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Preface

In this discussion of dialogue within Chinese philosophy we are providing the second in a two part series on the place of dialogue in Chinese educational and intellectual history generally. In our first paper, we consider the nature and structure of dialogues in China resulting from the encounter between Chinese and Western philosophy. In this paper, we focus specifically on the place of dialogue within the historical stream of Chinese philosophy itself. We give attention to the original theory for conducting civil dialogue in the pursuit of truth as it was first set forward by Mozi, along with a few examples of how this paradigm was applied, manipulated, and sometimes simply ignored. Next, we take note of several of the most important forums where philosophical dialogue occurred in the educational academies of China and court debates. We conclude with some observations about the ongoing function of intellectual exchange of thoughts and positions down to the present.

The craft of philosophical dialogue in classical China

Mo Di (a.k.a., Mozi, c. 470–391 BCE) was asked by his students to set out the criteria for judging between competing views. When asked how to distinguish between theories and conduct dialogue about what is true and right, Mozi answered as follows:

You must establish standards ... [for the choice between theories] these must have three criteria. What are the three criteria? There is the foundation; there is the source; there is the application. In what is the foundation? The foundation is in the actions of the ancient sage-kings. In what is the source? The source is in the truth of the evidence of the eyes and ears of the common people below. In what is the application? It emanates from government policy and is seen in the benefit to the ordinary people of the state. (Mozi 35.5, Johnston, 2010)

These three criteria require some brief explanations. The first test for judging between conflicting claims is what we may call an examination of the reports of what occurred in the past, as well as of the beliefs held in the past. It was commonly believed by Chinese thinkers of the classical period that the record of Chinese history known as the *Classic of History (Shujing)* was a literal and accurate record and it could be used as a standard for truth by which to judge claims and proposals. Mozi did not propose a critical analysis of this source; neither did he express any doubt about its records. A second truth test is what Mozi called ‘the evidence of the eyes and ears of the common people.’ In his actual application of this criterion, Mozi paid attention both to how widespread the testimony was for an experienced event and also who was reporting it. However, Mozi did not mean that just because a large number of people believed something to be true, then it must be so. Likewise, he did not regard a claim to be true simply because someone of high status reported having had an experience of a certain sort. An experience must be capable of being repeated by others. The third criterion Mozi offered was what Western philosophers would call a pragmatic test. Essentially, Mozi was suggesting that one criterion for accepting a claim is the usefulness in furthering the well-being of individual and social life of acting as though it were true. We may find it interesting that based upon this criterion Mozi argued that

we should behave as though ghosts and spirits exist and that Heaven acts in a way that exhibits volition and will, because doing so will encourage living as though life has a higher purpose and that Heaven will judge the immoral and unscrupulous (*Mozi* 26–37, Johnston, 2010).

While Mozi's basic guidelines for civilized dialogue on controversial subjects seem rather clear cut and achievable, in actual practice the matter was much more complicated. In the years following his life, Mozi's students and their students after them made ever more labyrinthine applications of his rules for dialogue. In *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, Sima Qian (145–86 BCE) identified a group of thinkers as *Mingjia* ('School of Names'). Actually, in the Warring States Period (c.475–221 BCE), the name used more generally for these thinkers who were descendants of Mozi was *bianshi* 辯士 (often rendered as 'disputers' or 'rhetoricians'). The Chinese term *bian* (辯) is often used for 'argument,' but it can also mean to dialogue in order to clarify and articulate what is known. The *bianshi* philosophers were well known for their skill in argumentation, making finely grained distinctions between concepts and exposing the flaws in received beliefs and traditional knowledge claims. Accordingly, Karyn Lai seems on target when she writes,

Their [the *bianshi*] ideals and philosophical methods fill an often perceived gap in Chinese intellectual thought. The debates of the preQin period [before 221 BCE] are represented predominantly – some would say overrepresented – by Confucian and Daoist views on ethics and government, while the arguments and analyses of the *bianshi* are neglected. (Lai, 2008, p. 113)

The approaches and arguments of the *bianshi* can be associated with the work of the so-called Later Mohist philosophers. This group of thinkers is known to us largely through the final six chapters of the *Mozi* text (Chapters 40–45). They employed important epistemological distinctions such as these:

- what can be affirmed as possible (*ke*) and what cannot be possible (*buke*),
- how items were the same (*tong*) or different (*yi*),
- this thing/truthfully (*shi*) or not this thing/falsely (*fei*),
- that something exists (*ran*) or does not exist (*buran*).

The ideas of two of the *bianshi* are known to us through sources about which we have some degree of confidence. They are Hui Shi (370–310 BCE) and Gongsun Long (320–250 BCE). Due to limitations of space, we offer a few remarks only about Hui Shi.

Most of what we know about Hui Shi, who was probably affiliated with the Jixia Academy, is found in the Daoist text known as the *Zhuangzi*. Hui Shi shows up in nine chapters of this text and he is typically presented as a friendly but misguided dialogical partner of Master Zhuang Zhou. In one passage, Zhuangzi was accompanying a funeral when he passed by the grave of Hui Shi. Turning to his attendants, he said,

There was once a plasterer who, if he got a speck of mud on the tip of his nose no thicker than a fly's wing, would get his friend Carpenter Shi to slice it off for him. Carpenter Shi, whirling his hatchet with a noise like the wind, would accept the assignment and proceed to slice, removing every bit of mud without injury to the nose, while the plasterer just stood there completely unperturbed. Lord Yuan of Song, hearing of this feat, summoned Carpenter Shi and said, 'Could you try performing it for me?' But Carpenter Shi replied, 'It's true that I was once able to slice like that, but the material I worked on has been dead many years.' [Thus, Zhuangzi said] since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There's no one I can talk to any more. (Watson, 1968, p. 269)

While the *bianshi* were known for their skill in dialogical argument, not all the classical thinkers found their guidelines convincing for gaining knowledge of truth and the way to live. Master Zhuang Zhou, the source of the *Zhuangzi*, who lived during the reigns of King Hui of Liang (370–319 BCE) and King Xuan of Qi (319–309 BCE), was also at the Jixia Academy at one time; however, he came away with decidedly anti-rationalist views about dialogue. Karen Carr and P. J. Ivanhoe argue that in Zhuangzi's anti-rationalism, the employment of the powers of reason is seen as useful but not ultimate. In the *Zhuangzi*, there are numerous and sustained

attacks upon reliance on reason and discursive argument as methods for arriving at fundamental truth. The text uses many examples to show that what a person thinks he knows is really relative to context and not absolute (Watson, 1968, pp. 45; 179–183). Zhuang Zhou warns that skillfulness in argument culminating in winning a point is not equivalent to arriving at truth.

Suppose you and I have an argument (*bian*). If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? (Watson, 1968, p. 48)

In addition to Hu Shi and Zhuang Zhou, two other figures from the Jixia Academy figure prominently in the design of the craft of philosophical dialogue in classical China. The *Records of the Grand Historian* provides information about the biography of Mencius (a.k.a., Meng Ke or Mengzi, c. 372–289 BCE), whose influence was so significant that he became recognized as the most authoritative interpreter of Confucius's teachings in all of Chinese history and was known as 'Mengzi the Second Sage (*Yasheng Mengzi*).' Mencius felt compelled to engage in dialogue defending Confucianism because there was much at stake.

I am not fond of disputation, ... [but] I have no alternative ... If the way of Yang [Yangzi, 440?–360? BCE] and Mo [Mozi] does not subside and the way of Confucius does not shine forth, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. ... Therefore, I am apprehensive. I wish to safeguard the way of the former sages against the onslaught of Yang and Mo and to banish excessive views. Then advocates of heresies will not be able to arise. (Mengzi 3B9, Lau, 2003, pp. 71, 73)

Mencius was a master of dialogue by analogy. D.C. Lau did a serious study of his method (Lau, 1963). One example of his procedure is his famous dialogue with Gaozi recorded in the *Mengzi* 6A1, 2.

Gaozi said, "Human nature is like the willow. Appropriate behavior (*yi* 義) is like the cups and bowls. To make benevolence (*ren* 仁) and appropriate behavior out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow."

"Can you," said Mencius, "make cups and bowls by leaving the willow untouched? Or must you mutilate the willow before you can make it into cups and bowls? If you have to mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls, then, on your analogy you must also mutilate a man to make him moral. Surely these words of yours would cause all men to consider benevolence (*ren*) and appropriate behavior (*yi*) to be calamities.

Mencius wanted Gaozi to conclude with him that the downfall of morality would result if there could be no appeal to the inner nature of a person, if each person had to be radically changed and reshaped (mutilated) in order to act morally.

Another figure from the Jixia Academy who helped design the craft of philosophical dialogue in classical China was Xunzi, the great Confucian philosopher (c. 310–220 BCE). . Sima Qian reports that Xunzi studied at the Jixia Academy and it is not impossible that he could have been well acquainted with Mencius's ideas directly or through first-generation disciples. In fact, Xunzi later rose to the position of 'libationer' or Principal of the academy. He and his disciples seem to have been highly regarded by the rising Qin rulers. In fact, two of his students, Han Fei (280–233 BCE) and Li Si (280?–208 BCE) were instrumental in developing the theory of law and justice used in the Qin dynasty and known simply as Legalism. Several of his methods of philosophical dialogue have been discussed, especially those having to do with ethics and morality (see Cua, 1985).

Some *bianshi* affiliated with the Jixia Academy between 340 and 284 BCE and became so adept at challenging various worldviews and arguments that they were often criticized and feared. Xunzi wrote the following about them:

They investigate things with extreme acuteness but without any beneficent intent, and they debate matters but provide no useful results. They meddle in many affairs but have few accomplishments, and they cannot be the binding thread of good order. Nevertheless, they can cite evidence for maintaining their views, and they achieve a reasoned order in their explanations, so that it is enough to deceive and confuse the foolish masses. Just such men are Hui Shi and Deng Xi. (*Xunzi*, Chapter 6, Hutton, 2014, p. 41)

Xunzi held that to judge between competing views one has to keep one's heart-mind in a clear state (*da qingming*). This state is attained by making one's mind empty of preconditions and presuppositions and quietening emotion and passion. Xunzi has many accounts of persons who allow their emotions to cloud their reason (for one, see *Xunzi*, Chapter 21, Hutton, 2014, pp. 233–234). Xunzi relied on his structure of the epistemological process and understanding of language to dispel superstitious beliefs, correcting beliefs about the facts and calming emotional reactions to the world.

If stars fall or trees groan, the people of the state are filled with fear and say, "What is this?" I say: it is nothing. These are simply rarely occurring things among the changes in heaven and earth... To marvel at them is permissible, but to fear them is wrong. (*Xunzi*, Chapter 17, Hutton, 2014, pp. 178–179).

Xunzi's appreciation for the separation of emotion and reason in the craft of philosophical dialogue in the classical period was brought to a fine point in the work of Wang Chong (c. 27–100). Wang's craft of philosophical dialogue is displayed in his work, *Critical Essays* (*Lunheng*). This work of eighty-five chapters reveals Wang to have been a thinker with a skeptical disposition, a sharp critical intellect and a flair for originality in approaching philosophical problems. Speaking of his work he wrote, 'And though the chapters of my *Critical Essays* may [only] be numbered in the tens, one phrase likewise covers them all, namely, 'hatred of fictions and falsehoods' (Chapter 61, Forke, 1907).' Of his method, he said, 'In things there is nothing more clarifying than having an example, and in argument there is nothing more decisive than having evidence (Chapter 67, Forke, 1907).' Wang was keenly aware of the tensions between empirical and rational pursuits of knowledge. He insisted both must play a role in the advance of knowledge. One cannot depend only on sense experience because it can be deceptive. Intellectuality (*xinyi*) must be involved. He said bluntly that the Mohists did not use their intellectuality to verify things, but merely accepted what they heard as so-called eyewitness testimony and thus fell into deception (Chapter 67, Forke, 1907). On the other hand, Wang certainly did not accept the Daoist anti-rationalist solution to the problem of truth. Against the Daoists, he held that history never affords any instances of men knowing what is true spontaneously without study or of persons being enlightened without inquiry and reasoning. For Wang, even the Daoist 'perfected person' (*zhenren*) was not able to bring about anything without study or to know anything in default of inquiry (Chapter 2, Forke, 1907).

In his actual practice of testing differing positions and claims, Wang often used the method known in Chinese as 'arguing from a lodging place.' This is similar to the strategy known in Western epistemology as 'assuming an opponent's position for the sake of argument.' Most often when he did this, Wang examined a belief that he regarded as false (*xu*) and practiced what is called a *Reductio ad absurdum* technique. That is, he showed that an untenable or absurd result follows from accepting the belief. Here is an example of his approach.

When the minister of Chu, Sun Shu Ao was a boy, he saw a two-headed snake, which he killed and buried. He then went home, and cried before his mother. She asked him, what was the matter? He replied, "I have heard say that he who sees a two-headed snake must die. Now, when I went out, I saw a two-headed snake. I am afraid that I must leave you and die, hence my tears." Upon his mother inquiring where the snake was now, he answered, "For fear that others should see it later, I have killed it outright and buried it." The mother said, "I have heard that Heaven will recompense hidden virtue. You are certainly not going to die, for Heaven must reward you." And, in fact, Sun Shu Ao did not die, but went on to become prime minister of Zhou. For interring one snake he received two favors. Does this make it clear that Heaven rewards good actions? No, this is idle talk. That he who sees a two-headed snake must die is a common superstition, and that Heaven gives happiness as a reward for hidden virtue is also a common prejudice. Sun Shu Ao, convinced of the superstition, buried the snake, and his mother, addicted to the prejudice,

firmly relied on the Heavenly recompense. This would amount to nothing else than that life and death do not depend on fate, but on the death of a snake. (Chapter 11, Forke, 1907).

In the last lines of this passage, Wang put himself in the place of one who believed this story, for the sake of argument. This enabled him to show the absurdity of thinking that everything that Sun Shu Ao did in life up to and including becoming a Prime Minister had nothing to do with his talents and learning, but only depended on his having killed a snake.

In these previous paragraphs, we have only offered a small taste of the seriousness with which Chinese philosophers took the craft of dialogue during the classical period of Chinese philosophy. Much more thorough studies of roughly this same time period were undertaken by A.C. Graham (1989) in *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* and Benjamin Schwarz (1985) in *The World of Thought in Ancient China*.

Forums for the practice of philosophical dialogue in Chinese history

The Academies. Of course, not all philosophical dialogue has occurred in Chinese history in a formal setting; however, China does have a distinguished history of intellectual academies (*Shuyuan*). Already we have seen that the Jixia Academy (Jixia xuegong) played a prominent role in the development of philosophical and civil dialogue in the 4th century BCE.

The Huainan Academy (Huainan yuan) is also of great importance to an understanding of dialogue in Chinese philosophy. According to his biography in the *Book of the Early Han (Hanshu, 44.2145)*, Liu An, the king of Huainan (in modern Anhui province), gathered a large number of philosophers, scholars and practitioners of esoteric techniques to Huainan in the general period from 160–140 BCE. The philosophical work, *Masters of Huainan (Huainanzi)*, was a product of this interchange (Major et al., 2010). It is a collection of twenty-one essays representing a kind of universal encyclopedia of knowledge, bringing all the then-prevailing philosophies into a coherent body of work.

After Confucianism was adopted as the state intellectual doctrine under Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), the scholar Dong Zhongshu suggested establishing a National University (*Taixue*) in the capital at Chang'an so that scholars could teach the Classics. Another academy of significance in the development of dialogue in Chinese education and philosophy was the Hanlin Academy founded in eighth-century Tang China by Emperor Xuanzong in Chang'an (Xi'an). It included master poets such as Li Bai (701–762) and Bai Juyi (772–846), historians, translators, painters, mathematicians, political advisors, and teachers.

Just what the complete dialogical craft practiced in these academies looked like, we do not know for certain, but even from the time of the Han, the strategic question examination (*cewen*) was a question-and-answer type essay designed to test how examinees could apply Confucian doctrine to practical matters of statecraft. In this test, a question on a problematic political issue was asked and the examinee was expected to answer it according to his own opinion and how the issue could best be resolved.

The heyday of the academy educational structure included the Taishi Academy (997) authorized by Emperor Taizong of Song, the Yintianfu Academy (1009) created by Emperor Zhenzong, the Yuelu Academy (976), which became the Hunan Institute of Higher Learning in 1903 and later the Hunan Normal College and finally Hunan University (1926), authorized by Emperor Taizu, and the Shigu Academy (1035), established by Emperor Renzong of Song.

One academy that stands out for its prominence in the history of dialogue in Chinese philosophy was the White Deer Grotto Academy, best known because of its great master teacher, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). In fact, the program of dialogue Zhu Xi put into place at this academy became the foundation for educational systems in China, Korea, and Japan for centuries. In terms of his impact on Confucian thought and upon Chinese intellectual history in general, Zhu Xi ranks along with Confucius and Mencius as the three pre-eminent thinkers of China. Master Zhu's

teachings are preserved in a work that reveals the purpose of critical dialogue to philosophy entitled, *Conversations of Master Zhu, Arranged Topically* (1270) (Gardner, 1990). As a kind of mission statement for the Academy, Zhu wrote 'Articles for Learning,' one of which says simply: 'Study extensively, inquire accurately, think carefully, sift clearly, and practice earnestly, (Gardner, 1990, p. 5).

One study reports over 1200 academies during the Jiajing era of Ming dynasty (1522–1566), and Qing dynasty records list more than 7,000 academies, some of which later became universities or high schools, while others became museums and libraries.

The Imperial Court. Not all intensive and educated philosophical dialogue took place in China's academies. Court debates often included more than policy issues, spilling over into philosophical and even religious topics. In the Han period, there were debates about whether claims to be able to create elixirs of immortality were credible, as well as which techniques best served political and social ends (e.g., law, punishment, reward, etc).

Buddhists and Daoists presented themselves at the Tang court to debate which tradition could provide greatest stability for the empire and offer the most benefit to the emperor and his people. In 520, the Daoist, Jiang Bin and the Buddhist, Tanmuzui, debated over two principal issues: which tradition was older and whether Laozi had undergone a kind of transformation and converted the Buddha or was himself actually the Buddha.

In the newly founded Temple of the Pervasive Way (Tongdao Guan) in Chang'an, Daoist masters formulated powerful criticisms of Buddhism. In the early 620s, Tongdao master Fu Yi proposed to the Tang court that all Buddhist institutions be abolished and the monks and nuns returned to lay family life and work. Li Zhongqing argued that Buddhism was inferior to Daoism by writing a tract to show Buddhism's principal faults. It was entitled *The Ten Differences and Nine Errors* (c. 626).

Tang rulers were often swayed to give favor to Daoism or Buddhism. In 637 Emperor Taizong (r. 627–50, birth name Li Shimin) issued an edict that gave precedence to Daoism over Buddhism and Emperor Gaozong (r. 650–84, birth name Li Zhi) continued to enforce it.

The emperor Xuanzong (r. 713–56, birth name Li Longji) was a committed student of Daoist texts. He established the Jixian Imperial College of Daoist Studies to assemble Daoist masters to offer lectures. Beginning in 741, Xuanzong inaugurated a program to place a 'College of Daoist Studies' in each prefecture and set up a new model of imperial examinations called the Daoju, which trained those unfamiliar with Daoist texts in the tradition so they could pass the exams necessary for holding bureaucratic office.

With the coming of the Song dynasty (960–1279), a revival of Confucianism began. The thinkers of the Confucian renaissance defended the wisdom of the classical Confucian sages just as Confucius and Mencius did for the sages of the Zhou dynasty; in the process, they created a thought world that has been variously called Neo-Confucianism, the Learning of Li (*Lixue*) or the Learning of the Way (*Daoxue*). Neo-Confucianism in its early stages in the Northern Song dynasty was associated with Shao Yong (1011–1077), Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), Zhang Zai (1020–1077), and his two nephews Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1108). After the fall of the Song imperial capital in the North and the relocation of the imperial center to the south in Hangzhou, the Southern Song Neo-Confucians were led by the great philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200). These philosophers constructed several forms of Neo-Confucianism and realigned the classical texts making up a canon of authoritative works. Generally speaking, we may say that Neo-Confucianism was a skillful weaving of China's Three Teachings: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Some dialogues in Chinese philosophy had implications far beyond the intellectual. In 1225, the Buddhist monk Fuyu (1203–1275) appeared before the Yuan dynasty Mongol court of Xianzong (r. 1251–1259, Khan name: Monke Khan). He complained that the Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) Daoist masters had seized Buddhist temples and were distributing a fraudulent document entitled *Classic of Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians*, which taught that Laozi had

converted the Buddha to Daoist teachings (Yao, 2004). As a result of these complaints, a series of Buddhist–Daoist debates was ordered by the emperor and the outcome was that a large number of restrictions were placed on the practices and spread of Complete Perfection Daoism. The *Classic of Laozi's Conversion of the Barbarians* was ordered to be burned. And when the disputes continued, an edict was issued in 1281 by Emperor Shizu (r. 1260–1294, Khan name: Khubilai Khan), ordering that all Daoist books except the *Daodejing* should be collected and destroyed, and that Daoist teachers and their disciples should follow Buddhist rules for their communities.

The fortunes of ongoing dialogue in Chinese philosophy continued to find various pathways. The three teachings movement (*sanjiao*) represented a long series of attempts to harmonize Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist teachings in Chinese intellectual history, finally reaching an institutional form with Lin Zhao'en (1517–1598) in the Ming Dynasty (Berling, 1980).

The tradition of dialogue in Chinese philosophy has expanded and became increasingly more sophisticated and engaging, culminating in the founding of many of China's great universities. For example, even the prestigious Beijing University was established in 1898 to replace the Taixue, specifically the Guozijian, or Imperial College, as part of the Hundred Days' Reform initiated by the Guangxu Emperor. The philosopher Liang Qichao (1873–1929) drafted the University's organizing regulations. Other institutions have kept somewhat more of the academy model of research and dialogue, instead of the school degree-granting model. For example, the Chinese Academy of Sciences is the world's largest research organization, comprising almost 60,000 researchers working in 114 institutes. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which includes its Department of Philosophy as one of its core research units, created a university to offer degrees beginning in 2017.

Conclusion

After Chinese scientific and philosophical learning began to engage Western research, texts, and writings, a new era of dialogue opened up, requiring in some cases, new methods and strategies. Thinkers such as Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liang Qichao, Zhang Dongsun (1886–1973), Hu Shi (1891–1962), Liang Shuming (1892–1988), and Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) have each made contributions to this new dialogue across cultures and traditions. An introduction to these various approaches is in 'Chinese and Western Philosophy in Dialogue' (Littlejohn & Li, 2019).

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