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'What Does Heaven Ever Say?'

A Methods-centered Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement

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ABSTRACT

How can we conduct cross-cultural inquiry without reproducing the ethnocentric categories that prompt critique in the first place? Postcolonial and comparative political theorists have called into question the "universal" applicability of Western liberal political norms, but their critiques are drawn most often from competing Western discourses (e.g., poststructuralism) rather than from the culturally diverse traditions of scholarship whose ideas they examine. In contrast, I suggest attending to these culturally situated traditions of scholarship, especially their methods of inquiry, in addition to their substantive ideas. This method-centered approach reinterprets cross-cultural engagement, not as a tool for modifying existing parochial debates on the basis of "non-Western" cases, but as an opportunity to ask new questions through alternative frames of reference. Examining the interpretive methodologies of two Chinese classicists, I show how their methods offer not only new ideas, but also new methods, for the practice of political and cross-cultural theory.

The postcolonial studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty once concluded that it is "impossible to *think* of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000, 4; emphasis in original). Few theorists seem willing or able to challenge his claim that social and political categories rooted in European experience are both necessary and inevitable parts of *all* modern inquiry— even inquiry into the "non-European life-worlds" (20) scholars like Chakrabarty most aspire to acknowledge. Interest in the political thought of Asian and African societies grows ever greater in the wake of globalization, but postcolonial and comparative political theorists tend to favor Marxist or poststructuralist approaches to their subject over pre-colonial or "traditional" philosophies of inquiry (e.g., Chatterjee 1993, Dallmayr 1998, Said 1978). In the political science classroom, "non-Western" canonical texts are treated as repositories of discrete knowledge that can be imported, without remainder, into existing curricula (e.g., Leslie 2007); and ancient Asian traditions are mined for their applicability to contemporary democratic practice, rather than explored for the questions they pose (e.g., Ackerly 2005). These examples illustrate the deep irony of much cross-cultural work in the contemporary Western academy: research into "global" thought seeks inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives, but does so by means of those very discourses whose cultural insularity is what prompts critique in the first place. Is there a way to conduct cross-cultural inquiry so as to supplant, rather than embrace, the Eurocentrism that Chakrabarty and others assume is unavoidable? And how must the way we practice not only cross-cultural theory, but also political theory in general, be changed to reflect this new approach?

In this essay, I begin to answer these questions by exploring an approach that does not read the cross-cultural exchange as merely the addition of culturally diverse voices to established parochial debates. Inspired by the recent work of Chinese classicist scholars, I suggest that looking at culturally-situated methods of inquiry, in addition to substantive ideas, can reinterpret cross-cultural engagement as an opportunity to ask new questions through alternative frames of reference. Chinese classicism, or *jingxue* 經學, is a dynamic legacy of exegetical practices that has flourished throughout China's long

history into the present day. Answering the call of prominent scholars like Liang Qichao and Xu Fuguan (1982, 208) to produce not just a history of China's classical tradition, but also a history of classicist *thought*, modern Chinese scholars have come to see new contrasts between Chinese classicism and Western interpretive insights even as they continue to make their own contributions to the tradition itself (e.g., Jiang 2003; Cheng 2003). By practicing traditional Chinese exegetical methods as counterweights to dominant Western scholarly practices, modern Chinese classicists attest to the close but often overlooked relationship between methods of inquiry and the kinds of knowledge those methods both produce and make accessible. More importantly, by demonstrating the viability of these methods in producing knowledge relevant to the modern world, they explain how Chinese thought can be globally applicable—not because, as Chakrabarty claims for European thought, that it is impossible for anyone to think *without* it. Rather, the viable methods for textual interpretation these Chinese scholars develop demonstrate how it is still possible for anyone to think *within* Chinese thought, in a process perhaps complemented but not constituted by European categories of experience.

Drawing on the work of these modern Chinese scholars, I examine as examples the textual methodologies of two earlier Chinese classicists, Wang Yangming (Ming Dynasty, 1472-1528 CE) and Kang Youwei (Qing Dynasty, 1858-1927 CE). I argue with Kang and Wang that there is much at stake in adopting one way rather than another to organize ideas, ask questions, and articulate meaningful responses. An interpretive method explains not only what particular insights are attained and how those insights are transmitted; it also implies an epistemological frame that situates and gives meaning to those insights (cf. Gerring 2001, xix). Part of the point both Kang and Wang make, albeit in different ways, is that the substance of expression and the *means* of expression are always mutually implicated. Ignoring one or the other aspect will distort both the intended thrust of the text as well as the epistemological frame into which it fits, leaving cross-cultural theorists with neither the vocabulary nor the conceptual map to move beyond the European categories they disavow.

This insight about the relationship between method and substance gestures toward the radical implications of a methods-centered approach to the cross-cultural encounter. Although Kang and Wang do not explicitly theorize this encounter, their interpretive method lends itself to theorizing both political life in general and cross-cultural engagement in particular. The methodological practices they develop are meant to render the substance of their traditions accessible to, and inhabitable by, outsiders—belying a widespread belief that traditions are discourses into which we are passively inserted "whether [we] like it or not" (e.g., MacIntyre 1984, 221), or that we come dangerously close to abandoning a critical stance when inhabiting the perspective of an "other" (e.g., Mahmood 2005, 38-9). By insisting that their exegetical traditions are constituted by *deliberate*, albeit extremely involved, practices of engagement with particular texts, Kang and Wang offer the possibility of launching critique from within discourses other than those to which the researcher is already culturally accustomed. The fundamental question of cross-cultural theorizing then becomes how to undertake alternative modes of inquiry that produce and are informed by particular concerns and texts, not how to overcome inter-subjective barriers to cultural understanding. When practiced in this way, cross-cultural engagement enables new modes of political theorizing: it offers a means by which a theorist can formulate questions about political life—and about the cross-cultural encounter itself—from within the framework constituted by other texts, practices, and self-understandings. Canons and traditions that structure political experience in various parts of the world come to constitute, rather than merely supplement, the work we call political theory.

Cross-Culturalism and its Problems

Before examining the methodological insights of Kang and Wang, however, it may help to clarify how my methods-centered approach shares similar goals, but contrasts in important ways, with other critical approaches to the cross-cultural encounter advanced by scholars in postcolonial studies, political science, and the emerging field of comparative political theory. Scholars in these fields have done a great deal to question the "universalism" presumed by mainstream liberal or social science models of politics,

explaining the need for culturally diverse perspectives in political and social analysis. Oddly, however, their critiques of ethnocentrism more often takes cues from competing Western discourses (e.g., Marxism, German hermeneutics) than from the culturally diverse scholastic traditions whose ideas they are scrutinizing (say, classical Chinese Confucianism, or twentieth-century Islamic fundamentalism). In this section, I consider how and why such approaches, designed to counteract Western-centric universalism, make it more difficult to move beyond it—often by picturing the cross-cultural encounter as an exchange of subjective "voices" rather than of the scholarly traditions that give meaning to those voices. This is not to say that my own approach is somehow "objective" or free of ethnocentrism. I am simply pointing out that because most cross-cultural theory sees its task as the inclusion of culturally situated ideas or experiences, it remains unable to recognize modes of scholarly inquiry that exist independently of any one particular subjective viewpoint. Most cross-cultural theorists, therefore, lack the resources to challenge Chakrabarty's insistence that all modern inquiry must be, in some form or another, Europeanized. Without these resources, these theorists continue to build frames of inquiry that turn on European categories and experiences—the very outcome their analysis seeks to hedge against.

Among the central features of contemporary cross-cultural theory is the critique and examination of European colonial and economic expansion during the last two centuries. Cosmpolitanism, subaltern studies, translation studies, and comparative political theory all have, in various ways and in various degrees, taken some form of this postcolonial critique as central to their analysis. Postcolonial theory draws attention to how categories and values particular to Western elite experience, especially those associated with "modernity," come to be constituted as universally applicable to societies everywhere. In place of the universal values of the Western Enlightenment, postcolonial scholars follow the lead of poststructuralist critics to substitute the fragmentary, contingent, and partial—those experiences, individuals, groups, and feelings that are left out, normalized, or exterminated by what Partha Chatterjee calls "the subject-centered rationality characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity" (Chatterjee 1993, xi). Perhaps not surprisingly, postcolonial critique focuses mainly though not exclusively on how

modernist impositions have been resisted in European colonies. Important components of that investigation include how native thinkers formulate resistance, the resources available for them to do so, and how this resistance raises a challenge to, or spurs a reconsideration of, dominant Western norms.[1]

The postcolonial approach is not without its tensions, however. While working against the hegemony of modern Western ways of categorizing knowledge and value, postcolonial studies scholars realize their effort at the same time "inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo" (Prakash 1994, 1475-6). As seen above in the declaration of Dipesh Chakrabarty, these scholars do not seek an absolute alternative to Western categories as much as space to question the value of those categories with respect to culturally and historically differentiated experiences. Within political science, this task of examining how American- or Western-centered norms dominate scholarly inquiry—a phenomenon the comparativist Susanne Rudolph calls the "the imperialism of categories"—has been linked to the discipline's ongoing reconsideration of its research methods. Remarking on her own preconceptions of Indian village life before she began survey fieldwork in the 1950s, Rudolph remarks,

> We imagined we were plumbing the true underpinnings of the Indian experiment in democracy. What we had not counted on was that American ideology, America's hegemonic Lockean liberalism, would shape the very concepts and methods we used to acquire knowledge about an unfamiliar society and its politics (Rudolph 2005, 5).

Working from experiences such as these, Rudolph and others have suggested ways in which interpretive (hermeneutic) approaches can more effectively counteract the "imperialism of categories" by refusing to start from the assumedly universal categories of quantitative analysis. Rather, interpretive approaches begin from the local and the particular self-understandings of the participants. In Rudolph's words, "the alternative to universal knowledge is situated knowledge" (Rudolph 2005, 12).

This depiction of truth as partial, and its bearers as situated within specific contexts that both enable and inhibit access to knowledge, draws arguments from contemporary post-structuralist and anthropological discourses, but derives from a long epistemological tradition in Western thought that pre-dates the Enlightenment. Belief that pure knowledge was inaccessible to fallible humans marks Christian theology as much as Enlightenment skepticism or ancient Greek epistemology. In fact, the word "hermeneutics" is derived from Hermes, messenger of the gods, whose imperfect translations of divine writ symbolize "the intrinsic tension between truth on the one hand, and the human capacity to understand it in mundane conditions" on the other (Ng 2005, 304). In cross-cultural theory, this tension undermines the certainty of translated knowledge, even as it recommends an interpretive, open-ended approach to take account of knowledge lodged in unfamiliar places and articulated in unfamiliar ways (Euben 1999, 156-7).

The "dialogic" approach directly confronts this uncertainty of knowledge, by picturing the cross-cultural encounter as an exchange between sympathetic, but ultimately differently embedded, actors. Sensitive to the ways in which colonial, economic, and political domination has fixed the terms for knowledge, even within the cross-cultural encounter itself, advocates of dialogue do not claim ability to overcome these limitations of knowledge completely. Rather, its most sophisticated practitioners seek to negotiate these limitations, by picturing the interaction of Western investigator with non-Western others as a "conversation" between actors who are each embedded in specific cultural, political, and historical milieux. In this way, its more radical advocates claim, "we can bring certain questions to bear across cultures" (Euben 1997, 32).[2] Dialogue shares important affinities with my own approach, because it aims to go beyond the "structures of Western domination" that decisively shape other cross-cultural exchanges, including much of postcolonial studies. However, in speaking directly to the concerns of inclusion posed by postcolonial studies and qualitative research more generally, dialogic interpretation also renders their shared biases more glaring.

Borrowing the language of Hans-George Gadamer (1975 [1960]), Roxanne Euben explains this interpretive method as a process in which "understanding comes to be seen as a dialogue between two

horizons of meaning, neither of which can claim a monopoly on truth" (1999, 36). In subjecting

everything – including the status of both interlocutors – to re-negotiation, dialogue fosters a learning

process that forces both participants beyond any one fixed world of meaning. Some, like Bhikhu Parekh,

employ the transformative potential of dialogue to forge consensus on difficult issues like human rights

(1999, 142), but others stress the importance of leaving its results open. To Fred Dallmayr, what should

emerge from cross-cultural dialogue is not "the enactment of a ready-made consensus (the subsumption of

particulars under a universalist umbrella) nor the conduct of random chatter…[but] an 'agonal' or

tensional quality which cannot be fully stabilized" (Dallmayr 1996, xiii).

Regardless of these differences, practitioners of dialogue pay careful attention to the role of

speech—that is, the use of language to articulate opinions, demands, and ideas—in the cross-cultural

encounter. Dialogue advocates see speech (or its reconstructed substitutes) as counterpoints to the

violence, explicit or implied, believed to characterize colonialism and Western hegemony. Drawing

attention to what are explicitly theorized as "voices" from the margins—whether those margins be

defined by cultural, economic, or gender-based exclusion—is a goal dialogic theorists also share with

postcolonial theorists, feminists, and qualitative researchers (e.g., Mohanty 1984, Chakrabarty 2002).

Including these voices does not always take the explicit form of a "dialogue." Often, cross-cultural

theorists may simply examine the articulated utterances of individuals whose contributions to political

theory are typically excluded (e.g., Browers 2006, Euben 2006). This drive for greater inclusion also

animates debates over the breadth and content of Western "canons" of political theory and literature.

Reading cross-cultural engagement as an exchange or inclusion of voices recognizes that

political thinking happens in a variety of cultural, social, and economic settings, but it also poses a danger.

Language is not a neutral carrier of meaning, nor does it exist in a vacuum. The different cultural and

societal norms that govern the acceptance and articulation of "reasonable" speech have been widely

discussed—and criticized—in contemporary political theory (Gibbard 1984, Young 1996). In cross-

cultural engagement, another more troubling possibility presents itself: the idea that speech itself may not

be a universal, or universally transparent, form of communication, and that its relationship to violence and politics may not be what cross-cultural theorists presume it is. Seeing the cross-cultural encounter as an exchange of "voices" aims to recreate the ebb-and-flow of verbal reason-giving—in other words, to deliberately put knowledge into words, and to engage in deliberative communication. Although theorists have thought carefully about how and to what extent such global spaces of communication can be designed to accommodate "multicultural" values (e.g., Benhabib 2002; Young 2000, ch. 7), little attention has been paid to how the very *means* and conditions of communication can alter or suppress the substance of expression. Practices that capture what cannot be expressed adequately in words—whether because too sublime (as are some religious truths), too complicated, or because so instantiated in practice that it is not comprehensible through language to begin with—can be acknowledged only with difficulty.

Put slightly differently, privileging the substance of particular utterances comes at the expense of taking seriously the traditions of scholarly inquiry that inform, but have existence and applicability apart from, the individual utterances or texts being examined.[3] Practices that complement text-based interpretive traditions, or that constitute traditions of their own—practices like imitation, ritual, dance, or other forms of non-verbal expression—are rendered silent, passed over in favor of text-based reconstructions of individual utterances. As a result, the "voices" many cross-cultural theorists hope to capture as a means of overcoming Western universalism and its implicit violence may mislead rather than clarify. How and even *if* things are spoken of implicitly endorses assumptions about the location and accessibility of political insight – precisely the destabilizing knowledge cross-cultural engagement seeks to reveal. The "local understandings" believed to result from such vocalizations of experience are pressed into the service of a methodology that renders much of their context irrelevant.

That methodology is often beholden to democratic, Marxist, or other forms of emancipatory politics that aim to foster possibilities of resistance within the cross-cultural encounter. Euben adopts the dialogic model for precisely this reason: "not because it is invulnerable to distortions of power but *because it is less susceptible* to them than explanatory models" that rely on questionable Western-centric

premises like interest aggregation (1999, 13). Yet singling out power relations for remedy presupposes or enforces mutual equality between participants, which may do violence to the non-democratic worldviews subject to cross-cultural scrutiny. By being forced to recognize as decisive the egalitarianism of inclusion and conversation, anti- or simply non-democratic political theories are rendered toothless, if they are recognized at all.[4] Building equality into the very model of exchange ignores particular, and perhaps foundational, hierarchical premises of non-democratic worldviews.

Many cross-cultural theorists, in fact, endorse "dialogue" explicitly on the grounds that it engenders egalitarian norms by building them into the terms of the encounter (e.g., Bell 2000, 11; Panikkar 1988, 132-3). Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes cross-cultural dialogue as an open-ended "pedagogy," in which the oppressed person of today can be taught to become "the democratic subject of tomorrow" (2002, 33). Conversing with our interlocutor may seem to emblematize mutual edification and respect, because "it is only by speaking to the other (not giving orders but engaging in dialogue) that I can acknowledge him/her as a subject, comparable to what I am myself" (Todorov 1983). Ultimately, however, assumptions about what is adequately "comparable to what I am myself" play roles in who and what we select as subjects of analysis. Those texts or personalities that are not directly amenable to conversation are given no chance to dissent to its imposition, because it has already been decided that "the very grain of a cross-cultural encounter has to start…in a dialogic fashion" (Dallmayr 1996, x). These expectations suggest that cross-cultural dialogue may not always minimize distortion: it may just as easily end up glossing over cultural and political differences. The theorist who initially staged the dialogue may change her own opinions as a result of the engagement, but the frame of inquiry she imposes remains always the same.

Whether or not this frame of inquiry changes, or is subject to scrutiny and comparison, has important consequences for how globally dispersed intellectual resources can be made available for theory-making in general. In postcolonial and comparative political theory, for example, accusations of ethnocentrism and cultural exclusion are launched not from "native" perspectives, but from within

European poststructuralist discourses (e.g., Mohanty 1984, Spivak 1988; Dallmayr 1998, 6-7). Gyan Prakash sees in this fact that third world voices so often "speak within and to discourses familiar to the West instead of originating from some autonomous essence" a confirmation that knowledge and its boundaries (whether cultural or disciplinary) are porous and contingent (Prakash 1992, 376). I draw a less positive conclusion from Prakash's observation. While cross-cultural theorists of various stripes have made pioneering efforts to recognize global sources of insight and experience, their frames of inquiry remain beholden to modern Western epistemological debates, often those of post-Enlightenment critique (Dirks 1992, 12-13; Dirlik 1994). With this approach, postcolonial and "non-Western" societies can be positioned as particularly challenging case studies, offering "alternative" views of self, culture, and society. However, their rich traditions of historical, political, and literary scholarship can play no role in elaborating methodologies for inquiry or exchange. The most alarming consequence is not simply that the adequacy of Western models and categories is re-affirmed, but that the capacity to conduct self-sufficient theoretical inquiry in non-Western intellectual or social traditions is implicitly denied (cf. Gandhi 1998, x).

A constructive next step in working through (if not resolving) the difficulties of both ethnocentrism and forced inclusion, then, may be to recognize how local knowledge is constituted not only by substantive, voiced claims but also by methods of inquiry. Focusing on methods in addition to substance draws attention to the modes of expression that mediate what is being expressed, and to the traditions of scholarship that exist apart from the particular subjective opinions expressed by discrete texts or persons. As such, this methods-centered approach both deepens and undermines the critiques made in contemporary West-based cross-cultural theory. It deepens them by adding another layer of interpretive nuance to the cross-cultural encounter they examine. At the same time, it also undermines them by exposing their methods of inquiry as ethnocentric, and hence prone to distorting—or ignoring outright— the very insights about political and social life their engagement means to reveal.

In what follows, I demonstrate through examples the extent to which foreign traditions, cultures, and practices may offer not only counterpoints to Western experience, but also additional means of undertaking inquiry. The Chinese Confucian "study of Classics" tradition is one such means, which bears strong similarities to other exegetical traditions and "commentarial modes of thinking" that have "dominated the intellectual history of premodern civilizations," including those surrounding Vedanta, rabbinical Judaism, ancient and modern Christian Biblical exegesis, Qur'anic exegesis, and the Homerian epic (Henderson 1991, 3-4). Given the global diffusion of these practices, my discussion below cannot possibly exhaust their insights. My look at two Chinese classicists, Wang Yangming and Kang Youwei, is intended as simply one example of how attention to methodologies can enrich the cross-cultural encounter. In responding to the methodological debates of their own time, Kang and Wang elaborate the intimate relationship between methods of inquiry and substantive knowledge. Their specific methodological innovations, in turn, add to the repertoire of techniques and to the frameworks of meaning that can structure both political and cross-cultural theory.

An Alternative Methodology? Two Thinkers from the Chinese Classical Tradition

The Chinese "study of Classics" tradition is not one but an array of practices, which center on interpreting "Classic" (*jing* 經) texts in terms of canonical legitimacy, historical accuracy, and philosophical substance. Techniques for interpreting these texts—canons of music, poetry, history and ritual—range "from the philological to philosophical" (Elman 1984), but draw coherence from the assumption that the Classics are a repository of truth accessible in its entirety to the properly cultivated. These practices comprise what the modern classicist Michael Nylan calls "an imagined community" of scholars dedicated to transmitting, through exegetical practices, the Way associated with Confucius (Nylan 2001, 59).

Like other exegetical traditions, Chinese classicist practices recognize a definitive break with a historical period that came to be considered "classical," a rupture that helped to render the texts of that era

canonical (Henderson 1991, 40). Though classics and the problems of their interpretations exist within

any canon—in China, the most prominent include Daoist, Buddhist, and Mohist (Jiang 2004)— my focus

in this paper is on the "Confucian" (*rujia* 儒家) traditions of classicism originally grounded in the Six

Classics (the *Changes*, *Rites*, *Odes*, *Documents,* and *Music*; and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*). Even

within this one set of traditions, more diversity than conformity is to be found. The intuitive textual

approach of Wang Yangming, for example, stood in sharp contrast to contemporary Imperial Confucian

orthodoxy, but his views held wide appeal from the Ming well into end of the Qing dynasty. Kang

Youwei, in contrast, advocates philological techniques that deliberately reject the intuitionism of Wang

and his followers. Each offers particular methods for understanding canonical texts that offer a variety of

insights into human life as well as techniques for comprehending, expressing, and sharing those insights.[5]

Although Wang and Kang are extremely well-known figures in the history of Chinese political

thought and classical studies, I do not claim them as representative of either. I have selected them for

analysis here because their disparate approaches to interpreting the Classics suggest the range of

viewpoints that Chinese exegetical traditions have accommodated. Perhaps more significantly, both

thinkers were involved in the intellectual negotiation of their own traditions with new, foreign ones

(Wang with Buddhism, and Kang with Western political theory), yet redress for both lay in putting to new

use traditional methodological practices. This methodological loyalty in the face of a cross-cultural

challenge does not suggest the conservatism as much as it does the resilience of classical scholarship in a

variety of settings, both intra- and inter-cultural.

Wang Yangming

Wang Yangming was a Ming dynasty contributor to neo-Confucianism, an intellectual trend that

revived Confucian traditions within a climate dominated by Buddhist thought during the late Tang and

early Song dynasties. Wang's own approach, his "study of the mind-and-heart" (*xinxue* 心學), grew out

of the contemporary orthodoxy dominated by the writings of the Song dynasty thinker Zhu Xi. Breaking

away from the pedanticism of the Han and Tang dynasty exegetes, whose interaction with the Classics Wang saw as "ruining the Classics for the sake of philology," Wang sought to discover the wider truths about human nature and virtue that the Classics contained (Wang 1960, 215). Appropriately, Wang's meditations on the Classics are not carried out with reference to the commentaries that for centuries accompanied the original text and mediated its perception by the reader. Rather, he engages the texts directly. This shift was partly as a response to the challenge of contemporary Buddhism. Like other neo-Confucians, Wang responded to the contemporary popularity of Buddhism by incorporating its metaphysical concerns to revisit possibilities within the Confucian canon (Lin 1994, 186). One result was that Song and Ming Confucians like Wang shifted their focus away from institution-building and political administration toward individual self-cultivation as the foundation for a harmonious social order. When reflecting on the meaning of the Classics, Wang appropriately looks inside himself for the principles they reflect, rather than looking externally, toward either teacher or commentary, for their meaning.

Wang's "Inscription on the 'Respecting the Classics' Pavilion at Jishan Academy" 稽山書院尊 經閣記 (Wang 1960, 214-5) represents not the earliest but certainly one of the most straightforward attempts to clarify how his philosophy is connected to his interpretive methodology. For Wang, his "study of the heart-and-mind" comes to be identified with "study of the Classics" (Cai 1982, Hu 2002). This inscription, commemorating the construction of a new pavilion, is a poetic and simple injunction to allow the meaning of the Classics to permeate and to constitute one's self and daily interactions. To Wang, the Six Classics themselves are permanent, comprehensive, and enduring through their identification with the "Way." These all finds their mainspring in the individual's heart-and-mind:

> The Classics are the enduring Way. When [this Way] resides in Heaven, it is called fate; when it
> is endowed to humans, it is called human nature. When it acts as master of the body, it is called
> the heart-and-mind. Fate, human nature, heart-and-mind—all are one. [This entity] flows through
> people and things, reaches the four seas, permeates heaven and earth, and stretches across the

ancient and the new. There is nowhere that does not have it; nowhere that it is not the same,

nowhere that it can change. This is the enduring way.[6]

Here Wang invokes several common metaphors tied to the etymology of the term "classic" (*jing*)

in Chinese, which originally meant "warp" (that is, the threads running lengthwise across a woven fabric).

These *jing* were often seen as the threads that tied scholars to the rich tapestry of their own civilization

(Nylan 2001, 11; Wang Junyun 2003, 144). The Classics, as Wang indicates here, touch upon every

aspect of the lived experiences of the people within that civilization, becoming synonymous with

constancy and endurance (常) not only among living peoples, but among one's ancestors and the history

they created. For Wang Yangming, the Classics are both of those things and yet more than those things.

Echoing the "On Explaining the Classics" chapter of the book of *Rites* (considered to be the earliest

extant discussion of this topic; Wang Meng'ou 1970, 792), Wang explains how each classic exhibits a

specific excellence but added together are more than the sum of their parts.

This enduring Way—when it is used to speak of the circulation of the ebb and flow of yin-yang

essence, it is called the *Changes*; when it is used to speak of the implementation of statutes and

political affairs, it is called the *Documents*; when it is used to speak of elegies and feelings is

called the *Odes*; when it is used to speak of the illumination of balance and appropriateness it is

called the *Rites*; when it is used to speak of the issuing forth of happiness and peace, it is called

the *Music*; when it is used to speak of distinctions between right and wrong, and sincerity and

disloyalty, it is called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. From the ebbing and flowing of yin-yang,

all the way to distinguishing right and wrong—all are one.

Here Wang is not pointing out how the Classics "speak" (言), but how they "are used to speak-

of" (以言): how they describe events, feelings and ideas that may elude precise human description,

through a rich vocabulary of metaphor and illusion. The Classics are a fixed but, as Wang points out above, completely comprehensive world of "images" (像) (images which the Ming-Qing dynasty classicist Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692) later came to identify as the essence of the Classics). These images gesture toward and give some voice to the obscurities of human life, but ultimately interpretation is a matter for *realization* within oneself of the enduring Way. Each of the Classics "inscribes itself upon the individual's heart-and-mind" (志吾心) to enable him to realize his inner nature to the greatest extent possible.

Wang sums up this point simply and boldly: "The six Classics are nothing but the enduring Way (常道)of my own heart-and-mind." Here Wang affirms the radical inward subjectivity toward interpreting the Classics displayed by the Song dynasty dissenter Lu Jiuyuan, whom Wang identified as his intellectual predecessor (Wilson 1995, 96-7). Lu's bold and frequently quoted assertion that "I do not annotate the Classics; the Classics annotate me" reduces the status of the Classics to a footnote, and their importance to below that of the individual interpreting them. For some scholars, this brazen statement alludes to the unacceptably loose interpretations of the Classics Lu (and his self-proclaimed inheritor Wang) advocated. Modern scholars who attempt to rescue Lu and Wang from this charge see in this quote a recognition that interpretation is unavoidably subjective, and hermeneutic systems necessarily historically contingent (Jiang 2003, 52). But such anachronistic attempts to integrate the Lu-Wang interpretive stance with modern, self-reflexive techniques conceals the other resources their textual methodology makes available.

Contra Zhu Xi's orthodox and institutionalized "school of principle," which held that the proper measure of all earthly activity (especially moral values) resides in "external things" (萬物), Wang's school of heart-and-mind insisted that this measure in fact lies precisely in the heart-and-mind of each individual. Where Zhu Xi urges us to "investigate external things" (格物) to correct our own internal faults, Wang Yangming believes that one's own intentions must be "right" or proper before certain kinds of knowledge—especially moral knowledge of Confucian virtues like filiality, loyalty, reciprocity and

sincerity—can be comprehended. In his confidence that human moral understanding can be its own

guarantee, Wang has been compared to Baruch Spinoza; Wang's thought cannot, however, be easily

assimilated into Western epistemological problematiques. Wang's reliance on intuitive perception over

Spinoza's "geometrical method" of reasoning (Ching 1976, 81) puts forth some important conditions as to

how Wang believes we are able understand the Classics.

These conditions can be clearly seen in what Lu himself identified as a precondition for enabling

the Six Classics to "annotate" him, namely that only "If I study enough to learn the root," can the Six

Classics become his footnote (cited in Liu 2004, 52). This important but frequently omitted condition

underscores the extent to which, in the "Lu-Wang" school, study and learning are an integral part of the

task of intuitive understanding.[7] This does not mean book-learning except insofar as study of the Classics

can be considered such; but since by properly reading the Classics, one's own nature becomes properly

identical with them (Cai 1982, 231), learning too takes on a bold new form. We understand the Classics

by practicing them, and practice them to respect them, but in practicing them we also become them. "As

to how the cultivated individual (君子) acts toward the Six Classics: he searches in his own heart-and-

mind for the ebbing and flowing of yin-yang, and when appropriate circulates them. This is how he

respects the *Changes*. He searches in his own heart-and-mind for statutes and political affairs, and when

appropriate implements them. This is how he respects the *Documents*…."

In this sense, the Classics are not only texts, though they are written records; and they are not

only history, though what they record is past events. The Classics are invitations to cultivate one's own

heart-and-mind by imbibing the lessons, rituals, and moral exemplars they contain. The meanings

understood in this way go beyond what is written and extend to what is practiced, although this "going

beyond" does not extend infinitely beyond. The Classics are still a fixed realm of meaning, even if they

do not limit us by being fixed since, according to Wang, they are identical with (but cannot be

transformed by) our own heart-and-mind. The modern Chinese scholar Yan Zheng has gone so far as to

suggest that the "fundamental essence" (*benti* 本體) of the Classics must already be acknowledged by the

interpreter before he can properly interpret them; in other words, a kind of cultural "pre-understanding" instilled by real experience of the virtues elegized in the Classics must exist before there can be an understanding of them (Yan 2001, 515). I do not believe this view is necessitated by Wang's reading of the Classics – since meaning can be derived at least partially from exploring one's own mind-and-heart – but it does underscore the extent to which identity and interpretation on this account become blurred. This possibility leads Yan to conclude that "classicism and the Classics are not objects of interpretation, but of implementation, of conversion" (Yan 2001, 516). The central "problem" driving Wang's interpretive methodology is not how to understand the truth of the text, but more compellingly how to affirm and practice that truth.

This kind of self-identification with the Classics that for Wang constitutes successful interpretation does not come without effort, however: daily and rigorous practice replaces a reading of the Classics mediated by commentarial "talk." Wang's "Inscription" on the Classics pavilion discussed here, in fact, is not an academic essay discussing subtleties of hermeneutics, but a visual reminder to students to *act* on their interpretations. Such actions are shaped and facilitated by a multitude of daily practices – consistently virtuous behavior in the manner of the sages, for example, or the memorization and recitation of the Classics. The importance of such practices suggests that interpretation of the Classics is less like "interpretation" than "imitation," a point to which Wang alludes elsewhere (*Chuanxilu* I:11). Even Wang's inscription takes on the form of a memorization exercise, repeating key phrases about the magnificence of the Way that begin as unfamiliar but become assimilated within the wider environments of the text and the psyche of the reader (who is also the enactor). This activist approach to interpretation is grounded in Wang Yangming's doctrine of "the identity of knowing and doing" (知行合一), which he discusses in the compendium *Records of Practicing What Has Been Transmitted* (*Chuanxilu* 傳習錄), compiled by his student Xu Ai. Wing Tsit-chan translates the title of this compendium as *Instructions for Practical Living*, but this translation obscures the allusion it makes to the *Analects* in "passing on what

has been transmitted" (*Analects* 1:4). The title self-consciously binds Wang and his followers to the Classics and their tradition of interpretation and practice that extends from the past toward the future.

Knowledge, then, is not primarily a matter of thought, but also of action; one cannot "know" something unless one has performed it or done it. As Wang notes, how can one know food before he has ever eaten, or clothes before he has worn them? (II:132-3). The same is especially true with the Confucian virtues, because virtue for Wang is essentially a practical knowledge in a way it was not for Zhu Xi (Ivanhoe 2002, 158).[8] Wang believes the necessity of embodied moral knowledge motivates Confucius' compilation of the Classics at a time of moral disorder: Confucius "did not intend to teach through mere words." The real "reason the world is not in order is because flowery writing is becoming ascendant and concrete practice is declining" (I: 11).[9] It was this concrete practice that Confucius hoped to invigorate with the Six Classics and that constitutes their real interpretation. "In ancient times sages transmitted the Six Classics to support what is best in man and to express concern for later ages" just as a rich householder stores up wealth for his progeny (Wang 1960, 215). The Classics transcend mere texts. So too does their interpretation transcend the merely linguistic and formal, and extend to the knowledge gained through the actual daily practice of humanity (仁), sincerity (誠), and reciprocity (恕), among other virtues.

Many of these principles about the understanding of Classics are shared across Confucian classical traditions, despite major differences in interpretation and implementation. Several hundred years after Wang Yangming, the Qing dynasty scholar Kang Youwei and his reform-minded classicism give us further insight into how similar assumptions are put to very different uses. Where Wang Yangming sees the Classics as an invitation for inwardly directed cultivation so as to make a better world and a better, more sagely individual, Kang Youwei begins from a very different interpretive stance. His reading of the Classics inform and is informed by external, administrative problems of politics rather than subjective intuition. A major political reformer in the late Qing dynasty, Kang is particularly interesting for our purposes here because, like Wang, he wrote in a period of cross-cultural fertilization. Yet Kang's

"Western" projects of constitutional monarchy and social justice were less concerned with realizing particular goals promoted by Euro-Americans, than they were with the possibility of bringing to fruition a political ideal urged by his interpretative stance on the Classics. Kang reinforces his stake in the exegetical traditions of Confucianism to find redress for the two kinds of cultural crises he faced: the first being anxiety over the authenticity of texts in the received canon; the second, the incursion of the West upon the political and social system China had maintained for millennia, shored up by the ideological monopoly of that canon.

Kang Youwei

Kang was the last of a group of Qing dynasty scholars who leveraged political reform on the "New Text" versions of the Classics. New Text methodology is linked to a debate that began thousands of years ago in the Han Dynasty, when "Old Text" versions of certain Classics appeared. Some scholars maintained that these versions had survived the widespread textual destruction initiated by Qin Shihuang, China's first emperor, around 221 BCE. Previously relying on "New Text" versions that recorded oral transmissions of the Classics in contemporary writing style, scholars in the Han Dynasty were now perplexed as to which set represented the "true" words of the sages. They set about establishing their authenticity by way of empirical, usually philology-based, inquiry, or *kaozheng* (考證). Reformist scholars of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, like Zhuang Cunyu and Liu Fenglu, inherited the mantle of the so-called "Han Learning" to continue research into the authenticity – and hence legitimacy – of the Five Classics (that is, the Six Classics minus the *Music*, which is now lost to antiquity). However, rather than narrow their focus to the philological techniques (訓詁) of other Qing exegetes, these New Text scholars attempted to understand the "esoteric words and great meanings" (微言大意) of the Classics, seeing in them an important precedent for adapting political institutions as the times dictated, rather than slavishly copying the details of Zhou-era institutions as many contemporary commentators suggested.

By the time of the Qing dynasty, the classical canon had been expanded from five Classics to thirteen, with special consideration being given to Zhu Xi's commentaries on the "Four Books" (i.e., the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, the latter two of which comprise chapters in the *Rites*). The "Four Books" formed the basis for civil examinations and thus political advancement. New Text scholars distinguished themselves in focusing not on these orthodox texts but instead on the historical texts in the canon, especially the *Gongyang* commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* classic, in which they read a decisive account of political reform. The *Gongyang* was given added legitimacy by the fact that the commentary was the only classic of the now thirteen to survive intact from the former Han (Elman 1990, xxvi; Liang 1985, ch. 22). Unlike the other major commentary on the *Annals*, the *Zuo* commentary, the *Gongyang* presented an image of Confucius as a charismatic visionary and social reformer—a sharp contrast to his perception by neo-Confucians like Wang Yangming as simply a teacher and transmitter of moral standards derived from the Duke of Zhou.[10]

These methodological debates received added impetus from the military, political, and intellectual incursions of the modern West that provoked an unprecedented critique of China's ancient political institutions. Kang Youwei was a leader in promoting sensible Western reform in the direction of constitutional government and democratic accountability, but he remained a cultural conservative wedded to the cause of rescuing Chinese civilization as he understood it. Although many of his claims about canonical authenticity have been discredited, his approach remains compelling on a methodological level: that is, as thoroughly as he embraced Western political reforms, his motivation for and understanding of that reform remains firmly grounded in Old Text/New Text debate, and takes the form of classical commentary.

In Western secondary literature, much attention has been paid to Kang's work *The Great Commonwealth* for its vision of a Confucian democratic utopia with overt resemblances to Western political theory (e.g., Pusey 1983; Wang Juntao 2003). Yet his overlooked books *Examination of the False Classics of the Xin Learning* and *Research on Confucius as a Reformer*, begun after Kang's

memorial to the emperor arguing for a reformed constitutional monarchy failed in 1888, are important resources for understanding how and why Kang links his methodology to his politics. In these books, Kang continued the mission of the New Text school initiated by earlier Gongyang forbears Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan. He sought to develop further the revisionist doctrine of "using the ancients as a pretext for reform" (托古改制), legitimized by a reading of Confucius who himself used the ancients for similar purposes (Ma 1992-3, 713; Zhu 2002, 200).

"Man came into being many years ago; but evidence from that period of time is unclear and lacking, such that records cannot be found for it," Kang's *Research on Confucius* begins. He holds this to be true even for China's Three Dynasties, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, upon which early China supposedly modeled its ethical and political systems. But these dynasties too are properly relegated to the realm of historical obscurity because, according to Kang, "it is only once we reach the Qin and Han dynasties that detailed records are available… the reality is, the glory and civilization of the Three Dynasties originates entirely from Confucius who put them forth as a pretext [for his own ideas]…however beautiful and flourishing they may have been, there is no hard evidence of them now." (Kang 1968 [1923], ch. 1). Confucius created these narratives of ancient civilizations ruled over by sage-kings to take advantage of contemporary beliefs in the sacredness of the past, not to celebrate their inherent exemplary value as neo-Confucians may allege.

In this account, Confucius emerges successively as a "new king," as an "uncrowned king," and finally as a sage-king, who himself authored all of the Six Classics (Kang 1968 [1923], ch. 8, secs. 1-4) making him, and not the sage-kings Wen, Yao, or Shun the real originator of Chinese civilization. While Confucius was always assumed to have compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a cryptically terse narrative history of the ancient state of Lu, his presentation here as the author of all the Classics enables Kang to paint him as a revolutionary who single-handedly established China's ethical and political norms. Quoting from the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian's authoritative *Historical Records* (史記), Kang

points out how Confucius' legitimacy as a king and thus as a lawmaker is linked to his stance toward the Classics.

> Once the Zhou House was in decline, its vassals acted wildly and without restraint. Zhongni [Confucius] mourned the fact that the *Rites* had fallen into desuetude and that the *Music* was no longer intact. He promoted editing the Classics as a way of promoting the Way of the Kings, restoring order to a chaotic world, and bringing those gone awry back to their proper place. His words were seen as the laws, institutions, and duties of all under Heaven. He transmitted the unity of the Six Arts, recording them for the benefit of future generations." (*Records*, Preface of the Grand Historian). At the time of Confucius, there existed before him in time no luminous Kings, ahead of him in time no way of putting their [wisdom] to use. So he wrote the Spring and Autumn Annals to pass on profound words…that acted as the law of a King (Kang 1968 [1923], ch. 8 sec. 2).

Kang here points out the roles played by the Classics, and what is at stake in using New Text investigatory techniques to identify their author as Confucius. The Classics literally stand as ultimately authoritative for all earthly affairs, in effect gaining political legitimacy (and not only the ethical supremacy they enjoyed with Wang Yangming's reading). They qualify Confucius as a king, since his word is law. Through a painstaking commentary drawing in evidence from the *Records*, the *Analects*, and a variety of other classical commentary including the *Gongyang* and Dong Zhongshu's *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, Kang rests his ethical and political claims on a historical argument that traces Confucius' kingship from the past into the future. The best way to worship that king is not to copy his institutions, but to imitate their spirit. This underlies Kang's doctrine of "using the ancients as a pretext for reform," by which he advances arguments for constitutional government on the basis of ancient precedents of change and adaptation.

In this way, Kang does call into radical question the legitimacy of ancient norms, but nevertheless implicitly affirms them by replicating Confucius' own decision to find in the past a culturally tenable precedent for balanced and necessary reform in the present. This path to reform was crystallized in Kang's doctrine of "preserve the three eras" (存三統). "Preserving the three eras" was a New Text reading of the Three Dynasties narrative, which held that just as Confucius himself admitted to differences and progression from the Xia to the Zhou dynasties, so too should contemporary rulers admit of political and social change and refit their institutions accordingly (Ma 1992-3, 700; Liang 1985, 449). Some scholars read into the "three eras" Kang's heterodox break with the typical Chinese perception of history as circular. Kang, it seems, presents a view of time and human evolution as Darwinist and progressive (Pusey 1983), since Kang's other work—notably the *Great Commonwealth*—does indeed offer a vision of a utopian future reached by means of three stages (三世). I would argue, however, that the future Kang describes is not a progressive but a fixed one, that to Kang reflects what Confucius "really meant" by his own invocation of "a great commonwealth" recorded in the *Liyun* (禮云) chapter of the *Rites*. Kang's history emerges in the way a pattern unfolds, a process that replicates the "using of the ancients" which binds Kang to traditions of transmission by way of imitating sagely action.

Along these same lines, Kang's argument goes on to consider that it is not only the authorship, but also the authenticity, of the Classics that are decisive. Kang puts forth a scandalously radical view about just how many of the Classics can claim canonical legitimacy (and hence political authority) in his *Examination of the False Classics of the Xin Learning*. There, he demonstrates the extent to which the Confucian canon was comprised of false documents – specifically the *Rites of Zhou*, the *Zuo Commentary*, and the *Mao* version of the *Odes* – engineered to legitimize the Han-era reign of the usurper Wang Mang by his loyal official Liu Xin.

> If I were to explain in words the reason and purpose for my writing these 40 chapters of
> *Examination of the False Classics*, I would say: The forging of the false Classics leading to the

upset of the institutions of sages began with Liu Xin when he propagated [the false Classics] and usurped Confucius' place of authority, and culminated with [the Han dynasty commentator] Zheng Xuan. [The false Classics] were read for two thousand years of time, accumulating bundles and bundles of scholarship and promoting reverence for the institutions of twenty dynasties – but all held up false Classics as the sage's law. Their words were memorized and respected…yet no one dare oppose [this state of affairs], no one dare suspect it. (Kang 1958, 2).

At this point, Kang's concern is truly for "study of Classics" in the literal sense: only a study of this scale can make clear how interpretation of the Classics and thus one's comprehension of truth are tightly implicated in how the Classics are transmitted and implemented. For Kang the Classics are valuable and imitable with respect to not mainly the details of their content, but to their history of being transmitted and preserved: an endorsement of "classical studies" as a very way of life that structures one's responsibilities as an ethical individual. Taking part in classical studies both transmits texts and makes one more like Confucius, in continuing to venerate (through prudent study of its principles) the past he valorized. In this way Kang differs from those commentators who read in the *Classics* detailed blueprints for institutional design. Kang's New Text commitments, manifest in his classical exposition in the *Xin Learning,* calls into question the idea that texts alone, with their "esoteric words," are reliable bearers of truth. He places more emphasis on oral traditions, extratextual practices of study, and pedagogical customs – both those that supported transmission of the Classics past the Qin disaster, as well as those that surround him, Kang, in the present – to unlock the "great meanings" of what Confucius is trying to convey.

This argument gains added force when we consider that Kang, following his mentor Liu Ping, identified the true difference between New Text and Old Text as lying not in words, but in the institutions and scholastic doctrines passed on by their teachers (師說) (Ma 1992-3, 702). Kang's argument demonstrates the extent to which the interpretation of the Confucian Classics is not lodged entirely in

texts, but (as with Wang Yangming) in supplemental regimes of extratextual practice and familiarization. Proper transmission of the Classics is just as important as what they contain—implicating in his interpretative stance the entire structure of teacher-student relations in imperial China and the oral messages they passed on.

In tracing back those transmission mechanisms to a more primitive Confucianism so that the "real" Confucius and his historical importance may emerge, Kang's movement can be seen as "fundamentalist." In fact, Kang's student Liang Qichao reports that Kang saw himself as a Chinese version of Martin Luther, with Confucius as his unwitting Messiah. But his resulting movement to make Confucianism into a religion, however Western-seeming or Western-inspired, is only comprehensible with respect to his "New Text" methodology. This is because Kang's problematic is about how to recover an ancient truth, not to manufacture a new one. His references are inter-textual but intra-traditional, and although they may reflect the conversations that were occurring in the West about the extent to which religion (especially Christianity) formed the backbone of its civilization, Kang does not join those conversations. Situating Kang within an egalitarian conversation oriented to the concerns of contemporary Western political theory would remove him from his methodological context and thus undermine much of the moral thrust of his argument: for Kang the links to his own past are not merely historical but also moral, and for that reason he cannot be unmoored from the hierarchy those links create. Reading his work as simply an interpretive engagement with an earlier time reduces it to a merely historical act, whereas for Kang it was also a profoundly moral one. When Kang attempts to figure out "what went wrong," his approach is critical not of the content, but of the authenticity, of the Classics that were China's most distinctive intellectual heritage.

Chinese Classicism and the Methods of Cross-cultural Theory

What impact can alternative modes of inquiry and interpretation, like those elaborated in the Chinese Confucian classicist tradition, have on thinking about global culture, as well as about ourselves

and our neighbors? Some of the lessons to be drawn from my discussion of Chinese classicism are specific to Chinese intellectual history, but they can be generalized to suggest new ways of thinking about the cross-cultural encounter. In what follows I tack between the specificities of this classicist tradition and the more general points about political thinking they gesture toward. I hope to show how classicist methodologies make important contributions to our study of politics, not only in terms of what we consider to be the dilemmas of political life, but also how we discern what even constitutes such a dilemma. By careful study, these methodologies may be applicable to our own practice of political *and* cross-cultural theory, providing us with new guiding principles as well as the modes of inquiry to investigate them.

The relationship between knowledge and action posed by Wang draws our attention to the knowledge not only contained in texts or conveyed through speech, but also implicit within traditions of practices. For both Kang and Wang as well as most Confucian classicists, the extra-textual practices and intense exegetical exercises that characterized their participation in this tradition were necessitated by the very nature of the classical Chinese language in which the texts were written. The contemporary Chinese classicist Liu Xiaogan points out that in the unpunctuated, uninflected and severely sparse language of classical Chinese, even defining a part of speech for the concept under discussion is a major philosophical issue. Liu believes this linguistic ambiguity is a primary reason classicist studies flourished in early and imperial China (Liu 2004, 41-2). Added to this are the multiple hardships of political censorship, physical replication, and material decay faced by all philosophically significant texts. Scholars were constantly reminded of how the physical presence of, if not the message inherent in, the Classics is subject to human limitations. For these reasons Kang and Wang adopt hermeneutic stances that privilege human relationships, action, and the understandings these practices convey, rather than the abstracted conversations or speech-based interventions of much contemporary cross-cultural theory.

Their hermeneutic approaches suggest that merely reading and translating these texts may not be enough to understand them, because such techniques cannot capture in words what is meant to be

exemplary, action-oriented, and impressionistic. It is not an accident that Western hermeneutics often takes a cue from Ricoeur (1981) and reads all of life as a text: in order to be intelligible, something must be articulated and recorded. But such an approach forces articulation of that which cannot be articulated (in Wang's case, both because too sublime, and because only ultimately meaningful in practice), and renders dry and inanimate that which has the power to morally transform its reader through its interpretation. The classical texts of Chinese Confucianism do not themselves overtly present theories or complete expositions of understanding; they do not "speak" as coherent voices. Rather, their interpreters read them as records of exemplary acts and as repositories of images and metaphor to which they supply their own theory of coherence, often interpreted through extratextual means such as embodied practice or teacher-student transmissions. As stated in the "Great Commentary" on the *Classic of Changes*, "Writing cannot express words completely; and words cannot express thought completely." Confucius himself expressed a wish to do without speech: "What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons run their course and the myriad things flourish. What does Heaven ever say?" (*Analects* 17:19.)

Viewing the texts in this way is motivated by an assumption that first posits a condition of inequality between reader and classic, and then a complete identification, a "becoming a sage," sought by working through and meditating upon the Classics. This approach to texts thus builds upon – rather than rejects or even singles out for remedy, as postcolonial theory does – a hierarchical understanding of power. As the eminent Chinese philosopher Mou Zongsan has pointed out, the "becoming" this engagement invites is not a "becoming like," as Christians seek to become "Christ-like," but an actual identity—through careful imitation—with sages and sageliness oneself (Mou 1963, 17-18). The Chinese classicist model presented here elevates the Classics to a status of a permanently superior "other," a situation negotiated by the commentating "self" only through complete identification with, *not* transformation of, the ancient sagely ideal presented (however indirectly) in the Classics. This focus suggests a diachronic path for interpretation and action – transmission (*chuancheng* 傳承) as equally important to new insight. Kang Youwei's doctrine of "using the ancients as a pretext for reform" is one

example of how history implies more than just its recrudescence in the present. History also invites replication, imitation, and valorization.

Consonant with such an expansive hermeneutic approach, Chinese Confucian thinkers do not compartmentalize understanding of self and other into mere academic disciplines. Like the warp thread, such understanding weaves into every aspect of the interpreter's life (Wang Junyun 2003, 144). In so far as ancient *ru* scholars understood their interpretations of the Classics as embodied in action, not only or primarily in written words, their political theory should also be sought in different sources. Political theory appears not only in places that self-consciously articulate it, but also in an array of modes that celebrate, commemorate and transmit it: in funeral orations and tombstone inscriptions; in the spirit of art, calligraphy, poetry and literature; on commemorative steles, monuments and temples (as with Wang Yangming's inscription); through ancient performance traditions that actually constituted parts of now-lost Classics (Nylan 2001, 11); records of kinship lineages (Elman 1990); the materiality of burial sites (de Pee 2007); and in the oral histories and teacher-student transmissions that constituted major sources of hermeneutic insight for both Kang and Wang. As a disciple of Confucius observed, "One can get to hear about the Master's accomplishments, but one cannot get to hear his views on human nature and the way of heaven" (*Analects* 5:13).

Unfortunately, these interpretive nuances are obscured when Chinese thought is approached as a series of clear treatises written by philosopher-type figures, who stand in for an entire received tradition that spans millennia. Many examinations of Confucian political thought, for example, identify "Confucianism" with particular philosophers like Confucius and his articulate followers (e.g., Ackerly 2005, Bell 2006, ch. 2; Fox 1997). Kang Youwei is particularly helpful for explaining why such an identity between a specific text or person, on the one hand, and a whole tradition, on the other, can break down. For Kang, methodology rather than content better characterizes much of what should be properly understood as "Confucian." "Confucianism" is not a philosophy for which Confucius is the official spokesman, but a tradition of self-understanding and textual interpretation as participants in the *ru* 儒

tradition, the Chinese term for Confucianism. The origins of the *ru* designation are obscure, but they do indicate the rootedness of "Confucianism" in traditions that preceded Confucius (Eno 1990, 190-3). This explains Kang's critique that the Tang and Song learning placed too heavy an emphasis on the Duke of Zhou and hardly any on the Great Sage himself.[11] In fact, the Confucian revival in the Tang and Song dynasties called "neo-Confucianism" in English did not center around Confucius, but rather on how to practice and interpret the Way he promoted, hence the movement's name: *daoxuejia* (道學家, lit., "study of the Way" school). The *ru* tradition viewed its task as understanding not merely the words of Confucius – who himself insisted that he "transmits but does not create" (*Analects* 7.1) – but the presumably comprehensive value system he inherited and transmitted from ancient Zhou Dynasty traditions in the form of the Classics. Indeed, "in the Confucian world of reading and understanding, the key issue is not so much how to know…as to apply what is known" (Ng 2005, 306). And, as contemporary American jurisprudence demonstrates, applying what is known is not indifferent to methods of interpretation and practice.

Classicist scholars like Wang and Kang believe that only a proper approach to the Classics will order their content and reveal its exhaustive truth—an assumption found in commentarial traditions across the globe (Henderson 1991, 89-134). These characteristics do not imply that exegetical interpretations are rigid and lacking creativity (Kang Youwei's certainly is not) only that they take a particular and unchangeable set of images as their focus of interpretation. In fact, the commentarial tradition to which exegetes like Wang and Kang were committed stands as some of the boldest in the Confucian tradition, though their arguments are less accessible when their specific interpretive methodologies are not kept in view. Their content on its surface seems repetitive, and its "original" insights sparse, but it is not for that reason beyond our comprehension. It may be better to understand their mode of thinking as more akin to a mosaic or a Byzantine "florilegium," a literary genre in which originality is actually sought for in personally inflected arrangements of standard formulas (Makeham 2003, 49). The author's "own" ideas cannot and should not necessarily be distinguished from those he quotes or otherwise alludes to: in

performing a commentarial exercise, the exegete is in fact forging an identity with the received text that, as we have seen above, comes to constitute the internalized standard of his moral system. Kang's attempt to distinguish the "false Classics" from the real ones is made more reasonable when this assumption is kept in mind; only by manipulating the images, identifying which are "authentic" and which not, does Kang's meaning become intelligible as an attempt to clarify a moral path and not simply an exercise in pedanticism. Like Wang Yangming, Kang attempts to build proper communion with other like-minded persons in the realization of a perfect truth.

Although elaborated within a Chinese exegetical discourse, Kang's and Wang's interpretive exercises imply a radical form of cross-cultural exchange. That is, the Way to which Kang and Wang dedicated their lives is seen as a closed system, but it is not one that is closed off to outsiders who engage in particular practices. For Confucians like Wang and Kang, the words of sages recorded in the Classics are assumed to be ultimately accessible by anyone, even if the process of attaining this wisdom takes a lifetime of practice and study. Its borders are made permeable not by means of prior intellectual or ethnic background, but by means of the very hard work to which Kang and Wang exhort us. In fact, during the Western incursions into China of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was widely assumed that Westerners too were inheritors of China's ancient Way (Wang Ermin 1995, 34).

Ironically, however, permeating borders in this way entails leaving behind the anti-universalist impulses of postcolonialism, situated knowledge, and dialogue, and instead embracing a kind of universalism. The presumption that truth or insight is always partial and irreducibly situated inhibits the passage from conversation, to *conversion*: an event many different traditions expect and even welcome in the course of learning something new. Some forms of understanding require us to consider the possibility that we may have to abandon our current beliefs completely and *become* something we now are not, committed to a new Way. The point here is *not* that such "becoming" is the only acceptable way of carrying out cross-cultural inquiry, that it is always and everywhere appropriate, or that other methods— including those associated with dialogue, postcolonial theory, or modern social science—are completely

useless in rendering truths, insights, or experiences tractable to new outsiders. But the possibility of "conversion," however limited, invites a host of new constructive possibilities for cross-cultural theorizing.

If texts and practice are acknowledged to exist in a complementary relationship, local experiences within a living tradition and prolonged, deeply committed engagement with its canonical texts in the original language offers significant hermeneutical advantages. Simply adding new texts or "voices" to the political theory canon will not be enough. As such, political theorists may realize the need to join their comparativist colleagues in language study, historical research, and fieldwork—what Pheng Cheah deems "the work of genuine comparative research." Cheah calls further for "detailed and empirically grounded research on particular regions outside the North Atlantic; and a theoretically sophisticated understanding of the complexity of material culture and social-scientific evidence" (Cheah 1999, 17). I would add, however, that if the goal is to maximize learning what is new, rather than simply affirming what we already know, the restraints and assumptions built into our comparative models—including the criteria for both evidence and theoretical sophistication—must also be reconsidered and possibly renegotiated.

This renegotiation should not happen only within the contemporary Western academy. It can and should happen from within the analytic frames developed by culturally diverse intellectual traditions, which cross-cultural theorists have all along meant to respect. The practices implied by canonical texts, and the conversions of outlook they invite, facilitate achievement of this goal by radically breaking down who and what is part of that tradition. After serious study and immersion, the scholar who formerly maintained her critical distance from otherness now may, if she wishes, continue the encountered tradition into the present. This need not lead to new forms of closed-mindedness, however; it simply gestures toward the possibility that critique from *within* Chinese or other non-Western traditions may become a possible form of cross-cultural engagement. We can move from formulating methodologies of comparison to thinking about "comparative methodologies," searching for alternative ways to practice political inquiry.

This move does not abandon the possibility for critique of dominant practices in any cultural tradition; it simply expects to find them in different and more diverse places, within as much as outside those very traditions. This methods-centered approach, like the other methods of cross-cultural engagement I examine in this paper, explicitly seeks to move beyond what anthropologist Saba Mahmood calls "the circumscribed social scientific exercise of 'understanding and translation.'" But it does more than simply "hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry," which is a goal she shares with the other cross-cultural theorists examined here (Mahmood 2005, 39). Rather, a methods-centered approach multiplies the sites and resources for normative appraisal by recognizing that a wide variety of traditions provide means for self-reflection, question-raising, and immanent critique. Kang and Wang have demonstrated how these positions can be simultaneously internal to a tradition—that is, deeply embedded in the norms that tradition proscribes—while remaining externally accessible—that is, capable of being formulated by those who deliberately participate in, but are not born into, any given tradition.

In this I tentatively endorse the call of the postcolonial theorist Ashis Nandy for a "critical insider" perspective, but resist assuming outright, as Nandy does, that native theories are useless without a "theory of oppression, overt or covert" (Nandy 2004, 21). I agree that political or economic subjection is an important concern, but it is only one among the myriad that have informed political theories and the textual methodologies that attend them. Instead, when formulating methodologies of comparison, we should see comparing methodologies as a necessary first step. Cross-cultural dialogue, the postcolonial framework of domination/resistance, and other interpretive interventions would then register as only parts of a more contextualized method of cross-cultural exchange. Other experiences – immersion, illumination, participation in ritual, and daily practices – can also come to have a recognized, if not more dominant, role to play. Informed by such practices, cross-cultural and comparative political theorists will be better able to recognize non-Western traditions as themselves productive of methodological and political-theoretic inquiry. Ultimately, this reorientation suggests a new path forward, in which non-Western

traditions are valued on the basis not only of their comparative potential – as a "comparative" political theory presumes – but on the ability of their methodologies to structure both cross-cultural and political inquiry.

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[1] This impulse to come to terms with cultural and historical difference is not exclusive to postcolonial scholars. Similar critiques have been launched, for example, by historians who do not explicitly align themselves with the postcolonial project (Cohen 1984, Woodside 1998), by comparative philosophers

(Hall and Ames 1987), by literary theorists (Liu 1995), and by comparative political scientists (Anderson 1998).

[2] Perhaps on the basis of these theoretical strengths, or simply because of its intuitive democratic appeal, "cross-cultural dialogue" is widely invoked in both academic and popular discourse. Calls for a "conversation" across cultures can be heard in some form from theologians (e.g., Berthrong 1994), to postcolonial and subaltern theorists (e.g., Chakrabarty 2002, 34; Esteva and Suri, 7), to human rights philosophers (e.g., Angle 2000, Parekh 1999). The United Nations, as well as religious leaders like the Organization of Islamic Conference and Pope John Paul II, have also issued calls for a "dialogue across civilizations" (Segesvary 2000, vi-vii, 99-105; John Paul II 2001).

[3] My emphasis on traditions of scholarship is related to, but more comprehensive than, what Quentin Skinner (following J.L. Austin) calls the "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" effects of speech-acts (e.g., Skinner 1970; 2002, ch. 6). As I explain below, my main goal is not to draw attention to what a particular utterance means or "does" on the basis of its intended effect on its audience. Rather, I hope to show how these utterances are situated within a tradition of scholarly writing and explanation that can itself constitute a target and (eventually) method of inquiry.

[4] Daniel A. Bell offers a dialogically-centered solution to this quandary, but one that reveals the inevitable decisions that must be made before dialogue can proceed. Sensitive to the elitist tendencies of some aspects of mainstream Chinese political culture, Bell seems to suggest that the ideal way to account for these non-democratic opinions about who may speak or speak for a particular tradition, society, or culture is to hold a dialogue to decide about the limits to speech before the actual dialogue begins (Bell 2000, 87-90). Bell's solution inadvertently points up the inevitable circularity of the dialogic model as such: unless certain normative decisions about power and speech are made beforehand, making dialogue itself a covert

enforcer of a universalist political message (the very thing it is trying to avoid), the model commits one to an endless dialogue about dialogue, ultimately leading nowhere because it can never begin.

[5] It should be noted here that dialogue as a methodological form is not entirely absent from the Chinese tradition. Less-dominant genres of writing, including the exchange of letters and the "question/answer" (*wenda,* 問答) sessions between teacher and student, have been compared to dialogue (e.g., Holzman 1956; Kubin 2005).

[6] I omit page references for Wang's essay because of its brevity, but compare Julia Ching's translation (1976, 212-4). All translations from the Chinese, including those of secondary sources, are my own unless otherwise noted.

[7] Splitting Chinese Neo-Confucianism into two "schools," the "Lu-Wang" and the "Cheng-Zhu" (based on the putative transmission of a coherent, distinct philosophy from Lu Jiuyuan in the early Song dynasty to Wang Yangming in the Ming dynasty; and the Cheng brothers in the early Song to Zhu Xi in the later Song) remains standard practice, but for some scholars the division is problematic. It is now recognized that Lu Jiuyuan's work did not directly influence Wang's thought, but was instead retroactively identified as a precursor by Wang after Wang had revised a contemporary orthodoxy influenced most prominently by Zhu Xi (e.g., de Bary 1989, 73). Mou Zongsan contends that the heritage of Song dynasty neo-Confucianism can be most profitably understood as containing *three* schools with distinct philosophical emphases (1968-9, 47), but he nevertheless retains the "Lu-Wang" category. My use of such terms here does not endorse any particular reading of Neo-Confucian intellectual genealogy; I only mean to acknowledge well-recognized philosophical similarities between Lu and Wang.

[8] Non-Chinese practitioners of virtue as an embodied practice with a specific external form include Aristotle—whose legacy was disavowed by Kantian rational abstraction but revived later by Michel Foucault (Mahmood 2005, 25-8).

[9] The translations here are considerably adapted from Chan's, in Wang Yangming 1963, 19.

[10] Despite this contrast, scholars have noted the similarities between Kang's revolt against Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, on the one hand, and the iconoclasm of Wang Yangming, on the other. Kang seems to have derived more from Wang's Song-Ming Confucianism than he admitted (Hsiao 1975, 60-2).

[11] In fact, referring to these scholars in their various roles as "ru," "shi" (士, their social classification), "ruists" or "scholars of X school" rather than as "Confucians" has become commonplace in much of Western sinology: e.g., Bol 1992, Elman 1990, Nylan 2001.