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CHINESE PHILOSOPHY: THE PHILOSOPHER AS ACTIVIST

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Abstract: In contemporary academic philosophy, Chinese Philosophy remains a niche. This has a lot to do with its presentation, which often creates an impression of alienness and allegory, making its contribution, especially to analytical questions, not obvious. This paper examines how a change in presentation eases the inclusion of Chinese Philosophy into the mainstream. On the assumption that there has been an "activist turn" in the discipline in general, philosophical interest in a tradition that ranges from conceptual analysis, to ethics and politics, but that is ultimately focused on motivating actions, becomes more relevant and pressing. Since, in much of Chinese Philosophy, the philosopher is an activist, if the wider discipline is indeed undergoing an "activist turn", then there is a connection here that should be made. In this paper, the connection is explained using two examples, Mozi and Xu Fuguan.
Keywords: presentation; Chinese Philosophy; Mozi; Xu Fuguan; activism.

Introduction: Presentation as problem for Chinese Philosophy

Often, Chinese Philosophy is perceived as something alien to the contemporary academic discipline. Its ideas seem difficult to grasp. Take, as an example, the *Dao*, or Way, referring to a natural structure of the world including language; or the principle of *Wu-Wei*, or action in inaction, denoting how something can be well done by not putting any effort into doing it (for an accessible introduction, see Littlejohn, 2016). These ideas seem difficult to relate to contemporary issues in North-Atlantic, especially analytic, philosophy. Chinese Philosophy is further perceived as allegorical, cosmological, with a special fondness for conceptual brooding as influenced by personal rivalries between masters of yore (the literature on this perception is vast, refer, for example, to Behuniak, 2021; Sun, 2019).

This (re-) presentation of Chinese Philosophy might be – indeed is – unfair and wrong, it is, however, an important factor explaining its general relegation to a niche in the North-Atlantic discipline (see Defoort, 2020). Refer, for example, to the presence of Chinese Philosophy in the main program of the American Philosophical Association's (APA) meetings. In the last decades, if at all, most meetings feature not more than one dedicated session to it. Defoort (2017) surveys the state of inclusion of Chinese Philosophy in Europe; and Bruya (2015) in the US. Both deplore the marginal status they infer from the data.

At the same time, philosophy is arguably undergoing a shift towards activism. A quick overview of the blog of the APA reveals "activist" issues of concern: the relation between races and genders, the status of minorities, the (re-)definition of the canon, the police, as well as, political and moral philosophy at-large. A similar impression is gained when surveying the APA's newsletters or its webinars. Additionally, the number of resolutions, petitions, declarations et al. proposed by philosophy faculty has significantly increased in the last decade. With this "activist turn", research areas related to activism such as ethical, social, and political theory are becoming more prominent inside and outside academic philosophy (for discussions and data, see Boland, 2018; Massumi, 2017; Spera & Peña-Guzmán, 2019; Thiele et al., 2021).

Whether this shift or turn is one in paradigm, research program, or the result of one or several biases, and whether it is beneficial or detrimental to the discipline as a whole, are important research questions. However, they are outside of the scope of this paper. Here, a different line of inquiry relating to this shift is pursued. *Assuming* there is an "activist turn" in academic philosophy, how could it impact the standing of Chinese Philosophy within the discipline?

This paper claims that the "activist turn" in academic philosophy is an opportunity for Chinese Philosophy, which could lead to it gaining a more important role in the mainstream of the discipline. The vector from conceptual analysis to ethics and politics to motivate actions is central to much of Chinese Philosophy. This vector touches many of the above-mentioned issues articulated in "activism." The presentation of Chinese Philosophy as something practical, political, in search of sociability, and grounded in ethics, is better understood in activist terms rather than as a pure analytical program.

This paper uses two examples to present the activist streak in Chinese Philosophy. Mo Di, or, Mozi (c. 470 – c. 391 BCE) was not only a philosopher, but the leader of a community of people engaging in thinking, politicizing, and even fighting according to their philosophy. Their main tenet was indiscriminate care for others. Xu Fuguan (1902/03 – 1982) was a philosopher taking an active role in intermediating between the two Chinas, and between them and Japan. He later built up the academic institutions needed to study philosophy in Taiwan. His main interpretation of Confucianism sees it as a fundamentally humanistic and democratic philosophy. Both Mozi and Xu can be studied as activists operating within a spectrum that ranges from analytical conceptualization to ethical and political issues but which is ultimately focused on motivating them to act and connect with other people, forming networks of study and action.

Presenting Chinese Philosophers as activists who created communities by inspiring other people to act in accordance to their philosophical thoughts resonates well with the apparently shifting paradigm in contemporary philosophy. Also, the philosophical investigations of these two examples and their practical implications as regards policy advice offer insights and resources for contemporary discussions in ethics, social, or political philosophy. In this way, the content of Chinese Philosophy can be presented as something actual, relevant, and which connects thought with action. In this narrative, the focus shifts away from discussing "only" ideas and towards embedding them in the activist community. This presentation can incorporate historical artifacts, photography, film, and websites (in case of Xu), or experiments (in case of Mozi). This focus also broadens the scope of presentation by allowing it to incorporate the relation of war and pacifism (in case of Mozi) or tensions

between China and Taiwan (in case of Xu). This mode of presentation is not about the biography of some thinkers. It is about showing how actions follow from philosophical analysis and how philosophy itself can be understood as a call for action.

First Example: Mozi – Impartial Care and Social Organization

Mo Di, (Mozi, "Master Mo," c. 470 – c. 391 BCE) is the founding figure of Mohism, an influential philosophical, social, and military movement during the Warring States era (479–221 BCE) in China. The teachings of Mohism are recorded in the book *Mozi*. While the book is attributed to Mo Di, it really is a compilation of his teachings as well as his followers' interpretations and additions. Core tenets of Mohism are pacifism, state-consequentialism, and egalitarianism.

Mohist ethics puts the egalitarian concept of *jian ai* at its center. *Jian* means together, or jointly; and *ai* means love, or care. *Jian ai* has been translated into English as "universal love" as well as "impartial care", the latter being more adequate. It has a special meaning of "equally distributing," for example, care, among all members of a society. This meaning is especially important in the Chinese context. The main adversaries of Mohism were the Confucians who advocated for a differentiated care. For them, one should care first and more for one's own family. In Mohism, care should be indiscriminate and extend to all people equally. The Mohist reason was consequentialist: if care would be equally extended to all, the whole of society would profit. There are two central moments to Mohist *jian ai* (following Fraser, 2016):

First, it is a dispassionate concern about the welfare of others. Some background on how this definition fits into the overall Mohist perspective further elucidates this meaning of *jian ai*: Mohists argue that the cause of the world's troubles lies in people's tendency to act out of a greater regard for their own welfare than that of others, and that of associates over that of strangers, with the consequence that they often have no qualms about benefiting themselves or their own associates at the expense of others. The conclusion is that people ought to be concerned for the welfare of others without making distinctions between self, associates, and strangers.

Second, it has the connotation of including everyone in society together within a whole. The Mohist project is a social one. It wants to establish a strong society, which in turn, works to the advantage of all its members. However, to establish this strong communal organization, its members must be treated as equals, for example by not distinguishing between nobility and commoners or between family members and outsiders.

This conception of ethics is closely related to the way of life led and advocated by Mo Di. Being an activist, he traveled among the various contending states of his time to present his ideas before their rulers. While he hoped to obtain political employment, he also wanted to spread his teachings. *Jian ai*, as an ethical tenet, has political implications, the most important being pacifism and the rule of law, understood as legal principles being applied to all people equitably. History tells us that Mo Di was successful in propagating both goals.

However, presenting his ideas via personal contacts with rulers and bureaucrats was only one part of his work. The other was to connect people. He initiated communities, i.e. local "cells", or, groups of people dedicated to living, learning, and acting together. In this part of his work he was successful, having created several of these communities that lasted, in

some cases, for two centuries. Because *jian ai* is an ethical tenet, it also demands concrete actions by those following it. These communities committed to ten theses ascribed to "Our Teacher Master Mo" specifying what *jian ai* is and how to live by it. They not only advanced the Mohist teachings, but also functioned as a "benevolent society", and even a "rescue organization" that dispatched members trained in defensive military techniques to the aid of small states under threat from military aggressors. For Mohists, as long as pacifism had not been established, one needed to be able to protect one's community (Lowe, 1992).

It is revealing to put Mo Di and these Mohist communities in a perspective capturing both their importance at the time, and also for the contemporary representation of Chinese Philosophy. It was not unusual for individual philosophers to travel in the Warring States Period. The philosopher was an enactor of philosophy, trying to persuade rulers, bureaucrats, and other people of doctrines. Kong Zi (Confucius), Han Feizi, and many others engaged in the same activities. It was also usual to form communities of like-minded members living and studying together. Confucians and Daoists, among others, entertained thriving communities. People would join them for two closely related reasons: first, to learn from the philosopher-master (paying tuition), and, second, to gain employment in a ruler's court (because of the pedigree of having studied under a master) (Feng, 2013; Pines, 2008).

The Mohist communities went a step further by providing help to people in need of defense in case of a military attack. Members of these communities were not interested in becoming officers at a court, or bureaucrats; rather, they wanted to live together and act on the principles of Mohism. In an unsympathetic comment, the book *Zhuangzi* describes Mohist communities as follows:

> Many of the Mohists of later ages wear furs and rough clothing, clogs and grass slippers, never resting day or night, taking self-sacrifice as the highest. They say, "One who cannot do this is not following the way of Yu and doesn't deserve to be called a Mohist." […] They press each other forward in self-sacrifice until there's no flesh left on their calves or hair on their shins (Watson, *Zhuangzi*, 33, "Under Heaven").

This quote reveals three aspects of Mohists' lives. First, it claims that they practiced self-sacrifice because of the philosophical principles according to which they lived – something unusual among other schools of thought. Second, it suggests that living together was more than merely provisional, but a permanent arrangement for its members who apparently swapped their familial and other relationships for the Mohist community. Finally, it also suggests that the aim of the members of the community was to remain there and not to gain employment in a court. These three elements are peculiar to Mohism.

Mo Di's *jian ai* is, at the same time, a philosophical concept, an ethical doctrine, a political program, and a call for action. Mo Di and his followers understood their philosophy as action and became activists. Sometimes they dedicated their whole life to their cause. This activism is the result of a series of policies going back to an ethical concept. Presenting Mohism against this activist background enables a new access to this and other strands of Chinese Philosophy as a philosophy in dialogue with society, one which presents a way of living and doing.[1]

[1] While there are not many materials on this presentation of Mohism yet, it is worthwhile mentioning the movie "A Battle of Wits (2006)", based on the Japanese historical novel "Bokkō" by Ken'ichi

Second Example: Xu Fuguan – New Confucianism and Confucian Democracy

Xu Fuguan (1902/03 – 1982) was a Chinese philosopher and historian who made notable contributions to Confucian studies. He was a leading figure of New Confucianism. This intellectual movement advocates for certain Confucian elements of society to be applied in a contemporary context in synthesis with North-Atlantic philosophies, such as rationalism and democracy. While there are different types of positions in New Confucianism, its main tenet is that traditional Confucianism can be brought into a fruitful dialogue with other, non-Chinese philosophies (Makeham, 2003). Xu's type of New Confucianism is an engagement, in particular, with John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith. He was interested in the combination of moral self-cultivation, and analysis of prosperity and property, which he saw as a common theme unifying those philosophers with Confucianism (Huang, 2019).

After growing up in a rural village, Xu went to the city of Wuhan, an important staging area for the 1911 Republican Revolution that ended China's last dynasty, the Qing. There, he enlisted in the Republican Army, where he spent 15 years rising through the ranks from soldier to colonel, and gaining direct access to the leader of the Nationalist Kuomintang Chiang Kai-shek. In his formative years, he also spent some time in Japan, studying. At first, he was entrusted with organizing cooperation between the Nationalist and Communists Republicans – the two main armed factions in the struggle for a Chinese republic. He then left the army to become a teacher and active politician serving as political advisor to Chiang Kai-shek, following him to Taiwan with the Nationalist retreat in 1949. While not an enthusiast of the nationalist policies of the time, he considered them more in tune with what he considered to be Confucian humanism than others (Sernelji, 2019). He also thought that the establishment of a Confucian democracy was more likely in the Republic of China (Taiwan) than in the communist People's Republic of China (Mainland) – a project he would see come to fruition, although he would become estranged from Taiwanese politics.

Still with the goal of renewing China in mind, Xu realized that connecting like-minded agents to form a network of people sharing the core of his outlook was more promising than working alone. He understood education as the steppingstone for the advancement of his philosophical ideas and as a place to create and maintain networks. He therefore used his influence in Taiwan and Hong Kong to build up universities and philosophy departments, as well as middle schools and other educational institutions. Xu was also a prolific writer of both academic and popular pieces.

Understanding writing as philosophical activism, he was a driving force behind the 1958 "Manifesto on Chinese Culture" (Harris, 2014) that is viewed by many scholars as a crowning achievement of New Confucianism. The declaration urges philosophers of all backgrounds to learn about Chinese culture, claiming that without a proper understanding of it, perceptions of China would be distorted, and the Chinese would have no future (Elstein, 2021). Xu also wanted to overcome the rivalries between East Asian nations after World War II. He

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Sakemi. Both, the novel and the movie, try to show the before-mentioned spectrum of interests at work. The special issue of *The Philosophical Forum Quarterly* (issue 51, 2020) on the philosophy of the Mozi applies the activist framework for analyzing the political philosophy of Mohism (Harris & Schneider, 2020). In terms of contemporary issues, Mohism adds resources to the discussion of social equality, public order, the relationship of peace and its armed enforcement, as well as the treatment of minorities.

continued pursuing a constructive engagement between Communist and National China, as well as campaigning for the democratization and approximation of China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. The rise of what he perceived as Confucian-inspired democracies in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea made him hope to see the same happen in China. In Xu's New Confucian view, the whole Confucian world would unite around humanism and democracy.

Xu's educational and political activism came from his understanding of Confucian philosophy, which he began developing in Wuhan and in the army. Two philosophical claims comprise the core of Xu's philosophy, an emphasis on moral self-cultivation and the possibility of a Confucian democracy. Xu believed that the emphasis on moral self-cultivation in Confucianism is the manifestation of the Chinese humanistic spirit. According to him, in Chinese Philosophy, people feel responsible for overcoming difficulties by their own efforts – as individuals as well as communities. Responsibility especially entails a duty of improving one's own moral quality to achieve autonomy and freedom. It also requires putting a premium on education. In contrast to religion, rather than placing the agent's sense of responsibility on a deity, ancient Chinese culture stressed the cultivation of the individual's heart-mind developing self-reliance, and, as a result, forming ethical and moral systems. Thus, ancient Chinese virtues stressed the importance of regulating society and human relations by building on individual and relational virtues, such as *jing* (reverence), *li* (rules of propriety), and *ren* (human heartedness, mutuality) as a means to focus on real world issues. Xu wanted to "rescue" these virtues and implement them in the contemporary world. In Locke, Hume, and Smith he recognized resources to transport ancient Chinese Philosophy into the contemporary discipline (of his time). According to Xu, they share not only a similarity in research focus but also inculcate in the philosopher a predisposition to act, by understanding philosophy as a call for action. One of the main objects of this call is that of instituting democracy (Huang, 2019; Elstein, 2021).

Xu makes a two-fold argument for the relationship between Confucianism and democracy: Confucianism by nature has elements of liberal democracy and it has the possibility of forming and strengthening a liberal-democratic society. Xu relies on the concept of "the people as foundation", an idea championed by the Early Confucian, Mengzi (Mencius), to advocate for human dignity and equality. In addition, Xu urges that one should not mistake Confucianism as being more consistent with despotism due to the long history of Confucian imperial rule, and instead, one should view it as having been unable to develop due to historical factors. Specifically, Xu claims that the emergence of autocracy in the Qin dynasty[2] inhibited the development of democracy in China and devalued the people. Xu also maintained that democracy should indeed have a rule of law, protect freedom, and hold elections, while, at the same time, he espoused the Confucian idea of "rule by virtue." In his view, Confucian democracy could address some problems of contemporary liberal-democratic societies, especially the exploitation of laws in attaining one's selfish gains. Xu believed that government should be more limited in interfering with morality, as he stated that moral subjectivity is secondary and cannot replace the "primary value," or, the value of human life.

[2] Not to be confused with the Qing, mentioned at the beginning of this paper – for more details on how legalism superseded Confucianism see Schneider (2018).

In Xu's view, there is a natural vector leading from individual and communal responsibility, to individual and transactional virtues, to a democracy in which individuals are morally empowered to share political power and to decide. This vector is firmly rooted in what he called Chinese Humanism. This humanism is a body of ideas containing specific ethical and political ideas motivating agents to engage in the social body. Correspondingly, the philosopher is called upon to become active within and outside academia, connecting people, advancing explicit political agendas, and spreading the ideas that change individual actions and society.

Presenting Xu Fuguan to a contemporary audience is facilitated by the continuing relevance of many of his interests, for example the relationship of Confucianism and democracy, the People's Republic of China's policies towards its neighbors, and competing definitions of Humanism in philosophy, such as in the philosophy of education. Xu's writings, as such, are thereby made more accessible, especially since some of his more activist papers were written in English. Also, there is much photographic material, oral history, and many of his friends and followers are still alive. The previously mentioned "Manifesto" offers a unique insight into the politics of Early Communist and Nationalist China, as well as into the diversity of Chinese Philosophy in the 20th century.

Conclusion: Activism as a Presentation of Chinese Philosophy

Mo Di and, more than two thousand years after him, Xu Fuguan, understood philosophy as the combination of analytic discourse, ethics, politics, and calls for action. From their perspectives, the philosopher is an activist. This is not because of an ideological preference, but out of philosophical necessity. There is a vector leading from philosophical analysis to ethics and politics, thereby motivating action, including communal action. The philosopher does not act alone but connects and creates networks inside and outside academia. Philosophy is the study of ideas and the actions that follow from them.

This is a common trait of much of Chinese Philosophy from its earlier thinkers to its contemporary exponents. This aspect has been neglected by the common framework in which academic philosophy is usually conducted in the North-Atlantic tradition. However, if this framework is indeed undergoing a turn towards a more activist approach, then – independently of the question of the desirability or otherwise of this shift – this provides an opportunity for a fresh presentation of Chinese Philosophy. This presentation stresses the continuum of analysis, ethics, politics, and action. While reducing, thus, the degree of foreignness of Chinese Philosophy, this approach also leads to the understanding of philosophy as a discipline including its practical application of unlocking new resources for many contemporary issues, especially in ethical, social, and political theory.

Of course, this paper just touched the presentation of Chinese Philosophy in the "activist turn" using two examples. Much more remains to be said about the presentation itself and about the philosophies mentioned here. Also several other "activist-sages" could have been discussed, to name a few, Kongzi (Confucius), Wang Yangming, or Hu Shi. The aim of the paper is, however, is to offer a presentation of Chinese Philosophy that might resonate with the changing approach in the discipline at large – assuming that it is changing – which could lead to strengthening of the standing of Chinese Philosophy. The philosopher as an activist is an interesting part of a rich tradition of *doing* philosophy.

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