


# Chinese and Western Philosophical and Ethical Perspectives: *Différance* Rather Than Incommensurability or Sameness

Diogenes  
2022, Vol. 64(1–2) 58–62  
Copyright © ICPHS 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/03921921211068258  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



**Geir Sigurðsson**

University of Iceland, Iceland

## Abstract

This experimental article claims that relatively recent trends in Western philosophy provide a much more open approach to philosophies originating in nonwestern traditions, including the Chinese, than found in most mainstream Western philosophy. More specifically, I argue that a slightly modified version of Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* offers a hermeneutic parallel to native Chinese philosophical approaches to interpretation. These converge in the view that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms and that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable, thus providing a future opening for – and even integration of – a Chinese-Western dialogue in global philosophy and ethics.

\*

## Keywords

Chinese philosophy, interpretation, Derrida, *Différance*, incommensurability, hermeneutics

Taking a step backwards from the content of ethics as such, this paper seeks a viable approach to a meaningful dialogue between Western and Chinese ethics. Rejecting as unhelpful the opposed but commonplace extremes of incommensurability and sameness as apt descriptions of Chinese and Western thinking, it proposes a critical openness inspired by both the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Chinese hermeneutics that requires responsibility, flexibility, and creativity on behalf of the interpreter.

---

## Corresponding author:

Geir Sigurðsson, Faculty of Languages and Cultures, University of Iceland, Veröld - House of Vigdís, Brynjólfsgata 1, Reykjavík, IS-107, Iceland.

Email: [geirs@hi.is](mailto:geirs@hi.is)

In their popular book, *The Path*, Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh (2016: 190) conclude with a reflection on the historical paradoxes in Western attitudes to China beginning in the late eighteenth century. They write:

When these European states became wealthier and stronger and began to break down the older aristocratic orders, they saw themselves as creating a rupture in history: rejecting the traditional world and beginning a modern one. Thus, they thought the Asian territories they were colonizing to be backward and traditional. Now they could be liberated – by becoming more like the West.

As Puett and Gross-Loh also remind us, the construction of the rationalized, bureaucratic state in Europe was significantly (and openly) inspired by Chinese Confucian notions and practices of meritocracy and Legalist views of impartiality, but later, when modernization was already well underway in Europe, China was condemned for being cemented in traditionalized structures considered incompatible with (and certainly inferior to) European approaches.

China did not become a victim of European colonialism until the mid-nineteenth century, and she enjoyed until then a certain respect by European powers – precisely because she was considered powerful. But condescending assertions of the inferiority of Chinese thought were already emerging around the turn of the 19th century by celebrated philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, who would claim, respectively, that “philosophy is not to be found in the entire Orient” (cf. Roetz, 1984: 22) and that Chinese philosophy has not reached further than “to stand on primary level” (Hegel, 1971 [1832]: 147).

It is often pointed out in their defense that Kant and Hegel did not have immediate or optimal access to Chinese philosophy. Certainly, they had no access to Chinese original texts, nor did they read Chinese, nor, perhaps more importantly, and unlike today, were there good European translations or explanations of Chinese philosophy available.

But Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and Voltaire, who all came before them and hence had even more limited access to Chinese philosophy, were much more positive, open and inquisitive than the supposedly open-minded enlightenment champions Kant or Hegel, who brusquely dismiss Chinese – and for that matter also Indian – philosophy, without it even occurring to them that their understanding may be limited. On the contrary, Leibniz and other thinkers of his time went even too far in dismissing differences between Western and Chinese thought, claiming, in the case of Leibniz, that Confucianism was “pure Christianity” (Leibniz, 1987 [1716]: 108).

It seems evident that the changing attitude in Europe about Chinese (and generally non-western) philosophy has much less to do with the philosophy itself than the changing global status of Europe in the world around and after the mid-18th century, sometimes called the age of imperialism or colonialism, during which Western powers would eventually rule over a significant proportion of the entire world. The political status of a culture, i.e., its perceived economic and military force, will tend to stand in direct relation to the evaluation of its cultural goods.

During the time of Leibniz and Wolff, both born in the 17th century, China was considered a most formidable power, and she enjoyed corresponding political status in the world. While China’s real power could not be adequately assessed at the time of Kant and Hegel, the Western powers already dominated the world, and there was increased skepticism about China’s ability to withstand the European forces, skepticism that turned out to be justified in the mid-19th century.

Thus, the general attitude in the West to philosophies that originate outside of it has been chiefly dictated by the relative political status of the West in the world, not by the quality of the philosophy in question. Unfortunately, although European power in the world has diminished significantly, the views of Kant and Hegel are still more or less dominant among philosophers operating in the Euro-American world – and, curiously, even among some philosophers in the non-western world.

But this attitude is certainly changing, and the changes manifest themselves clearly in relatively recent trends in Western philosophy that have been critical of mainstream dispositions. Many of these trends provide, with their suggested interpretive approaches, more openness to philosophies originating in non-western traditions, although some of them may not be fully aware of it. Some obvious candidates derive from post-colonial approaches, but they can also be found – in many different guises of course – in feminist, poststructuralist, and care-ethical approaches. While the Leibnizian openness is commendable, it seems nevertheless advisable to steer clear of his tendency to lump the Chinese and Western traditions together as the “same”, since applying a broad brush confounds matters and does not help to establish a meaningful dialogue. To avoid dialogue that is merely superficial and artificial, differences must be expected, acknowledged, and accepted. Difference, however, does not imply incommensurability, as will be discussed shortly.

Among the commonalities of these recent strands of Western philosophy is that they all downplay the importance or status of truth. This is also an important condition for increased openness to non-Western philosophical ventures. Mainstream Western philosophy is still very much focused on, and therefore constrained by, the notion of truth – which by and large excludes its active participation in non-western philosophical ventures.

My suggestion is that a slightly modified version of Derrida’s concept of *différance* offers a promising hermeneutic tool for a western approach to Chinese (and other non-Western) philosophy. In some ways, it also serves as a parallel to what I take to be the traditional Chinese philosophical approach to interpretation.

*Différance* is a hybrid concept pointing to the dual meaning of “difference” and “deference”, indicating both spatial and temporal dimensions involved in the act of interpreting (or understanding) in the sense that, firstly, there is necessarily an ultimately unbridgeable distance between interpreter and interpreted (they will never be one and the same), and secondly, that the meaning derived from what is being interpreted is necessarily a temporary meaning, applying to the particularity of present circumstances, and that something like an objective, final meaning must be deferred to indefinitely.

This usage of the term *différance* is, I believe, sufficiently in line with Derrida’s own original application, while certainly adapted specifically to its role in communicating between the two distant traditions in question. As it happens, I believe that the very act of such adaptation is also in line with *différance* as a hermeneutic tool or concept. The adoption of *différance* is simultaneously an acknowledgment of the limiting role of the notion of truth, which is then for the most part discarded, deconstructed (or at least deferred). While truth is deferred, the emphasis is placed on the most appropriate or fitting interpretation of the philosophical teachings in light of the present circumstances. The question guiding the philosophical undertaking then becomes, how can we gain a useful and viable understanding of this philosophy.

Having briefly touched upon the problems arising from the assumption of sameness between philosophical traditions, let us now move to the other extreme: incommensurability. To regard Western and Chinese philosophies as incommensurable is not uncommon. Indeed, this is precisely what the British communitarian thinker Alasdair MacIntyre (1991) claimed in a well-known paper on Aristotelian and Confucian views on virtues. MacIntyre’s argument is that their views on virtues were incommensurable, and therefore it was impossible for them to have a meaningful dialogue with each other on the issue, that they would simply be speaking past each other.

Now a *différance*-approach to the issue will first and foremost reveal that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms. This idea is important, *not* because it implies that the philosophies are incommensurable – since, as we will see, they are not – but because it shows that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable. This lack of finality provides an opening for a Chinese-Western dialogue in global philosophy and ethics.

The problem with the traditional Western interpretive approach is that it is geared to discovering the truth and is therefore inescapably narrow. Consider, for instance, Rudolf Schleiermacher's explicit theory of interpretation in the 19th century: "Hermeneutics," he says, "is the art to avoid misunderstanding" (cf. Gadamer, 1990: 188). "To avoid misunderstanding" means to bring to light the true understanding concealed in the text. Schleiermacher's objective was to grasp the origin of the thought that underlies the text, access the author's intention, and thereby get to the "true" meaning of the text. This approach reveals two conspicuous tendencies in Western thought, the focus on singular truth and the tendency to equate "origins" with truth.

Chinese hermeneutics could surely accept the description of the first step of Schleiermacher's objective: "grasping the origin of thought that underlies the text". But grasping is precisely just the first step; then this hermeneutics goes on to developing, adapting, and, most importantly, realizing and implementing.

This sheds light on why the classical Chinese tradition does not rely on definitions. Definitions are timeless, universal, and ultimately absolute. In the Chinese context, nothing is timeless, universal, or absolute. A vital aspect of Chinese philosophical sensibility concerns timeliness and appropriate responses to the situation at hand. All serious students of classical Chinese philosophy are aware of background cosmology or "daoology" as I prefer calling it (Sigurðsson, 2020: 23ff.).

It therefore comes as no surprise that the aim of the Chinese scholarly tradition of writing commentaries to canonical texts is not to explain the ultimate meaning of the text by getting to its "original" and "only true" meaning, as is usually the case with Western commentaries, but to continue the dialogue in the hermeneutical sense that the ideas expressed in the texts invoke the commentators' own ideas and inspire them to elaborate their ideas further. There is much scholarship on the historicity of Chinese philosophy that has expressed similar views. For example, Huang Chun-Chieh says, speaking of the Song-Ming-Confucians' reading of the *Mengzi*:

During the prolonged dialogues back and forth among [Zhu Xi] and his disciples we never find them regarding the *Mengzi* as an objective text unrelated to their personal lives. They all blended their life experiences into their various readings of the *Mengzi*. (Huang, 2001: 258)

Now, of course, such a creative ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation did not always take place. A lack of creativity already emerges in Confucianism after it became state ideology during the Han. François Jullien (2000: 212) says that under the Han, Confucianism's "success was its downfall. [...] The Confucian openness is [...] transformed into its opposite: the codification of moralism." Huang Chun-Chieh (2007: 42) has also formulated this most aptly: "After the establishment of the Han Empire, when Confucianism was designated the orthodox state ideology, the Confucianization of politics in the ideal of Confucians was soon turned into the politicization of Confucianism."

But these were political interruptions that were not continuous but sporadic, although we may be experiencing such a tendency today as well. Recall what the *Daodejing* says in chapter 23: "A gusty wind cannot last all morning, and a sudden downpour cannot last all day [...] If even heaven and earth cannot go on forever, much less can man." (Lau, 1963) Contrary to what seems to be happening in China now, the overall philosophical tendency in Chinese hermeneutics (which I think will prevail, but this is also up to us) has been to understand canonical texts creatively and contextually depending on circumstances, which implicitly temporalizes the truth of the interpretation – we could also say *defers* truth. At the same time, there is clear awareness of the distinction between the interpreters and the object of interpretation.

What we need in Western philosophy is something comparable – and I suggest that *différance* may be a good candidate. If Alasdair MacIntyre had adopted this concept, he would have seen that

while there are certainly clear differences between Chinese and Western approaches, they can be used for the benefit of each other. Therefore, in his paper on virtue in Confucian and Aristotelian ethics, MacIntyre would have written about complementarity instead of incommensurability. It is my claim that such complementary reading – one that still respects the differences – is precisely what a successful global dialogue between Chinese and Western ethics needs to be based on.

## References

- Gadamer HG (1990) *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in *Gesammelte Werke* 1. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).
- Hegel GWF (1971) [1832] *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*. Werke in zwanzig Bänden 18. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Huang Chun-chieh (2001) *Mencian Hermeneutics: A History of Interpretations in China*. New Brunswick/London: Transaction.
- Huang Chun-chieh (2007) The “Body Politic” in Ancient China. *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 8(4): 33–43.
- Jullien F (2000) *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, transl. Sophie Hawkes. New York: Zone Books.
- Lau DC (1963) Transl. *Tao Te Ching*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Leibniz GW (1987 [1716]) *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois, plus quelques écrits sur la question religieuse de China*, transl. Christiane Frémont. Paris: L’Herne.
- MacIntyre A (1991) Incommensurability, truth, and the conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the virtues. In: Deutsch E (ed) *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 104–122.
- Puett M and Gross-Loh C (2016) *The Path: A New Way to Think About Everything*. New York: Viking.
- Roetz H (1984) *Mensch und Natur im alten China: zum Subjekt-Objekt-Gegensatz in der klassischen chinesischen Philosophie, zugleich eine Kritik des Klischees vom “chinesischen Universalismus”*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Sigurðsson G (2020) Confucian philosophy as a universal approach to integrated living: A contemporary interpretation. In: Flavel S and Manning RR (eds) *Differences in Identity in Philosophy and Religion: A Cross-Cultural Approach*. London: Bloomsbury, 7–19.