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TEACHING COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

The Challenge of Teaching Chinese Philosophy: Some Thoughts on Method

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In this essay I offer an alternative perspective on how to organize class material for courses in Chinese philosophy for predominately American students. Instead of selecting topics taken from common themes in Western discourses, I suggest a variety of organizational strategies based on themes from the Chinese texts themselves, such as tradition, ritual, family, and *guanxi* (關係), which are rooted in the Chinese tradition but flexible enough to organize a broad range of philosophical material.

Keywords: Chinese Philosophy; *Analects*; Thematic Organization; Ritual

The problem: Teaching Chinese Philosophy

Classical Chinese philosophical texts, especially the so-called “Masters Texts” like the *Analects*, the *Daodejing*, the *Xunzi*, and the *Zhuangzi*, can be difficult reading for American students encountering them for the first time. Some texts are perhaps easier to read than others. The *Mencius*, for example, offers self-contained stories that are both readily intelligible and also present discrete philosophical ideas, such as King Xuan swapping the ox on the way to slaughter for a sheep (1A7), and the importance of sympathetic response. But the Confucian tradition’s foundational text, the *Analects*, is considerably more difficult for new readers. Students’ first reaction is often bemusement, both at the meaning of the passages and at how such a text could ever be regarded as profound and important.

Reading these texts brings other problems. Most obviously, students usually take a class in Chinese philosophy with little prior knowledge of Asia, and this can be amplified if students are also taking their first philosophy class. The latter issue is not always problematic, however, if it saves students from reading the texts as if they were roughly equivalent to (bad) contemporary works in Anglo-American philosophy, searching out systematic arguments and growing frustrated at the apparent lack of clarity and order in the texts. Nevertheless, students can be underequipped to make productive sense of the *Analects*, with its unfamiliar concerns and unusual language. They might, for example, feel compelled to accept the interpretation and glosses offered by the instructor, feeling unable to challenge them. The challenge, then, is to bring the texts to life and make them alluring objects of reflection and discussion for students.

Possible Solutions

To address this problem of students making productive sense of a text like the *Analects*, various possible pedagogical strategies might be used. Perhaps the simplest is to embrace students’ unfamiliarity with the text and invite them to read and creatively interpret selected passages, asking for their (untutored) thoughts and responses. For example, students might reflect on the moral message of *Analects* 13.18—the well-known sheep-stealing passage—and discuss whether the son should

cover for his father's conduct, and whether they would similarly cover for their own parents' wrongdoing. However, while this method suits passages featuring vivid stories or events, it is of limited use for the more obtuse or abstract parts of the texts, which rarely yield such ready responses. Another method is to read multiple translations of a single passage, helping students by providing multiple interpretations and so increasing their chances of making productive sense of the text. Sometimes, however, this strategy can confuse students, since different translations can conflict sharply (such as on the question of whether Confucius is portrayed as conservative and backward looking or pragmatic and more innovative); and it can induce premature cynicism among students: if passages are open to such widely-varying interpretations then the text doesn't really mean anything because it can mean almost anything. No powerful vision of how to live can lie concealed in such a text. Furthermore, this approach can require substantial time, reducing the number of passages that can be studied in a course.

Perhaps the most familiar pedagogical strategy is to arrange lessons as a series of analyses of the key Confucian terms. These include *li* (ritual or observing ritual propriety), *ren* (human-heartedness or authoritative conduct), *junzi* (the gentleman or exemplary person), and *yi* (rightness, morality, or appropriateness). Such an approach has many strengths, not least that it encourages students to understand Chinese thought on its own terms, and how these terms relate to and inform each other (see Jones 2000). What I have to say is broadly sympathetic to this approach. However, the key terms approach also faces difficulties. The alien and abstract nature of the Chinese terms can mean students struggle to grasp terms like *yin-yang*, *dao*, *qi* (energy or psycho-physical matter), or *li* (ritual); and they might struggle to identify ideas or experiences that allow them to make sense of such terms.

An Alternative Approach

The approach I describe here serves to bridge the gap between the Chinese texts in their subtlety and otherness, and students' intellectual starting point. The classics draw heavily on particular themes or topics that are on the margins of "mainstream"

philosophy and infrequently discussed in so-called Western canonical texts. However, understanding these themes or topics can be crucial to appreciating the vision contained in texts such as the *Analects*. One of the tasks in teaching the classical texts is therefore to make students think carefully about these themes and topics. By encouraging explicit reflection on these themes, students can engage more deeply with the classical texts, and derive a richer set of imaginative connections from them.

What are these topics or themes? Before answering this, a clarification is necessary. An argument is sometimes made for treating early Chinese thought as presenting an entirely different worldview, with its own precepts and foundational ideas. Grasping the metaphysical assumptions of the tradition is a prerequisite for making the fullest sense of the texts. This is not the kind of alternative topic or theme that I have in mind. The approach outlined here is less metaphysical and more piecemeal. This is not to deny the importance of the debate over whether early Chinese thinkers are best understood by locating them within one or another larger conceptual framework—such as appealing to a processual worldview that contrasts with, for example, ancient Greek thinkers concerned with substance and natural kinds. Rather, we can approach the texts while postponing such questions for later or more advanced studies of Chinese philosophy. Here, I am most concerned with students encountering Chinese texts for the first time and who have no experience with metaphysics, Greek philosophy, or any other kind of philosophy. The themes and topics I have in mind are more mundane and everyday, and can bridge the gap between contemporary life, from which students start, and the alien ancient texts of early China. In fact, they are concepts accessible and present to the students already, though they might rarely be given much attention.

Exploring Neglected Themes and Topics

In what follows, for reasons of brevity and simplicity, I will limit discussion to the themes and topics relevant to the *Analects*, since this is often regarded as a seminal text, with other schools partly defined by their response to it. A similar list of

important themes or topics could be developed for other classical texts or schools; in the case of the *Zhuangzi*, for example, such themes would include death and absurdity.¹

Sticking with the *Analects*, the list of topics includes, but is not limited to: tradition, ritual, the family and personal connections, and the nature and value of aesthetic experience. In what follows, I want to sketch a methodology for how students can be stimulated to think through philosophical issues bound up in each of these topics and thereby be better prepared for an encounter with the *Analects*.

Some of these topics and themes will already be familiar to readers of Chinese thought because they map directly onto key words or debates explicitly presented in the classical texts. The idea of ritual or ritualized conduct, for example, maps directly onto the Chinese character *li* (禮), encountered throughout the *Analects*. (This does not mean, however, that the topic is widely discussed and well understood.) There are other important themes that do not translate readily into specific terms found in the *Analects*, but which are similarly important for a deeper engagement with the text. These include the importance of tradition and the value of aesthetic experience.

There is a further dimension to this task of illuminating the *Analects* for undergraduates, however. This is that some of the themes and concepts important to understanding early Confucian thought are neglected in most Western philosophy courses. Foundational courses that question the nature of reality and how knowledge of it is acquired, or the possible existence of a single creator divinity, do not readily transfer to a reading of the *Analects*. Discussions of tradition, ritual, and aesthetic experience are often missing from courses required for philosophy majors. Thus, even students schooled in the Western canon might struggle with the text. In teaching the *Analects*, then, we must first make more vivid and alive some of the

¹ Not all philosophical schools share the same themes and topics, though clearly some are widely shared areas of concern, such as the use of ritual. Other themes are more indicative of particular schools, such as the absurdism of Zhuangzi or the *Mozis*' interest in ghosts and spirits. Regardless of which texts are taught, developing a set of preparatory philosophical readings to help students engage with each theme remains the goal.

philosophical issues contained within, but which have not been introduced to the students in other philosophy classes, if they have taken any.

Methodology: Addressing the Lacuna

The above observations lead to a particular pedagogical approach to an introductory course on classical Chinese thought. A course or single section on the *Analects* could be organized around the above-mentioned themes, with each theme developed using a combination of approaches. These include, unsurprisingly, relevant *Analects* passages that address the theme (tradition, ritual, aesthetic experience, and so forth). But also included are readings that explore and unpack the philosophical issues and arguments relevant to that topic, including appropriate secondary readings in Chinese philosophy. Finally, if available, contemporary case studies or examples can be included, from news media or other sources. Most importantly, the secondary readings dealing with philosophical issues such as tradition or ritual need not be about Chinese thought or culture *per se*. Their purpose is not to explain particular passages, but rather to give the students a range of ideas and concepts pertinent to these themes, and to help them appreciate what follows if these are treated as the core of the intellectual framework through which action and the world are approached.

In order to further explain and illustrate this approach, I will briefly give a summary of how I have approached four of these themes that are central to the *Analects*. Let us start with the topic of tradition.

Tradition

There is little doubt that tradition is important to the early Confucians. Several passages allude to the importance of being familiar with the past as a prerequisite for influence in the present. This is well expressed by passage 2.11: “One who warms up the old to know the new can be considered a teacher.”²

² All quotations from the *Analects* are based on the Ames and Rosemont translation (1999), with some modifications.

Similarly, the text repeatedly emphasizes the role of history, the influence of ancient sage kings as moral exemplars, and the attractions of the Zhou dynasty (see, for example, 8.18–21). In 9.5, Confucius explicitly describes himself as an upholder of a tradition or culture: “With King Wen long dead, does not our cultural heritage reside here in us?”

However, there isn’t a keyword or term in the text that neatly expresses the idea of tradition, at least not in the way that the select group of terms mentioned above (*li, ren, junzi, yi*) frequently feature in surveys of Confucian philosophy. This absence means that effort is needed to make clearer the importance of tradition, and its various possible meanings and associations in the text.

One way to bring out the nuances and implications of tradition is to read a detailed discussion of the term. One such resource is Edward Shils’s 1960 classic, *Tradition*.³ In this book, Shils defines tradition as something, including objects and social practices, passed down from the past unto the present, whether they are explicitly identified as “tradition” or not. Understanding this helps students to think, for example, about tradition’s importance to social and political institutions, science, religion, and scholarship; and how it is partly constitutive of personal and communal identities. Further, as Shils points out, even forces that are usually contrasted positively with “oppressive” or “backward” traditions—such as science or business practices—can be seen as constituting, and so belonging to, traditions. For example, seeking ever-greater efficiency or improvement are themselves instances of propagated traditions, while what constitutes success can be similarly received notions. Appreciating this extended definition of tradition helps students to recognize that supposedly commonsense or universal truths—including seemingly timeless and universally necessary ones—might be the product of a particular tradition. Raising such questions is not intended to glorify tradition, however. Rather, it helps unpack the notion of tradition for students, allowing them to read the text more sympathetically and with greater awareness of their own prejudices.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1984) is another possible resource, especially Chapter 15, “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition.”

Ritual

Another theme central to the *Analects* is ritual or ritual propriety (*li*). An initial concern here is that students first approach *li* via their own experiences with ritual, and unfavorable associations attached to forced exposure to the most turgid kind of ritual practice. This might include being made to sit quietly and behave correctly during a lengthy religious ceremony, or an unappealing monthly childhood visit to a distant family relative. Ritual might thus be thought of as something constraining, which contrasts with valued notions of freedom and choice. Another starting consideration that might need to be addressed is that ritual can be understood as mere ceremony, such as weddings or funerals, events that, although perhaps pleasant in their own right, seem like isolated occurrences and somewhat removed from the more urgent demands of everyday life, such as finishing college, earning money, and finding employment.

Li (禮), or 'ritual,' is clearly a much richer set of experiences than such initial reactions recognize. The *Analects's* diverse discussions of the meaning and importance of the term suggest as much. *Analects* 12.1 alerts readers to the importance of ritualized conduct when it declares that, "Through. . . observing ritual propriety (*li*) one becomes authoritative in one's conduct (*ren*)." The text draws attention to many other dimensions of ritualized conduct. 3.12, for example, points to the importance of the attitude taken towards the rituals one engages in—in this case reverence and solemnity are inseparable from the meaning of *li*. The text also makes us think about the bodily dimensions of ritual (10.4) and questions such as: what observable effect does engaging in ritual have on a person, and what responses do we have when encountering someone solemnly engaged in it? The text also suggests that ritual is a means of restraining behavior and preventing excess. "Rulers should employ their ministers by observing ritual propriety" (3.19) suggests that ritual prevents the mistreatment of others by binding conduct to precedent and entrenched patterns of behavior—in the case of 3.19, it averts the danger of a ruler thinking he can do as he pleases.

As these passages suggest, it is important to alert students to the broad range of meanings of the Chinese term *li* beyond simply 'ritual.' *Li* is connected

to large-scale and elaborate ceremony, as well as more mundane and regular practices, with habit, and also with the psychological experiences and benefits of taking part in ritualized life. Alerting students to these different dimensions wakes them up to the value of *li*.

Course readings dealing explicitly with philosophical issues surrounding ritual and ritualized conduct help to bring out the variety and depth of these meanings. Anthropological surveys, including Catherine Bell's work on ritual, help overcome the idea that "ritual" refers to a very limited and specific area of human life, somewhat at odds with modernity.⁴ A scholar of Chinese religions, Bell outlines some of the basic characteristics of ritual-like behavior, such as being rule-governed, disciplined invariance, symbolic power, and performance. This enables students to appreciate the extent to which ritual pervades their everyday life, directing their public and private behavior in previously unnoticed ways. This includes examples as varied as interpersonal greetings, attending sporting events, and the comfort of daily or morning routines.

Seeing these features at work in their own lives reveals the power and rationality inherent in ritual. Students see how it bestows a sense of familiarity and homeliness on everyday life, or how it removes anxiety and uncertainty through the formation of habit-like routine, or aids efficiency by removing the need for prolonged thought. Further, shared participation in ritual or ceremony can create a communal identity, and a sense of mutual respect and deference. Students usually recognize this in the singing of a national anthem or participation in a community-wide social celebration, such as a national holiday like Thanksgiving. In creating such stability and mutual respect, ritual can produce results similar to those achieved by practices of debate and argument.

In all such ways, ritual serves as a social glue, even if its social function is not always acknowledged. In a community that prizes uniqueness and freedom, thinking carefully about ritual provides an important critical perspective on students'

⁴ See, for example, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, especially chapter 5. An alternative, and more challenging, discussion of ritual is found in Ray Rappaport's chapter "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual" in his *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (1979).

underlying assumptions and convictions, perhaps showing how such idealized descriptions of action can fail to capture how stable social life typically operates.

There is also much secondary reading within the field of Chinese philosophy that deals directly with ritual. Best known of these is perhaps Herbert Fingarette's 1972 book *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*.⁵ Fingarette's book is particularly useful because it enables students to weave the *Analects* passages on ritual together into a coherent, if contested, theory of human nature and the good life. One further teaching method to illuminate the theme of ritual is to assign short readings on ritual found in contemporary media and online. These add color and often provide vivid examples that stimulate discussion. A personal favorite is the recent study covered in the *New York Times* (2013), which suggests that food tastes better when consumed within some kind of ritualized framework.⁶

Aesthetic Experience

Another topic important to understanding the *Analects* is aesthetic experience. The *Analects* is a text that grants pleasurable or joyful experiences (*le* or *yue* 樂) a guiding role in conduct, often understood in musical terms. Delight is granted a higher status than intellectual achievement: "To like something is better than to just understand it, and to delight in it is better than to like it" (6.20). This is apparent from the number of times that music and delight appear in the text. One such passage is, "One stands to be improved by the delight found in attuning oneself to the rhythms of ritual propriety and music" (16.5). "Music" here should be understood broadly, to include musical activities such as singing and dancing, and is often a social event that brings people together. Perhaps the definitive image of such musical delight is Confucius joining in with the sung harmonies of his students (7.3), or declaring that his greatest desire is to bathe in the river with his students and then sing with them on the way home (11.26).

⁵ But see also, for example, Michael Ing's recent book *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (2012).

⁶ "Ritual Makes Our Food More Flavorful" (Published 9th August 2013): www.well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/rituals-make-our-food-more-flavorful/?smid=pl-share&_r=0&pagewanted=print

This appreciation of aesthetic experience is expressed in one of the highest Confucian ideals—harmony (*he* 和). This is also arguably best understood as an aesthetic ideal, indicating the successful blending together of social, political, and ritualistic dimensions of human life. For the former sage kings, the “achievement of harmony makes them elegant, and this was a guiding standard in all things large and small” (1.12). There are two classical metaphors for harmony in the early texts, both expressed in terms of achieving a certain quality of experience (in the realm of either taste or sound)—the blending of fine soup and the making of harmonious music.⁷ Achieving such harmony requires sensing when an appropriate balance of constitutive elements has been reached, and this is something that no general principle can determine.

To appreciate the importance of such an aesthetic sensibility in the text, students should be helped to think about what aesthetic experience is—what counts as an “aesthetic” experience, rather than, say, the attempt to reason logically or analyze a problem—and why it is valuable. Students typically have not had much chance to think about aesthetic experience prior to encountering the text. They might, for example, associate “aesthetics” with objects of art found in museums. If they have taken a philosophy course in aesthetics, they might quickly associate “aesthetics” with accounts provided by canonical figures, such as Immanuel Kant’s account of the disinterested contemplation of beauty. On this view, a clear separation exists between observing subject and object, and the formal properties inherent in the object itself. Clearly, the *Analects* does not pay much attention to that kind of aesthetic experience. It does, however, pay attention to another form of aesthetic experience or sensibility, an understanding of which helps students to make sense of the many passages on music and delight.

In the *Analects*, aesthetic experience permeates everyday life and social interactions rather than belonging to a narrow, specific kind of activity such as the consumption of art; it can even guide action. This alternative account focuses on the

⁷ For an overview of the role of harmony in Confucian thought, and accounts of both musical and culinary harmony, see Chenyang Li (2006, 2008).

creation of shared social events, where the aesthetic experience has its source not in a discrete beautiful object but in a shared social experience, which draws upon emotions, context and place, understanding, and more obviously aesthetic factors like music. Simply stated, the *Analects* offers the idea that we should think about a large proportion of our lives in aesthetic terms, which includes both sensory experience and affective experiences such as delight.⁸

This alternative understanding of aesthetics is not something unique to the *Analects*, however. Philosophers have explored such alternative ways of thinking about aesthetic experience, and a body of writing in the Anglo-American tradition seeks to describe an enlarged notion of the aesthetic. John Dewey's *Art As Experience* is one well-known starting point for this view. Contemporary thinkers, such as Sherri Irvin (2008), have also explored how aesthetic experience permeates everyday life. It is, Irvin argues, to be found in such everyday experiences as enjoying the pleasurable, tactile sensation of stroking a lap cat, or admiring the peculiar patterns that vehicle tracks make in a muddy field.

To further enrich students' feel for the importance of the category of the aesthetic in classical texts, it is also helpful to introduce them to elementary readings in Chinese art and aesthetics. This alerts them to how the more formal properties of art, such as shape and form, merge fluidly with symbolic meaning, how emotion is expressed through brush strokes, and the link between personal cultivation and artistic expression. This includes, for example, how calligraphy is taken to be the direct expression of personal character, as the lines drawn correlate directly with the emotions of the painter or calligrapher—agitated and energetic, calm and confident,

⁸ Although not found in the *Analects*, the *Zhongyong* (often known as the *Doctrine of the Mean*) contains a passage that neatly expresses the Confucian view of the centrality of affective experience to the human subject, one that can serve as a starting point for thinking about an enlarged notion of the aesthetic: "Happiness and anger, sorrow and joy; before they arise this is called balanced; arising in the proper rhythms (*jie* 節) this is called harmonious (*he* 和). Balanced, this is the great root of the world; harmonious, this is the ultimate path of the world. Reaching balanced harmony, the heavens and earth take their proper place and the myriad things and events of the world are thereby nurtured." (Sec. 1, trans. Eno 2010)

and so forth. Li Zehou's book, *The Path of Beauty* (1993), is a challenging but insightful account of the evolution of aesthetic awareness in the classical period.⁹

Bringing together the *Analects* passages relating to aesthetic experience and philosophical discussions of the topic, both China and non-China focused, helps students to unpack what might otherwise be an overlooked dimension of the text. Collectively, these readings make clear the connections between what might be called aesthetic sensibilities and social order or personal conduct.

The Family

The family is perhaps the *Analects* theme most familiar to students. Even so, there is still scope for enriching the students' resources for thinking about it, and its role in the *Analects*. The text implies that the family is somehow the causal root of both the best kind of person and the best society. Immersion in the family is directly responsible for a person becoming *ren*—good, cultivated, or consummate—and for the maintenance of social stability and prosperity. *Analects* 1.2 makes this explicit: “. . . Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁).”

It is, however, difficult to determine just what this causal connection is: What exactly is created or nurtured through the family that has such an important effect on wider society? Is it just the habit of nonconfrontation and subservience? Or is it, for example, a form of psychological strength, as in a confidence that family members will always cover one's interests (as the sheep-stealing case in 13.18 suggests), and how this confidence might translate into social ambition and authority? Readings can help unpack this and other issues about family and filial piety. These might include secondary readings on the Chinese family, such as Vance Cope-Kasten's (2001) account of the relation between the Chinese family and philosophy, or a

⁹ A reading of Li's book, at least the early chapters, might be supplemented with readings focusing directly on the features of Chinese art—brushwork, the use of calligraphy in painting, etc. See, for example, Leni Rubenstein's "The Great Art of China's 'Soundless Poems.'"

more sociologically-orientated piece such as Richard Madsen's (2002) on the changing nature of the Chinese family through the centuries.

Philosophical discussions that focus explicitly on the family, whether Confucian or otherwise, are also worth inclusion. Jane English's (2011) article, "What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?" is helpful here, since it prompts students to personally confront the question of what a child owes to its parents (Everything, on account of bringing one into existence? Nothing, since no consent was given for this? Or something, since a debt exists that can eventually be paid off?). This debate leads directly to the possible meanings of *xiao* (孝, often translated as filial piety), and whether it consists merely in obedience and gratitude to parents—in which case the Confucian tradition seems conservative and even potentially oppressive—or whether *xiao* encompasses a richer set of experiences and more complex relationships. Some elements of the latter might include taking responsibility for others' welfare, remonstrating with them to improve their conduct, and experiencing a tenderness and awe towards older, more experienced members of society. Readings should aim to unpack this complexity, and some useful ones include Sor-hoon Tan's (2012) and Alan Chan's (2012) articles in their coedited volume, *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History*. Finally, the family is a particularly appropriate topic for the introduction of criticisms of Confucian social ethics, and Ba Jin's (1972) popular novel, *Family*, does this while providing relief from denser readings.

Conclusion

Other topics and themes could be added to this list, including readings dealing with shame, the sacred, and yielding or deference. The above discussion is merely intended to outline the general approach. As noted, it can also be repeated for other texts in an introductory course, such as the *Zhuangzi* and the *Mozi* (Mohists), to increase student interest and provoke richer interpretations of the texts. It does have limitations, however. Insofar as it encourages students to understand the texts by references to works and discussions originating outside the Chinese tradition, there is a danger that understanding of the texts is gained by imposing concepts and a cultural framework that distorts or obscures valuable aspects of them. We might fail

to “let the texts speak for themselves.” Perhaps, then, this approach is best thought of as a bridging strategy, helping students to make the leap into the world of classical Chinese thinkers; it prepares students for more advanced courses that focus more directly on core concepts like *ren* 仁 (humaneness or consummate conduct), *yi* 義 (rightness or appropriateness), *tian* 天 (natural, divine, or heaven-like), and *qi* 氣 (psycho-physical energy). As the difficulty of translating these terms suggests, perhaps students need the broad grounding in Confucian ideas that this method provides before they attempt to reconstruct the worldview implicit in such disputed terms. And for those students that never get to a second Chinese philosophy class, the method described here provides them with a solid introduction to the world of thought in ancient China.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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Andrew Lambert is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at City University of New York, College of Staten Island. His research focuses primarily on contemporary ethical theory and Chinese philosophy. He is interested in the relationship between conceptions of moral conduct and personal attachment, especially the intersection of Confucian ethics and the ethics of care. He is currently working on a translation of a book by contemporary Chinese thinker Li Zehou, to be published in 2017.

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