

# RECONSTRUCTING CHINESE METAPHYSICS

JeeLoo Liu

***Abstract:** This paper calls for a reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics that recognizes the distinct features of Chinese worldview, while at the same time explores the speculative thinking behind the dominant ethical concerns in Chinese philosophy. It suggests some research topics for constructing a Chinese moral metaphysics, without turning it into a metaphysical ethics – the difference between the two is that the former is fundamentally “truth-pursuing” while the latter is “good-pursuing.” This paper argues that even though Chinese metaphysics is deeply connected with concerns for human flourishing, it is not just a study of nature for the sake of practical living. Furthermore, although Chinese metaphysics is different from traditional Western metaphysics, it is not incommensurable with it. There are many interesting metaphysical topics that can be investigated within Chinese philosophical texts. This is a project that looks in to the future of the development of Chinese metaphysics, not a backward-looking study into the history of Chinese cosmological thinking.*

## I. Background

To establish the relevance of Chinese philosophy in the contemporary philosophical discourse, a project that is greatly wanting is a systematic reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics. To engage in this project, we need to bypass the fruitless debate on whether there is metaphysics (including both cosmology and ontology) in Chinese philosophy, and take the presence of Chinese metaphysics as our starting point. There are many contemporary Chinese scholars who argue against aligning Chinese *xing(er)shangxue* with Western *metaphysics*, since the two studies have different goals, scopes, and methodologies. Western metaphysics is a pursuit of the transcendental realm (Yu 1999), is “metaphysics of nature” (Zhao 2006), is “truth-pursuing” (Yu & Xu 2009), while Chinese metaphysics is concerned merely with transcending individuals’ conditions of existence, is “metaphysics of ethics,” and is “good-pursing.” However, such a division is unwarranted as there are still many shared underlying concerns for the world beyond individual human existence. As Zhao Dunhua argues, “... reasons for the denial of, or doubt about, the existence of Chinese metaphysics are not tenable” (Zhao 2006, 23). Robert C. Neville also points out: “Metaphysics in the usual senses of that Western term is not always an obvious topic area within traditional Chinese philosophies. Nevertheless, various Chinese philosophers have addressed issues that have occupied the Western metaphysical imagination, and in the Neo-Confucian writers these have been addressed systematically. So it is in fact possible to write about Chinese metaphysics in connection with Western metaphysics” (Neville 2003, 313). If we overemphasize the differences and conclude that there is no

*metaphysics* in Chinese philosophy, we are simply dismissing the rich resources in classical Chinese philosophical texts that have yet to be systematically analyzed and explored. As Shi Zhonglian points out:

In highlighting the difference between Chinese and Western philosophies, to deny the presence of ontology in the former is understandable. But [the] outright negation without considering how Chinese philosophers discuss similar ideas or theories in their distinct ways will devalue Chinese philosophy, or worse, result in its expulsion from the great disciplinary house of philosophy. (Shi 2006, 189)

In the early twentieth century, around the time when Logical Positivists launched an attack on the meaningfulness of metaphysics in the West, contemporary New-Confucians such as XIONG Shili (1885-1968), FENG Youlan (1895-1990), JIN Yuelin (1895-1984) and He Lin (1902-1992) undertook the task of reconstructing Chinese metaphysics. These New-Confucians were all well versed in Western philosophy, and they saw that an important foundation for Western philosophy was exactly its metaphysics originated in Aristotle. They understood that to legitimize Chinese philosophical heritage as philosophy (*zhexue*), there had to be a systematic construction of Chinese metaphysics as an essential part of Chinese philosophy. In these Contemporary New-Confucians' opinion, constructing Chinese metaphysics would be the most essential issue in establishing the self-identity of Chinese philosophy. Metaphysics represents each philosophical heritage's fundamental pursuit of ultimate reality. It is closely tied up with human values and cultural spirit. New-Confucians in the twentieth century devoted their effort to constructing various forms of metaphysics. To establish the relevance of Chinese philosophy to the contemporary philosophical discourse, we must also endeavor to reconstruct Chinese metaphysics that not only represents the Chinese philosophical heritage and human values, but also addresses the fundamental problems of our times.

## II. Metaphysics versus Science

Metaphysics and science can both be said to be concerned with the true nature of our reality, but the two approaches are at times disconnected, and at times even incompatible, with each other. Many philosophers have taken the position that metaphysics is purely speculative, which is not restricted to the experiential world, while science is grounded in observation and is empirically based. Logical Positivists attacked metaphysics because its language is not subject to the criterion of verifiability. Carnap called for the elimination of metaphysics on account of the charge that metaphysics cannot generate meaningful descriptive statements: "The (pseudo)statements of metaphysics do not serve for the description of states of affairs, neither

existing ones ... nor non-existing ones. They serve for the *expression of the general attitude of a person toward life*" (Carnap 1932, 78). Chinese metaphysics, whether it is XIONG Shili's metaphysics or FENG Youlan's metaphysics, would probably all fall into Carnap's category of "expression of the general attitude of a person toward life." This feature should not be seen as a problem for Chinese metaphysics, since it is not aimed to be a branch of science. Contemporary New-Confucians were aware of the challenges science could bring to their metaphysics. XIONG Shili, for example, claimed that all other studies could fall into the domain of science, except for ontology, the study of ultimate reality (*benti*). Science has no claim on ultimate reality, because science only deals with the phenomenal world. Philosophy, on the other hand, has ultimate reality as its proper subject; therefore, metaphysics is the groundwork of philosophy. FENG Youlan also thought that the kind of metaphysics rejected by Logical Positivists is the old metaphysics of the West, and he wanted to establish a different form of metaphysics that incorporates notions of *principle (li)*, *dao*, *qi*, etc.

There is now a new trend in metaphysics, *naturalized metaphysics*, which regards metaphysics as continuous with science, and argues that metaphysical positions must be grounded in methodology that is scientifically respectable. A group of philosophers, including Carl Gillett, Robert Wilson, Andrew Melnyk and Thomas Polger, to name a few, formed the *society for the metaphysics of science*. It currently has over seventy active metaphysicians among its members. The metaphysics of science is "neither transcendental nor aprioristic since it takes its foundation in the sciences."<sup>1</sup> It is interested in issues such as causality, causal power, natural laws, natural kinds, properties, disposition, constitution, reductionism, and so on and so forth. Some of the metaphysicians of science want to use physics as a guide for metaphysics, while some argue that physicalism, the view that all things should ultimately be explainable in physical terms since everything that exists is physical, is the only legitimate ontology. They all hold the view that current physical theory is the only valid starting point for metaphysics if one wants to establish any credible theory about ultimate reality. To these philosophers, Chinese metaphysics will certainly lack plausibility and legitimacy.

To deal with this challenge, we need to remind contemporary analytic metaphysicians that naturalized metaphysics or the metaphysics of science is not the only legitimate metaphysical approach. As a matter of fact, science and metaphysics have traditionally been treated as separate pursuits, even though they share some common subject matter. Metaphysics and science should inform each other and engage in conversation, but science should not be placed as the referee of metaphysical views, nor can it ever replace

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/socmetsci/metaphysics-of-science>

metaphysics. Naturalized metaphysics may contribute to a healthy discourse in philosophy of science, but it falls short of offering insights on the nature of human existence, the meaning of human life and the values of human world. If metaphysics is to be a study of ultimate reality beyond science, then it should not exclude these humanistic concerns. Ultimately, even the progress of science has to be couched in the humanistic context. As Erwin Schrodinger, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, pointed out:

There is a tendency to forget that all science is bound up with human culture in general, and that scientific findings, even those which at the moment appear the most advanced and esoteric and difficult to grasp, are meaningless outside their cultural context. A theoretical science ... where this is forgotten, ... will necessarily be cut off from the rest of cultural mankind; in the long run it is bound to atrophy and ossify however virulently esoteric that may continue within its joyfully isolated groups of experts. (cited by Michael Bradie, See Bradie 1985, 372)

YANG Guorong also argues, “From the historical point of view, science has never been separated from human existence: the needs of humans prove to be the most important incentive for the origin and development of science, and obviously such needs are also related to moral values” (Yang 2002, 79). A delicate task that falls in our hands is to find topics and issues that could relate metaphysics to science, without losing their connections with ethics and moral values.

### III. Fundamental Differences between Western Metaphysics and Chinese Metaphysics

To reconstruct a systematic Chinese metaphysics that has plausibility in the contemporary philosophical discourse, a major difficulty is to recognize some fundamental differences in the basic assumptions of contemporary analytic metaphysics and Chinese metaphysics. The Chinese worldview is an integrated system of subject and object: the individual is placed in the spatial/temporal location of the world, with her experience, values and expectations constantly shaping as well as being shaped by the world. I will list four sets of fundamental differences between the two worldviews.

1. Fact and Value. The fact/value dichotomy has wide endorsement in the Western philosophical tradition. It is the foundation for the naturalists’ rejection of the possibility of deducing what *ought to be* from what *is*.<sup>2</sup> It is also this dichotomy that gives science its special status as the search for

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<sup>2</sup> “The naturalistic fallacy rejects the possibility of deducing ethical statements from non-ethical statements. This principle, more precisely described as the fact/value dichotomy, denies the possibility of logically deriving what ought to be from what is.” (Kendler 2002, 490)

truth. “Facts” are supposed to be objective, cognitively meaningful, non-controversial, public knowledge, can be demonstrated scientifically and can in principle be established in a way that will command the assent of all rational people. Value, on the other hand, is supposed to be subjective, non-cognitive, controversial, not publicly knowledge, cannot be demonstrated scientifically, and cannot in principle be established in a way that will command the assent of all rational people. (Putnam 1988, Lecture IV) Hilary Putnam calls question to such a dichotomy, and yet it is still an entrenched view. The moral realism established in Confucian metaphysics places humans at the center of a world of real values: humans do not create values; values are instantiated in the world of nature itself. Values are thus *facts*. As Robert C. Neville puts it, “[t]he Chinese tradition is a powerful antidote to the fact/value distinction” (Neville 2003, 318). Under this worldview, value and good are real in a robust sense — they are really what we can observe in nature. But when we talk about value, it is automatically assumed that we are engaged in an ethical discourse, not a metaphysical one. It will be hard to break this barrier.

2. Laws of Nature and the Normative Principle for Humans. “Laws of nature” understood in the Western tradition refers primarily to physical laws governing the physical realm. We have Newton’s law of motion, general law of gravitation, thermodynamic laws, conservation laws, Einstein’s special relativity and general relativity, to enumerate just the most famous ones. These laws are not specific to human behavior, though they can be said to govern everything humans do. Under this conceptual framework, we have seen entrenched philosophical problems (or philosophical entanglements) such as the mind-body problem, free will versus determinism, epiphenomenalism versus mental causation, reductionism versus nonreductionism. These are issues that relate to human existence, and yet under the physicalistic worldview and the postulation of overarching laws of nature, it is difficult to establish the special status of human mind or the causal efficacy of mental properties. Chinese metaphysics, on the other hand, would begin with a different set of normative principles for nature and for human conduct. Both Confucian and Daoist metaphysics would posit *Dao* as the law of everything. The word ‘*dao*’ means both “what is” and “what ought to be.” *Dao* is both the descriptive law of heaven and earth and the normative law for human conduct. Confucianism and Daoism have different interpretations of the content of *Dao*, but they would share the integrated worldview that does not separate the world of nature from the world of human affairs. To make this worldview credible to those ingrained with *the divide* would not be an easy task.

3. Knowledge and Practice. The Western philosophical tradition separates epistemology from ethics; the former has to do with knowledge while the latter has to do with acting. There is a specific area of Western philosophy, action theory, which deals with the motivational force behind human action.

A typical dichotomy in this discourse is between belief and desire: does reason motivate sufficiently or does it always have to be enhanced by desire or passion? Human intentionality is carved into different categories, and practical rationality is seen to consist in acting out of the calculated result of the best means to achieve one's own ends. Between knowing and acting, there is always a gap in efficacy. Sometimes people act against their better judgment. Hence, we have the problem of *akrasia* – weakness of the will. However, Confucius has commented on the inseparability between knowing and acting: “To learn and to practice constantly what one has learnt. Isn't this a pleasure?” (*The Analects*, 1:1). Knowledge is not complete knowledge unless it is accompanied by action. In Neo-Confucianism, whether it is Wang Yangming's doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action, or Zhu Xi's claim that knowledge and action always require each other, there is unmistakable emphasis on the inseparability of knowledge and action. Knowing as an observer and knowing as a practitioner lead to different requirements and satisfaction conditions for knowledge. We need to find a way to elucidate a Chinese theory of knowledge that does not presuppose the divide between the subject and the object. Chinese epistemology can add a different dimension to traditional Western epistemology, but we need to find a pertinent language and accessible discussions.

4. Metaphysics and Human Existence. Finally, metaphysicians in the Western tradition have sometimes been called “the star-gazers.” Metaphysics is seen to be the pursuit of ultimate reality beyond human perception or is even cognitively closed to human beings. If that is the case, then metaphysics has little to do with human life, human concern and human wellbeing. However, metaphysics from the Chinese perspective is closely related to human existence. Kenneth K. Inada points out that whereas the Western tradition slowly deviated from combining human existence and nature, the Eastern tradition typically seeks “a deeper examination of the intimacy of humankind and nature” (Inada 2005, 37). To reckon the characteristics of Chinese metaphysical thinking, YANG Guorong has called for a new form of moral metaphysics. He argues that metaphysics should not be detached from concrete human existence, and that we should construct a form of metaphysics that integrates dimensions of human history and human society, human morality and values, human languages and knowledge, etc. He further defines “ultimate concern” as the inquiry of the origin of the meaning of our existence, and not the inquiry of some unknowable realm. When we reconstruct Chinese metaphysics, we need to make sure that this humanistic spirit of Chinese metaphysics is not lost.

At the same time, however, we also need to be careful that Chinese metaphysics would not be transformed into just another dimension of ethics or philosophy of practical living. The nature of metaphysics is ultimately a quest for the unknown, an intellectual pursuit of the truth about our world. It is related to human existence, but it cannot be turned into a handmaid for the attainment of the *good life*. As Fang Zhaohui points out,

For most traditional metaphysicians, such as Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and so on, metaphysics might be beneficial for practical daily life, but it is not necessarily pursued for the exclusive purpose of practical daily living. When Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, and many other Western metaphysicians conduct their studies of so-called ‘substances,’ it is never taken for granted in their minds that substance is an exclusive end of every life in the world and that a pursuit of substance represents the only way for a regular person to achieve completeness in practical daily living or the ultimate meaning of life.” (Fang 2005, 100)

The same kind of intellectual curiosity about the world beyond personal meaning and individual existence can also be found in Chinese philosophy, and my main goal of “reconstruction” is to clearly delineate topics for a metaphysical investigation that captures the spirit of *Chinese* metaphysics, without losing the spirit of *metaphysics*.

#### IV. Metaphysics as *Moral Metaphysics* and not as *Metaphysical Ethics*

A major obstacle I perceive in the reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics is that it will end up being merely a project in ethics or in existential philosophy of practical living. Some contemporary authors (Yu & Xu 2009; Zhao 2006; Fang 2005) rightly analyze the essential differences between Western metaphysics and Chinese philosophy, but this should not be taken to demarcate the two philosophical traditions as totally divergent on their intellectual pursuit. Even though there are fundamental differences in the assumptions or attitudes of Western metaphysicians and Chinese philosophers, we would do a disservice to Chinese philosophy if we therefore conclude that Chinese philosophy is not a pursuit of *truth*, but a pursuit of *good*. I want to argue that even with the above differences from traditional Western metaphysics, Chinese philosophy does proffer speculative thinking on truth about our world.

YU Weidong and XU Jin argue that Western metaphysics is “metaphysics of nature” while Chinese philosophy of *Dao* is “metaphysics of ethics.” The former is “truth-pursing” while the latter is “good-pursuing” (Yu & Xu 2009, 360). They further argue, “Chinese tradition stressed morality and emotion but ignored reason. It seems that Chinese people innately possess an integrative consciousness which is manifested in the general program of Chinese thought, namely *tongtianren heneiwai* (human and nature are interlined, as are the inside and outside worlds)” (Ibid. 367). I agree that the integration of nature and human (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一) is indeed a fundamental assumption in Chinese metaphysics, but disagree that this feature would disqualify Chinese philosophy as a pursuit of *truth*.

Fang (2005) cautions against conflating the Chinese concept of *benti* with the Western notion of *substance*, even though the two terms have been

used by many scholars as the translation for each other. Fang argues that the two concepts originated in totally different intellectual contexts: the study of *substance* developed in the Western tradition is to “know the first causes or the most fundamental elements of the world, not for the purpose of inventing a system of guidelines for practical daily living” (Fang 2005, 100); while the concept of *benti* (or related concepts such as *xingtì* and *xinti*) refers to “something formless and supersensible and as the ultimate reality or goal of self-cultivation” (Ibid. 94). The two are thus totally different pursuits according to Fang:

The Chinese phrase *benti* is usually translated as “substance” in English (somewhat misleading in my view), but in the Confucian and especially in the neo-Confucian tradition, as a synonym of *Dao*, it is an achievement of a long-term self-cultivation and personal moral practice in daily life, which has a strong sense of psychic feeling, subjective affection, and internal experience. (Fang 2005, 94)

Fang thinks that it is because of this (mis)translation, many contemporary Chinese philosophers wrongly assume that “there is a necessary connection between the study of the supersensible beings (*xingershang zhe*) and the purpose of achieving excellence in the art of practical daily living” (Fang 2005, 95). Furthermore, it is also because of this conflation that MOU Zongsan (1909-1995) in his notable *Xinti yu Xingtì* (*The Ti of Heart-mind and the Ti of Human Nature*) concluded that Kant “had never really completed a ‘moral metaphysics’” (Ibid. 97). I think this is an important reminder for our reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics: that we do not turn metaphysics into a sub-category in ethics or the philosophy of practical living. Presently many articles written in Chinese metaphysics are on human nature and human heart-mind, but this should not be taken to be the only viable topic in Chinese metaphysics. Even though the pursuit of the *original mind* and *essential nature* is central to Confucianism, especially to Neo-Confucianism, it does not mean that there is no pursuit of *substance* in the sense of *ultimate reality* or *fundamental principle* of the world around us.

YU Xuanmeng (1999) argues that both Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy have what can be qualified as “metaphysics,” but the two forms of metaphysics have totally diverse characteristics. Western metaphysics is a study of the transcendental realm, a pursuit of some *absolute* knowledge or *pure* principle that is logically derived from, but goes beyond, the empirical realm. Chinese metaphysics, on the other hand, did not “explore this transcendental realm, and did not develop that kind of absolute knowledge.” Yu thinks that the essence of Chinese metaphysics lies in its endeavor to surpass humans’ actual conditions of existence (Yu 1999, 132). This view picks up one, *albeit* significant, aspect of Chinese metaphysics but dismisses the rest. As Shi Zhonglian criticizes:

It is true that Chinese philosophy, as Yu analyzes, stresses the unification and inseparability of the *dao* and the myriad things, the sensible and the rational, substance and function, the natural and the human, and so on. But this does not mean that it is incapable of developing the idea of substance, or existence, which is universal, eternal, timeless, and transcendent over empirical world. There is the idea of the rational that is over and above the sensible; there is the theory of the realm of principles which is a pure, immaterial world; there is the account of the different characters of the *dao* as the substance, as well as the general and overall integration of all of its characters. Actually, one can find many arguments in Chinese classical texts, especially the Daoist works, which vigorously advocate the universality, eternity, and supremacy of the *dao*. (Shi 2006, 188)

I agree completely with Shi that we can find classical texts that deal with issues beyond the concern for one's practical living, and we need to explore them not as a historical analysis, but as a way to construct new metaphysical views out of these classical texts.

Zhao Dunhua argues that both Chinese and Western metaphysics "originated from a dynamic world-view, and both had common subject matter and characteristics in their primitive state"; however, the two traditions diverged later on: whereas Western metaphysics became *metaphysics of nature*, Chinese metaphysics became *moral metaphysics* and it hindered the development of modern science in China (Zhao 2006, 23). This may indeed be a historical fact, but it does not have to be an immutable fact for the development of Chinese metaphysics. What we need to find is the interface between contemporary science and ancient Chinese worldview. We may need to shift away from the quest for *benti* (sustaining foundation of things) in human nature or human mind, and embark on the quest for "the deepest bottom of the cosmos" (in Zhang Dainian's term, cited in Zhao 2006, 26).

#### V. Proposed Topics for the Reconstruction of Chinese Metaphysics

The approach I suggest is to focus on questions that would reflect the shared pursuit between Western metaphysics and Chinese metaphysics of the truth about our world as it is, and different speculations of the world as we conceive it to be. The following ten questions are merely meant as suggestions, not to be seen as an exhaustive list.

1. What is the conception of ultimate reality? The Western conceptions include Plato's *Form*, Kant's *noumenon*, among others, while for Chinese metaphysics, we can analyze *Yijing*'s and later Neo-Confucians' notion of *Taiji*, Laozi's notion of *Dao* or the *Supreme One (tai-yi)*, Buddhist notion of *Thusness* or *sunyata*, XIONG Shili's notion of *benti*, to name a few.

2. What is the generation process of the world? Was there something or nothing at the beginning? Did the universe have any boundary at the

beginning? In the Western tradition, we have *the first cause, creation, the Big Bang, the M-theory*; in Chinese metaphysics, we can analyze *Yijing's "From Taiji comes the Polarity, the Polarity generates the Four Images,"* Laozi's *"Dao generates One, One generates Two, Two generates Three, Three generates the myriad things,"* Zhou Dunyi's *"Wuji and then Taiji,"* the Buddhist's *twelve causal links* or the mentation of the *Alaya* consciousness. There is also the question of whether there was any boundary of the universe, and Zhou Dunyi's famous quote *"Wuji and then Taiji"* could be taken to be a discourse on this topic. *Taiji* can be interpreted as the spacetime continuum, which is supremely ultimate; at the same time, the state before *Taiji*, namely, *Wuji*, can be seen as the state before any spacetime framework was formed and it thus has no boundary. We can investigate the possible connotations and implications of this quote: does it imply not merely the expansion of matter within spacetime, but also an expansion of the spacetime framework itself? To address these issues, we will need to have a clearer understanding of what is meant by the Chinese terms *being (you)* and *nothingness (wu)*, the *Boundlessness (wuji)* and the *Great Ultimate (taiji)*.

3. What is existence or what things exist? In contemporary Western metaphysics, only the physical is real. But Plato took the realm of *Forms* to be real, while Descartes took souls to be real. Nominalists deny the existence of universals, while universal realists argue that they are real. Different philosophy has different ontological commitments. Chinese philosophers do too. Some of them make ontological commitment to ghosts and spirits, while some (such as Buddhism) do not use life and death as the dividing line between existence and non-existence. It will be an interesting endeavor to sort these out.

4. How is the world of change related to the unchanging? Plato talks about the world of Form and the world of appearances; Kant has his *noumenon* and *phenomena*. In Chinese metaphysics, we have the Daoist discourse on *Dao* and the world, Huayan Buddhism's analysis of the connection between principle (*li*) and states of affairs (*shi*), Neo-Confucian discourse on the one Principle and its many manifestations (*li-yi-fen-shu*), or XIONG Shili's theory of the relation between substance and function (*ti-yong*). The conceptual analysis of these notions will also require careful reading and reconstruction.

5. Is there any vantage point assumed in Chinese worldview? Does time make any difference? What is the Chinese conception of *time*? The *Perfect Cosmological Principle* "postulated that the large scale structure of the universe was the same no matter what spatial or temporal vantage point was assumed. This ... is just a modern expression of the theme implicit in classical physics: time does not make a difference." (Bradie 1985, 380) In contrast, the Chinese notion of time, in *the Book of Change (Yijing)* and in *the Analects*, is a changeable framework from the observer's point of view. Time is not a container for the flow of human affairs; rather, time is

embedded in different temporal points at which the agent finds herself, from which events are being observed, interpreted and acted upon. This notion of *time* in Chinese philosophy is highly compatible with the observer-relative approach in quantum physics. This viewpoint also presents a great contrast to the hypothesized “God’s point-of-view,” “impartiality” or “agent-neutral” approach prevalent in contemporary analytic philosophy.

6. Are the cosmic laws dynamic and changing, or static and eternal? According to Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine, “Since the dawn of modern science, our view of nature was dominated by the search for static immutable laws and the rise of the mechanistic picture. From Newton to Maxwell and Einstein, time was reduced to a parameter in the dynamic description of the world: irreversibility was only an illusion. *This position is no longer defensible.*” (quoted by Michael Bradie, in Bradie 1985, 379, italics mine) The Chinese notion of *Dao*, a dynamic law of the universe, can be given a fresh new light against this context.

7. What are the hierarchical layers of the world’s constitution? A current topic in contemporary analytic metaphysics is the relationship between the mental and the physical or the macro and the micro. The concepts employed in this discourse include *supervenience*, *realization*, *determination*, and *reduction*. We could perhaps investigate whether these contemporary philosophical concepts can be used in our analysis of the relation between *Principle* and *qi* or between *Dao* and concrete things (*qi* 器). We might also need to find a new concept to explicate the relationship between the mental and the physical.

8. What is the basic constituent of things? In the Western tradition, Pre-Socratic philosophers were already engaged in the speculation on the basic constituent of things, which they called ‘*arché*’ though they had different suggestions for what it is. It is probably safe to say that the Chinese metaphysics originated in *Yijing* sets the basic constituent of all things as *qi*, or *yin* and *yang*. We can develop a theory of material constitution on the notion of *qi*.

9. What are the conditions of *knowledge*? Just as virtue ethics has been widely regarded as a compatible ethical discourse with Chinese ethics, virtue epistemology, the approach that focuses on the knowing subject’s intellectual virtues, could be used as a way to reconstruct Chinese epistemology. We can ask such questions as: What counts as *true* knowledge and what are its conditions of satisfaction? What are the necessary intellectual virtues for the knowing agent? From Chinese philosophical perspective, what conditions separate *belief* and *knowledge*?

10. What is the ontological foundation of human goodness and evil? In this context, we can discuss Mencius’ theory of moral sprouts, the Buddhist notion of Buddha Nature, ZHANG Zai’s distinction between “the nature endowed by heaven and earth” and “physical nature,” among others.

There are many other existing problems in Western metaphysics that we can bring into Chinese philosophy if we are creative enough. For example, the problem of universals could be developed for the theory of particular principle (*shu-li*) in things, and we can understand particular principles as “universals *in rebus* (in objects).” We can consider the Chinese School of Name to be engaging in the discourse on universals. With these questions, we can go back and look at various metaphysical theories that have been *suggested* in different philosophical texts. Granted, traditional Chinese philosophers did not produce systematic philosophical work and most of their thoughts were preserved in the form of commentary, recorded sayings, or short treatises. Nonetheless, we as contemporary readers can systematize their views with scrupulous reading and careful analysis. When various texts are analyzed with the same set of inquiry, we can see how they either come together or diverge on certain viewpoints.

A promising sign for the construction of Chinese metaphysics is that there already has been a vibrant discussion on Chinese metaphysics in the Chinese philosophical circle. Most of these authors take the various metaphysical theories in Contemporary New-Confucianism as paradigms of Chinese metaphysics: XIONG Shili and HE Lin developed their systematic metaphysics that places human mind as the core of their ontology; FENG Youlan constructed a different kind of metaphysics that focuses on cosmic order and pattern. JIN Yuelin has developed metaphysics of *Dao*. We may begin with these twentieth century New-Confucian metaphysics, or we may reconstruct Chinese metaphysics from the discourse of Neo-Confucianism, since these pursuits were clearly the central topics in Neo-Confucianism. The classic *Yijing* also provides profound philosophical basis for Chinese cosmology. Laozi’s *Daodejing* and Weijin Neo-Daoism’s discourse on being and nothingness derived from it add further dimensions to the scope of Chinese metaphysics. Chinese metaphysics is indeed a rich field for new research topics.

## VI. Conclusion

Future metaphysics should be concerned not just with the foundation of the objective world, but also with the foundation of human existence. Chinese metaphysics will offer a different paradigm for future metaphysics. Ancient Chinese philosophers often like to use ‘tree’ as a metaphor, and here I shall employ it too. The topics of Chinese philosophy are like a tree with roots, trunk and branches. Metaphysics would be the roots, while ethics and other topics are the trunk and branches. The roots are often hidden underground, but without them, the tree cannot flourish. Because of the current development of contemporary analytic metaphysics, we often get the impression that metaphysics is an idle pursuit for the sake of intellectual gratification. The study of Chinese philosophy in the West has placed tremendous emphasis on Chinese ethics, but ethics without metaphysics

would lead us to the path of skepticism, anti-realism, quasi-realism or even relativism. A Chinese ethical system without a solid metaphysical grounding would just be yet another ethical system, without persuasion and conviction. I therefore call for a systematic, accessible reconstruction of Chinese metaphysics that investigates the issues about the true nature of the world in relation to, but go beyond, practical humanistic concerns.

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