

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Echoes of the Past, Visions for the Future

The Power of Ideas to Navigate the China- West Divides

March 8-9, 2024

Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University
CGIS South, Belfer Case Study Room

Friday, March 8

09:15 - 09:25

Welcome by the PI

09:25 - 09:45

Introductory Remarks

Tiziana Lippiello (Ca' Foscari), Michael Puett (Harvard)

09:45 - 11:15

The Role of the Individual in Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Tiziana Lippiello (Ca' Foscari), Anna Irene Baka (Harvard-Ca' Foscari) Chair: Michael Puett (Harvard)

11:15 - 11:45

Coffee Break

11:45 - 13:15

Methodological Perspectives on Comparison and Engagement

Bryan Van Norden (Vassar College), Michael Puett (Harvard)

Chair: Tao Jiang (Rutgers)

13:15 - 14:15

Lunch Break

14:15 - 16:30

Reflections from History

Hsinning Liu (Academia Sinica), Wen Yu (Boston College), Benjamin Gallant (Harvard)

Chair: Karen Turner (EALS- Harvard, College of the Holy Cross)

18:00

Dinner

Saturday, March 9

09:15 - 11:30

Early Chinese Approaches as a Resource

Franklin Perkins (University of Hawai'i), Tao Jiang (Rutgers), Dimitra Amarantidou (University of Macau)

Chair: Bryan Van Norden (Vassar College)

11:30 - 12:00

Coffee Break

12:00 - 13:30

Rethinking Paradigms

Lisa Raphals (University of California, Riverside), Wang Hui (Tsinghua)

Chair: Peter Bol (Harvard)

13:30 - 13:45

Concluding Remarks



DEPARTMENT OF EAST ASIAN
LANGUAGES AND CIVILIZATIONS
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice
Department of Philosophy
and Cultural Heritage



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Abstracts

1. The way of Chinese Concepts: on he 和 and li 禮, by Dimitra Amarantidou (University of Macau)

He 和 or “harmony” and li 禮 or “ritual” pervade much of the Confucian tradition, and provide orientation in all areas of life even in contemporary China, from domestic policies and diplomatic practices to interpersonal relations and seating arrangements. In comparative scholarship he-harmony and li-ritual are generally discussed as *sui generis* concepts, distinct for their flexibility and openness to changing contexts and diverse content. In this presentation I will argue that rather than relatively fixed forms open to varied content, harmony and ritual are better understood within a “form is content” interpretive model. The “form is content” model does not take the formal aspects of harmony and ritual as separable from and prescriptive for particular situations, but views the forms of harmony and ritual and the particulars of concrete, diverse situations as mutually constitutive.

2. Scholar-Creators as Architects of Change in Governance, by Anna Irene Baka (Harvard- Ca’ Foscari)

In an era defined by complex moral and political dilemmas, the critical reassessment of the scholar’s role could draw on the ancient traditions of Greece and China, where scholars were not only advisors but also instrumental in shaping governance. This stands in stark contrast to the contemporary, often reactionary, scholarly engagement, prompting a reevaluation of scholars’ potential and responsibilities in addressing societal challenges. The discourse also critiques the modern departure from core values, influenced by the Enlightenment and logical positivism, leading to a perceived neutrality that obscures biases, notably in the realm of international law. The paper advocates for scholars to transcend their traditional roles, embracing a proactive, dynamic participation in governance with a view to tackling systemic injustices. Central to this reimagined role is the concept that scholars should also be envisioned as creators of new institutions and solutions, drawing upon the profound ideas found in Aristotelian philosophy and the teachings of Xunzi. This perspective not only highlights the importance of ethical guidance and policy involvement but also underscores the creative potential of scholars in devising innovative approaches to contemporary issues.

3. Ritual and the Politics of Reciprocity, by Benjamin Gallant (Harvard)

This paper argues that ritual 禮 in early Chinese texts like the *Zuozhuan* should be understood in terms of normatively acceptable acts of gift-giving that create and maintain relationships and social obligations. The historiographical focus on gift-giving and reciprocity that is evident in this text and the *Shiji* accords in important respects with Marcel Mauss’s theorization of gift-exchange as a “total social phenomenon.” While claims about the extension of imperial gifts and grace were central to Qin Shihuang’s justification of his imperial project, Sima Qian’s account subverts his rhetoric by revealing a reality of exploitation and expropriation, and

Liu Bang and the Han dynasty are in turn described as successful in part because of their commitment to gift-giving. Thus contra Mayfair Yang's suggestion that the imperial state emerged in opposition to older forms of social interaction (that resemble modern conceptions of *guanxi*), it seems likely that the emergence of the state can actually be traced back to those practices. While the obligations and relationships that are created through gift-giving are not readily formulated in the language of rights, significant similarities between the Chinese case, Greco-Roman political practice, and ancient Greek philosophy point toward a possible shared framework for international collaboration, understanding, and critique.

4. Zhuangzi and the Tragic Fate of Personal Freedom in Chinese History, by Tao Jiang (Rutgers)

Zhuangzi was a singular figure in the history of Chinese philosophy. Within the context of overwhelming early Chinese emphasis on order, Zhuangzi single-handedly opened up a critical space for the discourse on personal freedom. The Zhuangist freedom thrives in personal space with its characteristic ambivalence toward the state. This made him the singular outlier in the moral-political projects of the classical period. However, such a vision of personal freedom was severely constrained by its aversion to a more active engagement with the state as a collective project instead of as a personal project. The Zhuangist vision of personal freedom would have a lasting impact on the subsequent development of personal freedom in Chinese intellectual and political history, i.e., its marginalization, internalization, and lack of institutional impact in the imagination and construction of an ideal Chinese state.

5. "Echoes from the past, visions for the future": the legacy of Marco Polo, teachings for today international dialogues, by Tiziana Lippiello (Ca' Foscari)

The year 2024 commemorates the 700th anniversary of Marco Polo's death, a renowned Venetian merchant and traveller in the Middle Ages. This milestone offers a valuable opportunity to reflect upon the impact of his significant travels throughout the Mongol Empire. The Polo's expeditions not only fostered connections with diverse peoples but also revealed new geographical, cultural, political and sociological dimensions. Despite the tumultuous era characterized by wars and invasions, China welcomed travellers, including the Polo family, Franciscan missionaries, Arab explorers, Persian scientists and Muslim merchants. All these individuals contributed to the exchange of goods, ideas, beliefs.

During the reign of Kublai Khan (1267-94), the Mongol empire thrived, promoting an environment that embraced foreigners in government, military, business and the arts. There was no prejudice against people of other faiths and cultures, as reflected in *Devisement dou monde*, Marco Polo's memoir of his travels. China in the 13th and 14th centuries served as a crossroad of civilizations, facilitating the interaction and knowledge-sharing among merchants and religious figures. The Yuan empire emerged as a powerful country, rich in wonders, where people of all kinds, merchants and religious figures, met and learned from each other. The Franciscan friars, through their letters and accounts of their journeys to Asia, have provided the history of an era marked by raids and devastations but also one brimming with opportunities. These accounts shed light on

the passion of merchants and the missionary zeal, which the Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci described as being overshadowed by the “courageous ambassadors of culture”. Understanding Marco Polo’s perception in China and Europe during that time and the lessons they impart on us today remains a topic of interest.

6. State Power and Civil Disputes: Civil Litigation in Early China, by Hsinning Liu (Academia Sinica)

Compared to criminal litigation, our understanding of civil litigation in early China is limited. However, civil litigation provides valuable insights into the dynamics between the state and society. This presentation aims to shed light on the legal processes of civil litigations, the court’s evaluation of evidence, and the state’s stance on civil cases during early China, specifically the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE).

Civil litigations typically commenced with oral appeals, reflecting the era’s low literacy rates. While written contracts were considered crucial evidence, interrogations of involved parties and witnesses often played a more pivotal role. Those willing to swear under the threat of severe perjury penalty had their testimony accepted as near-true. Local officials invested considerable effort in determining the facts, believing that an accurate grasp of the truth could lead to the resolution of the litigation. However, reconciling contradictions in testimonies posed a challenge. In cases where basic-level officials couldn’t reach a consensus, higher-ranking officials might be appointed to reevaluate the case. If dissatisfied with the judgment, parties involved could appeal to higher-level government authorities. Clearly, people expected the public power to do their justice, and in response, the public power managed civil litigation prudently. Nevertheless, the state’s focus on justice often leaned towards substantial rather than procedural justice.

7. Avoiding both Anachronism and 'Museumification' in Comparative Philosophy, by Bryan Van Norden (Vassar College)

I want to suggest that, when we engage in comparative philosophy, we should avoid two extremes: 'museumification' and anachronism. I am borrowing 'museumification' from Henry Rosemont, who used it to describe the mistake of treating Chinese philosophy as a quaint oddity of interest only for historical purposes, without relevance to contemporary issues. This mistake is less common today than it used to be. More common today is the mistake of reading Chinese texts anachronistically, as if Confucius were Richard Rorty or Zhuangzi were Derrida. I suggest that we should learn to read Chinese philosophers as "speaking in their time yet to our time."

8. Early Chinese Approaches to Diversity and Disagreement, by Franklin Perkins (University of Hawai’i)

In this talk, I will discuss how early Chinese philosophers reflected on diversity and disagreement. I will begin with an overview of how differences in views were explained and whether diversity was seen as a problem or a resource. I will then turn to the positive views of diversity found within the *Huainanzi*, an early Han dynasty

text with a Daoist orientation. In the conclusion, I will assess of the value and weaknesses of the *Huainanzi*'s approach for the relationship between different cultures and philosophies in the contemporary world.

9. Modes of Thinking: Daoism, μῆτις and Indirection, by Lisa Raphals (University of California, Riverside)

This paper has two parts. The first part examines modes of thinking that were prominent in both Chinese and Greek antiquity, and might help us today. Several examples show how both Greek μῆτις and Chinese *wu wei* 無為 rely on indirection in different ways. The second part argues that an exclusive focus on Confucianism as the dominant paradigm of Chinese philosophy and culture obscures this important Chinese mode of strategic thinking, military and otherwise. It also marginalizes other non-Confucian ideals of a good life, including independent or 'individualistic' elements in Chinese thought that have profound implications for ethics, government, family life, gender equality, education, and the conduct of daily life.

10. The Birth of Modern Perspectives on Self-Rule in China and Europe: A Comparative Discussion of the Historicist Turns in 17th Century Political Thought, by Wen Yu (Boston College)

In recent decades, a significant area of research on Western political thought has centered on the gradual formation of the modern Western theories of State during the early modern period. This process is often linked to the emergence and evolution of modern Natural Law theory in the 17th century. In particular, the Natural Law discourse transitioned from a focus on pre-social rights based on nature to a more empirical study of human civilization and society, and this historicist turn laid the groundwork for the conception of rights in the modern Western liberal political system. What scholars often fail to notice, however, is that Chinese political thought underwent a similar historicist turn in the 17th century as well. The rise of a new empirical scholarship in Confucian classical learning replaced the naturalist Neo-Confucian moral philosophy that had dominated China's intellectual culture for centuries. This transition was accompanied by the rise of new historicist theories of civilization and society, by criticisms of the Neo-Confucian imperial ideology, and ultimately by attempts at creating new political values based on the ideas of responsible government.

This paper compares these historicist turns in 17th century Chinese and European political thought, focusing on the similarities and the differences between the new social theories and visions of government they heralded. It situates both traditions in a shared historical context shaped by increasing global trade and new wealth, but explores the different local consequences faced by China and Europe and the different paths they chose. For instance, while European Enlightenment liberal thinkers theorized rights through a historical model based on the effect of "commercial reciprocity," Chinese thinkers' argument for self-rule was built around the "cultural interests" of the historical community. To what degree was such difference an outcome of historical contingency, or of a much more deeply rooted philosophical difference? The different views of self-rule and the

historical knowledge Chinese thinkers created at this moment would become a major source for China's modern nationalist reforms after the fall of the imperial system in the early 20th century.

Ultimately, the paper hopes to show that understanding the deeper roots of China's political modernity in comparison to the European tradition has the potential to shed light on the differences between their modern political trajectories. In addition, it helps to reconceptualize their commonalities, fostering more meaningful engagements. Current international politics often assumes that China's modernization is a purely Westernizing process. Such assumptions can lead to unproductive moral expectations for China to adopt the modern Western political model as universal values, which can create a backlash and invite ultra-nationalist and anti-modernist politics. Instead, understanding how China's political modernity is rooted in its own historical transformation can help transcend the current political impasse, creating constructive concepts to bridge the different intellectual traditions of modern self-government as the basis for a shared international order.