us to create an argument based on *what* someone said about philosophic problems, and this often means ignoring *how* they thought philosophically.

Additional problems with the use of "masters as mouthpieces," problems which can also be found in the other methodologies mentioned above, relate to personal philosophical commitment to a stance and the use of authoritative figures. When a discussion centers on what Confucius might say, the presenting scholar evades some degree of responsibility for the argument they provide. They are not personally beholden to any stance projected onto Confucius because they have created a two-and-a-half-millennia gap between themselves and their position. This further leads one to ask, given that Confucius was unfamiliar with contemporary cultures and the concept of gay marriage, why construct an argument about the legal status of same-sex marriage using selectively quoted words from Confucius? Why would this method be utilized in the first place if not to use the authority of these figures to demand that one's personal opinion (not argumentative approach) be taken seriously?[7] Arguing with a mouthpiece (or with any of the other narrowing approaches) has the potential to close the conversation. If a scholar presents a view of what the *Laozi* would say about an issue, anyone not equally knowledgeable about the text has little if anything to say. The grounds of the discussion only grants full access to those who are also experts, and the conversation then becomes about the *Laozi* and not the issue, thus narrowing how and with whom we talk about Chinese thought. (Again, we may think of the approach of contemporary Aristotelian scholars mentioned above as doing the opposite, and in this way opening the discussion.)

Despite possessing a very different style from the semblance of scientific rigor marking much contemporary academic (particularly analytic) philosophy, contemporary scholarship on Chinese philosophy is often done in a way that narrows our philosophical approaches to the world, and thus

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narrows the world itself. The methods described above exhibit two primary narrowing tendencies. First, reinterpreting thinkers or texts according to contemporary, dominant (most often western) philosophical modes, conventionalizing otherwise unique and valuable ways of approaching problems. Second, defining thinkers or texts exclusively by their "answers" to their own historically contingent problems, thus preventing engagement with contemporary issues and relegating them to the annals of history. The first of these narrowing tendencies stems from ignoring historical contexts and assuming the universality of western methods, thereby concealing truly unique Chinese approaches. Conversely, the second results from over-historicizing, exclusively focusing on what texts say about those historical circumstances, thus preventing the extension of Chinese approaches to current issues and making them irrelevant for contemporary life.

The major argument presented here is that we can learn not only *about* classics, but also learn *from* the way they reflect on issues. Doing so we can use their philosophical approaches to address contemporary issues. This is a method not often found in contemporary scholarship. We argue that it would not only yield much in terms of contributing to discourse about today's issues, but would also display the significance of Chinese philosophy as a unique and legitimate resource for developing critical reflections. This is what we mean by a philosophy that is "open" or "opening Chinese philosophy." Here "open" means using Chinese texts as a foundation for learning more about the world, not putting it into ever smaller boxes. It must be recognized that many of the narrowing tendencies in the field of Chinese philosophy, result not from Chinese thought itself, but from the disciplinization of modern academic philosophy. As such, perhaps a good way to begin thinking about how to "open" Chinese philosophy without leaving the domain of academia is to consider how other scholars represent an open way of philosophizing in other areas of academic philosophy.

4 Philosophy as Opening the World

The general orientation of Anglophone academic philosophy is largely a narrowing of the world. It picks out something small and closes it from its connections to other things, including context, in order to achieve a more precise understanding of increasingly compartmentalized phenomena. Examining the world in this way means specifying things as isolated from others, downplaying the significance of circumstance and interconnectedness, and supposing that much of the world (including humans) can be known, predicted, and controlled. This mechanistic-reductionistic method is used in the sciences to simplify complex phenomena into their most basic components and minimize variables to precisely observe how they operate, often with great success. But academic philosophy does not need to model itself on the sciences—at least not in this regard—nor should it. Another way of doing philosophy moves in an opposite direction. It opens the world, recognizes the dynamic interactions of things as highly or completely interwoven, seeks out the importance of contextual variables, and is skeptical about the degree to which we can know, predict,

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and control the world (or ourselves). It seeks to treat different ways of reflecting on the world seriously and asks how we can build off of these foundations to think about ourselves, our relationships, and our world.

A more open type of philosophy is then not limited to a preoccupation with history, on comparisons between texts and traditions, or on narrow de-contextualized abstract arguments. For example, we can take open philosophy as meaning something like "reflecting on life" or "re-considering familiar thoughts and behaviors." [8] We would then understand some of our philosophical heroes, including Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Mencius, the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi*, not as proffering specific arguments about what is and is not the case, or what is right and what is wrong, but rather providing readers with examples of what they could consider, or how they might think, when reflecting on philosophical issues themselves. [9] Understood in this way, to engage in philosophy means to learn *from* the style, orientation, and general approach provided in classics, and to then practice these approaches in our introspective contemplation, navigating relationships with others, or in our political commitments. The content is still important, but it need not necessarily be taken as either fixed in the historical past or universally applicable. What is argued by great philosophers might rather be taken as suggestions for ways of approaching problems, how we might consider different aspects of the world, and how to be open to various avenues for thinking and interacting.

Engaging in philosophy in this way *opens* the world by offering unfamiliar ways of reflecting on the world. When engaging with philosophical texts, one is presented not merely with new rules or calculations for how they should view the world, but is given a set of options to use when practicing philosophy for themselves. For example, Plato's dialogues challenge one to think about what is essential to their concept of justice and how to assess what is just and unjust in the world, or how to balance duties to one's parents and duties to the state. Reading the *Analects* and *Mencius* we find ways of considering our obligations to relatives and society along lines distinct from those suggested by Plato's work. Additionally, these ancient Chinese classics explore ideas which are less prominent in Plato, such as the importance of hierarchical relationships and ritual. Rather than simply comparing the similarities and differences of the concepts explored by different thinkers, we can use the approaches employed by these thinkers interchangeably. Plato can serve as a guide to re-consider what is centrally constituent of those values we purport to uphold, for example, while the *Analects* might help us recognize how those values must be manifested very differently according to circumstantial contingencies. We can then decide what is the best method of deliberation, not based on a singular preestablished rule, principle, or calculation, but simply on what we determine as being appropriate given the demands of our situations. In this way philosophy opens the world in ever more ways.

Accordingly, the very approach to philosophizing itself becomes an open project, one that neither has nor claims to work towards a final end. We do not suppose we can figure out the world, but seek instead to find effective and productive ways to operate in the world as beings who are

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fundamentally constituted by it. Both philosophizing itself (methodologically) and the person who philosophizes, are taken to be part of the world with no recourse to something outside of it.

Philosophizing this way is a relatively humble and modest endeavor. It does not presuppose much knowledge about the world, but rather gives people tools in the form of philosophical approaches to problems, points out things they might want to consider, and does little else. If we emphasize dogmatic adherence to specific content and take philosophical texts as offering a fixed set of responses to problems, then, in its extreme at least, philosophy becomes a way of closing the world. The world becomes more narrow—only certain aspects of it count as significant and a potential world of multiplicity is assessed according to a limited set of abstract standards and modes of thinking. The more closed style of philosophizing assumes we can know and predict much about the world and focuses on doing just that. In this regard, it must be recognized that this narrow approach to philosophy can, in fact, be quite valuable and has been instrumental to varying degrees across all academic fields, including in the humanities. This article is intended merely as a reminder that philosophy can serve not only to refine but also to open dimensions of significance, broaden our methods of sense-making, and reveal healthier and more efficacious ways to engage with one another and the world.

Reading Aristotle in a more open way—the way the scholars mentioned above work with Aristotle's approach to the world—we learn how to think about things, the world, and ourselves. Aristotle's arguments about a specific type of good or a particular virtue are less important than his approach to these questions, what we can learn from *how* he thinks. Again, this is arguably what the contemporary Aristotelians mentioned above frequently do.

Writing about genetic engineering, Michael Sandel provides a prime example of what this type of philosophizing looks like. Sandel constructs an argument that is very much in line with Aristotle's approach to problems, but he does not make assertions through references to quotes from Aristotle, nor does he purport to present "What Aristotle would say about genetic engineering." In this way, when debating with other scholars the crux of the discussion does not revolve around interpretations of Aristotle, or on "What Aristotle would think about genetic engineering," but rather "How *we* should think about genetic engineering." One obvious benefit of this type of philosophizing is that in takes genetic engineering as the prime focus. The discussion is not about Aristotle, or even Aristotle and genetic engineering, it is about genetic engineering itself. Additionally, working in this way allows Sandel to engage in productive dialogue with people from different backgrounds. If someone has no knowledge of Aristotle, it is of little consequence in this type of discussion. Sandel does not assume prior knowledge of Aristotle, nor is he reciting passages from Aristotle. Sandel's approach might be classified as Aristotelian, but the structure of his argument allows him to communicate with anyone within a relatively wide Anglophone community. As a result of de-coupling an Aristotelian philosophical *approach* from what Aristotle said *about* philosophy (content), the very premises utilized by an Aristotelian who practices this type of philosophy are open to criticism because Aristotle as philosophic authority is not the central part of the discussion. The pre-occupation with what a person or text said, what they *really* meant,

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and why it is good or bad is not particularly relevant according to this more open method, and we are left to consider whether that thinker's fundamental approach is beneficial and conducive to discussing problems by testing that approach itself against contemporary real-world problems.

5 Opening Chinese Philosophy

Chinese philosophy has a particular need to open up, which results from the general narrowing tendencies found in the disciplinization of academic philosophy, as well as those unique to popular methodologies used in this field. In response to the four methods that sometimes narrow Chinese philosophy discussed above, this "opening" might be achieved by: first, emphasizing the distinct philosophical approaches of Chinese thinkers, which are often obscured by imposing western topics, methodologies, and frameworks; and second, addressing contemporary issues through these approaches rather than defining Chinese masters solely by a fixed set of propositions. In this case "opening" would be both a de-historicizing and re-historizing, freeing scholars to utilize uniquely Chinese philosophical approaches in response to contemporary issues. Indeed, in recent decades, there has been a reaction against the 'de-contextualizing,' 'de-historicizing' tendencies commonly found in comparative philosophy and in the imposition of western derived frameworks, such as virtue ethics or meta-ethics, onto classical Chinese texts.

Roger Ames has written extensively about the need for Chinese philosophy to be understood "in its own terms," an endeavor we can begin "by taking into account the tradition's own indigenous presuppositions and its own evolving self-understanding." Ames continues, "We must be aware of the ambient, persistent assumptions that have given the Chinese philosophical narrative its unique identity over time" (Ames 2017: 9).[10] Chinese philosophy's unique identity(ies) is something anyone would affirm as a matter of course, yet too often their "indigenous presuppositions" and philosophic approaches are supplanted with those of the west, thereby silencing their distinct voices. The call to understand Chinese thought "in its own terms," along with other trends in the field, has exposed many blind-spots and limitations of traditional comparative philosophy and provided methods for those unique Chinese philosophical approaches to be heard across the divide (cf. Burik 2009[11]; Moeller 2022). This challenge is not restricted to Anglophone discourse, as China's tumultuous 19th and 20th centuries also resulted in an internalized "western-centrism" amongst leading Chinese intellectuals. Recognition and responses to this problem are common throughout Chinese academia, found in the form of articulations of more nuanced methods of comparative philosophy (cf. Fu 2022)[12] and calls to rehabilitate Chinese philosophy by "using Chinese philosophy to explain Chinese philosophy" (Zhang 2003: 6).[13] In regard to "opening" Chinese philosophy, rather than superimposing approaches from Aristotle, Hegel, and Heidegger, the unique philosophical approaches of Chinese masters must first be heard, understood, and articulated in a way that goes beyond the "Chinese text input into western framework" for us to engage with them.

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Defining thinkers or even entire schools of thought according to specific "answers" to problems rather than by their approach to those issues tethers them to specific historical circumstances in a way that makes it difficult to apply their approaches to novel problems in contemporary life. In the case of defining schools of thought as partisan enemies, the *Laozi*, for example, is sometimes read as promoting "Daoist" values like suppleness and weakness against "Confucian" values like hardness and strength. If we read the *Laozi* in terms of being "for" and "against" particular propositions it may appear very plausible that Daoism, represented by the *Laozi* and advocating values like suppleness and weakness, is arguing *against* Confucianism, represented by Confucius and advocating values like hardness and strength. This, we would argue, is quite a superficial interpretation of the *Laozi* and a mischaracterization of Confucianism, and furthermore, an interpretation that limits its relevance to the field of history. However, the text can also be read as a philosophical *approach* which re-considers the developmental relationship between those socially abnegated values of "soft and weak" and those more conventional values of "hard and strong." The *Laozi* thus provides an unconventional form of thinking about problems, not an "un-Confucian" set of propositions.

From the perspective of "opening Chinese philosophy," reading texts like the *Laozi* as providing an approach to socio-political problems with an eye to developmental processes, an approach that could be applied to issues beyond those of classical China, may also be fruitful. For example, one of the guiding ideas of the philosophical approach in the *Laozi* is "when things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite" (Cao and Pei 2017: 23).[14] In the context of classical Chinese thought, it is argued that excessive reliance on that which is characterized by *Yang* (strength, force, activity) will paradoxically, inevitably, and violently transform into its opposite binary other, that which is characterized by *Yin* (weakness, suppleness, non-activity). This unique approach can help contribute to how we think about contemporary issues in ways that do not necessarily directly refer to the *Laozi* or make use of its "answers" to problems, even when adopting multidisciplinary perspectives. The application of the *Laozi*'s approach to dialectical developments and their (sometimes destructive) counteractive transformations could rather coherently be applied to, for example, Stephen Skowronek's "political time" framework (Skowronek 2011).[15] This might reveal the ways in which it is more productive to think of the rise of Tea Party and MAGA republican candidates, not merely dismissively as the product of millions of "neo-Klansmen and knuckle-dragging hillbillies" (Jonsson 2010)[16] coming out of hiding to vote, but as a developmental outcome of the success of their binary other, neo-conservative republicans. The rise to power of hawkish neo-conservatives during the Bush administration paradoxically served as a condition for their own downfall (transformation) and for the subsequent (reactionary) success of the anti-interventionist tea-party (and later MAGA) republican candidates. While this serves as merely a cursory example of the application of philosophical approaches from classical Chinese texts, some modern scholars have articulated more open readings of early Chinese philosophy along similar lines. Below we will explore two such examples.

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Our first example of using a more open strategy of philosophizing with Chinese thought can be found in *The Path*.[17] Here Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh introduce early Chinese philosophical texts while simultaneously presenting them as challenges against contemporary preoccupations with authenticity and the self. Accordingly, readers of *The Path* may actually use much of what Puett and Gross-Loh present for their own reflections on life. *The Path* opens a new world to readers, offering new things to consider and, more importantly, new ways to consider them. While the discussions primarily revolve around introducing Chinese philosophy, and thus make ample references to classical Chinese thinkers and texts, readers are not required to have any specialized knowledge about them in adopting and extending their approaches to authenticity and associated issues. In this way *The Path* is an excellent example of broadening academic Chinese philosophy to include contemporary issues that are not strictly academic, geared towards a specific audience that might not otherwise be interested in academic or Chinese philosophy, and thus serves a dual function of dealing with contemporary issues and introducing readers to classical Chinese thought.

A second example is found in Henry Rosemont's *Against Individualism*, which presents a harsh critique of individualistic thinking and is geared towards more academically-oriented and intellectual readers.[18] Rosemont presents new ways of thinking about everything from the individual person, to family, politics, and religion. He invites others into a worldview where people are co-constitutive and can be thoroughly transformed as their relationships and social contexts change. Here too, Rosemont draws heavily on Confucian texts, and houses his discussions largely therein. In this way his book can be regarded as being about Confucianism or a Confucian argument "against individualism," but it can also be regarded as simply an argument against individualism that utilizes approaches found in typically Confucian texts.

Examples like these are not especially common among scholars who work on Chinese thought insofar as they are far more open than most other works in the field. While many scholars make classical Chinese philosophic texts relevant to contemporary issues, few do so using approaches derived from those very texts. In their discussions of contemporary issues, both *The Path* and *Against Individualism* largely use *approaches* from Chinese philosophy rather than simply what classical authors said about similar issues. They invite readers to expand their perspective on familiar ways of interacting and thinking about contemporary issues. These examples, while exhibiting a method and style uncommon within contemporary Anglophone academic Chinese philosophy, are also not entirely unique. Yanqing Qin, for example, has developed a theory on relational power within the field of International Relations utilizing a philosophical approach from the *Zhongyong*, a text which addresses problems through the dialectical meta-relationship between *Yin* and *Yang* (cf. Qin 2018).[19] Scholars like Stephen Angle,[20] Daniel Bell and Wang Pei,[21] and Li Chenyang[22] use Confucian approaches, such as recognizing the functions of social hierarchies or judging events using harmony as a standard, to address contemporary issues ranging from anxieties afflicting US-American students to challenging the dominant western liberal democratic conception of justice. Likewise, Hans-Georg Moeller[23] and Thorsten Botz-Bornstein[24] adopt

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approaches from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to reveal the sometimes destructive outcomes of overly moralistic discourse and to problematize the more recent incarnations of political correctness.

6 Conclusion

The "open" style of philosophizing described above cannot and should not completely replace the contemporary academic style. Concentrating on texts and how they communicate with one another in their respective historical contexts, analytically focusing on concepts and crafting syllogistic arguments about them (which often historically de-contextualizes them), and thinking about them in more abstract ways are all important. When scholars like Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, or Martha Nussbaum write about authenticity, justice, or emotions, we do not question their philosophical foundations, not because they are authority figures beyond reproach, but because they are good scholars. They are well-versed in the classics and understand the debates between different thinkers and texts, appreciate historical context, and are capable of discussing them analytically as de-contextualized abstractions. Indeed, these skills developed within the discipline of academic philosophy are conditions for developing a more open philosophical approach. The argument presented in this paper is that philosophy does not have to stop there. It is already valuable in this way, and this way should be continued to be practiced and taught. However, philosophy *can also* go beyond that type of research. And oftentimes it is when it does that the potential to make significant contributions beyond Chinese and comparative philosophical discourse, or beyond academia, emerge. This is particularly important for scholars who work on Chinese thought in English, as they have a unique responsibility at this point in time.

To some extent we can understand all scholars (of the humanities) as having similar responsibilities. One way to conceptualize their role is along the following lines: They should help those they teach broaden their perspectives, question their assumptions, consciously develop values, and become good listeners and communicators, enabling them to engage in fruitful dialogue with others.[25] As mentioned above, academic philosophy can sometimes become overly focused on narrow research projects. Articles, books, and even teaching are sometimes focused on issues such as "How the *Zhuangzi* criticizes Confucius" or "Does the *Mencius* support democracy?" Accordingly, the potential to benefit society exhibited by scholars becomes similarly narrow. A more open style of philosophizing foregrounds the responsibilities mentioned above and has a much higher chance of benefiting students and communities. Scholars of Chinese thought have additional responsibility—at least the authors of this paper think so—given the current socio-political climate.

For the past several years the relationships between the USA and China, but also between China and other Western European countries, has been increasingly intractable. The reasons are complex, and there is probably just as much blame in the Western hemisphere as in the Eastern one. Nevertheless, scholars who have influence in what we often refer to as the west should try to

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alleviate some of the tensions, to whatever extent they can, by at least trying to communicate well about and with the Chinese tradition. In addition to and compounding problems on the stage of international relations over the last several years are those related to post-colonial cultural power dynamics and Chinese identity, whose seeds were sown centuries ago. We must remind ourselves that when we talk about the Chinese tradition, it is not a mere abstraction nor is it dead history; it also speaks about, to, and with *people* beyond the narrow halls of academia. We should appreciate that simply saying things like "the *Laozi* says…" or "according to Confucius" is often alienating. Not only is it alienating for modern western students when such statements are presented as "inscrutable wisdom of the East" inaccessible to modern westerners, but they can also exoticize and Orientalize East Asian traditions and people as essentially Other. Engaging with Chinese thought in a more open and relatable manner could promote a more intersubjective understanding of China, moving beyond clichéd tropes such as "oriental despotism" often perpetuated by the media.

None of this is to say that discussions based on what the authors referred to as the "narrowing" methods cannot also be accurate depictions of Chinese thought and make the tradition more relatable to modern western readers. They certainly can. There is no question. But scholars can also go beyond this style of philosophizing and develop conversations that are open to many more people, both within other academic fields as well as to the general public. It takes a certain disposition to be intrigued by statements starting with "Chinese philosophy argues…" and, given the current climate, there are even less people so inclined. An open style of philosophizing with Chinese thought is one of the ways we can communicate better.

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[6] Hans-Georg Moeller, "Before and After Comparative Philosophy," *Asian Studies* 10, no. 26 (2022): 201-24.

[7] One reviewer asked: "But don't folks who use the masters as mouthpieces method also typically try to establish how the master's philosophy would warrant support for their personal opinion? I.e., don't they usually offer arguments, even if they graft these onto the master?" Our responses is: "Yes, but the point is, why do that? When this is done scholars hide behind past thinkers, and exclude all those who do not have a certain level of expertise. The method used by contemporary Aristotelian scholars is, we argue, better because it allows anyone to meaningfully engage with the discussion."

[8] Michael Sandel understands philosophy as an approach which "estranges us from the familiar, not by supplying new information, but by inviting and provoking a new way of seeing." See, Michael Sandel, "Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do? Episode 01 "The Moral Side of Murder" Harvard's Open Academy (September 4, 2009) (URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBdfcR-8hEY; last accessed on November 23, 2024).

[9] Certain readings of Leo Strauss understand his work as doing something similar. For example, Strauss famously argued that the *Republic* should perhaps be read ironically. See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

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[22] Chenyang Li, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, London: Routledge, 2014.

[23] Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

[24] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Daoism, Dandyism, and Political Correctness*, Albany: SUNY, 2023.

[25] Not everyone will agree with this list, but there are at least parts of it that most would probably agree with.

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