
Some Methodological Reflections

In Defense of Philosophy of Culture and Thick Generalizations

Roger T. Ames

In a single generation we have experienced nothing less than a seismic sea change in the economic and political order of the world. In the wake of this grand transformation, the Berggruen Institute in sponsoring the multiyear workshops on “Chinese and Indian Worldviews on Global Order” is prescient in anticipating the influence that the cultures of both East Asia and South Asia will have on the reshaping of a newly emergent geopolitical configuration. A point to be made at the outset: When we bring cultural “China” and “India” into conversation to inventory and assay the cultural resources available to us for a new geopolitical order, we must be wary of any uncritical assumption that we are referencing two nation-states in the ordinary sense of this term. The scale of these two “continents” (rather than “countries”) is such that, when considered together, they not only constitute half of the world’s population, but perhaps more importantly, they are heirs to and perpetuate antique cultural resources that take us back to human history’s earliest memories. A second point: I am truly honored that, in the pairing up of sinologists with indologists, I have had this opportunity to work with and learn from Patrick Olivelle, one of the international academy’s most distinguished scholars of Sanskrit literature.

Patrick and I have been tasked by the workshop organizers to think through some of the methodological issues in making cultural comparisons. In our exchange, I have had the benefit of receiving Patrick’s essay as I prepared my own, and thus the opportunity to engage each of Patrick’s important themes explicitly: the dangers of essentializing, making room for many voices, the problems of translation and definition, the importance of interpretive context, and the gleaning of resources from the past in our search for a new geopolitical order. As will be clear from what follows, Patrick and I are sometimes inclined to say things

differently, and while some might want to make much of these differences, I think we are much closer than we are apart in the concerns we are expressing, and in the recommendations we chose to make. At the end of the day, both of us are cultural pluralists who over our lifetimes have been committed to promoting a better appreciation of, and respect for, the world's many diverse cultures.

Patrick is properly concerned about the issue of gross generalizations that would essentialize world cultures, and might have good reasons to associate my name with this *déformation professionnelle*. Indeed, on the sinological side, some contemporary scholars go so far as to believe that in discussing Chinese history and culture, we would do well to abjure generalizations altogether. And two of them, Paul Goldin and Michael Puett, have indicted me and my collaborators, happily in the company of some of the most distinguished sinologists of the past century, as offering what Goldin calls “an updated Orientalism.” For Puett, Marcel Granet, Fritz Mote, Joseph Needham, Angus Graham, K. C. Chang, and Hall and Ames are all described as “cultural essentialists” in offering our best attempts to provide an interpretive context for understanding the evolution of Chinese culture. Goldin charges us along with these other scholars with presenting “China as a reified foil to a reified West, an antipodal domain exemplifying antithetic mores and modes of thought.”¹ As his alternative to our “Orientalism,” Goldin would argue that “if there is one valid generalization about China, it is that China defies generalization. Chinese civilization is simply too huge, too diverse, and too old for neat maxims.”² And Puett, explicitly rejecting our self-conscious interpretive strategies, argues that “we should instead work towards a more nuanced approach in which we make no *a priori* assumptions regarding single statements made in single texts and the significance of any individual claims.”³

I think that Goldin and Puett, while both presumably aspiring to some ostensive interpretive objectivity, are advocating for nothing short of a naïve realism that fails to acknowledge the inevitable and profound subjective coloration of all interpretative experience. We might appeal to Hilary Putnam to make this point. Putnam not only rejects “view-from-nowhere” objectivism, but further insists that the subjective dimension of experience is always integral to what the world really is. He would argue that

elements of what we call “language” or “mind” *penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being “mapper’s” of something “language-independent” is fatally compromised from the start.* Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.⁴

Putnam will not admit of any understanding of the real world that cleaves it off from its human participation and that does not accept our experience of it as integral to what the world *really* is:

The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me—of James’ and Dewey’s pragmatism if not of Peirce’s—was the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must

take a certain point of view, use a certain ‘conceptual system,’ when engaged in a practical activity, in the widest sense of practical activity, then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really ‘the way things are in themselves.’⁵

In our earlier forays into translating the Chinese canons—a translation of both texts and culture—I and my collaborators, rather than advancing spurious claims to an erstwhile objectivity, have produced what we have called self-consciously interpretive translations. In describing our translations as “self-consciously interpretive,” however, we are not allowing in any way that we are recklessly speculative or given to license in our renderings. Nor we are willing to accept the reproach that we are any less “literal” and thus more “creative” than other translators. On the contrary, we would insist first that any pretense to a literal translation is not only naïve, but is itself an “objectivist” prejudice of the first order. Just as each generation selects and carries over earlier thinkers to reshape them in their own image, each generation reconfigures the classical canons of world philosophy to its own needs. We too are inescapably people of a time and place.

At the most general level, I would suggest that modern English as the target language for translating the Chinese canons carries with it such an overlay of cultural assumptions that, in the absence of “self-consciousness,” the philosophical import of the text can be seriously compromised. To conventionally translate the classical term *tian* 天 as a capital “H” “Heaven,” for example, is to insinuate Abrahamic theological assumptions into what is a fundamentally an a-theistic cosmology. As the distinguished French sinologist Marcel Granet observes rather starkly, “Chinese wisdom has no need of the idea of God.”⁶ Again, a failure of naïve translators to be self-conscious and to take fair account of their own Gadamerian “prejudices” with the excuse that they are relying on an existing “objective” dictionary, is to fail to acknowledge that in the case of China at least, this lexical resource, given its missionary origins, is itself so heavily colored with cultural biases that Chinese philosophy is for the most part taught in religion or Asian Studies departments in our universities, and shelved in the religion section of our libraries. To fail to be self-conscious as translators is to betray our readers not once, but twice.⁷ That is, not only do we fail to provide the “objective” reading of the text we have promised, but we also neglect to warn our unsuspecting readers of the cultural assumptions we willy-nilly insinuate into our translations.

This self-consciousness, then, is not to disrespect the integrity of the Chinese philosophical narrative, but to endorse one of the fundamental hermeneutical premises of this commentarial tradition captured in a cosmological postulate of the first among the Chinese classics, the *Yijing* 易經 or the *Book of Changes*, with its notion of “continuity in change” (*biantong* 變通):

According to the *Changes*, with everything running its full course, there is flux (*bian*), and where there is such flux, there is continuity (*tong*). And where there is such continuity, it is enduring.⁸

Risking here a thick generalization that emerges from a contrast between early Greek substance ontology and this Confucian process cosmology, this postulate might be used as an example that is revealing of a fundamental and resilient “continuity” integral to their different cultural identities. I would suggest that these early Confucian hermeneutically inclined philosophers were less disposed to ask *what* makes something real or *why* things exist, and more interested in *how* the complex relationships that obtain among the changing phenomena of their surroundings could be negotiated for optimum productivity and value. Rather than any predetermined necessity in teleologically derived assumptions about origins, or causal speculations about some grand design that are associated with ontological thinking, it is the pursuit of superlative quality in an achieved personal, social, and ultimately cosmic harmony (*he* 和), and the creative possibilities of enculturating the human experience (*wenhua* 文化), that served as a fundamental guiding value for these seminal Confucian thinkers.

What this postulate means when applied to the philosophical canons is that textual meaning at the intersection of change and persistence is irrepressibly emergent, and that, like it or not, we translators of the culture, far from being passive or secondary or epiphenomenal in our interpretive work, are integral to the growth of the tradition. The hundreds of translations of the *Daodejing* that have transformed it into world literature, for example, not only have extended its reach and influence but have dramatically appreciated the meaning and relevance that can be drawn from its pages.

As a self-confessed philosopher of culture, I am required to do my best to excavate, identify, and articulate generalizations that distinguish different cultural narratives. My premise is that only in being cognizant of these uncommon cultural assumptions will we, in some degree at least, be able to respect their most fundamental differences and to locate the philosophical discussion within their alternative worldviews. Just as in the watershed of the Western cultural narrative with the ontology made explicit by Plato and Aristotle, in the formative period of Confucian philosophy certain enduring commitments were reinforced by Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi that are more persistent than others, and allow us to make useful generalizations about its evolution. In fact, one of the premises that allows for such generalizations is the importance of reading and understanding the earliest conditions available to us as the history of an organic process unfolds. Nathan Sivin observes that “man’s prodigious creativity seems to be based on the permutations and recastings of a rather small stock of ideas,” where the fundamental distinction between a Greek substance ontology and a classical Chinese process cosmology must number among this stock.⁹

We might take two historical examples of distinguished philosophers of culture—one from Europe and one from China—who were themselves willing to risk thick generalizations. In the Preface to his *Novissima Sinica* (News from China) written over the period of 1697–99, an astute and penetrating Gottfried

Wilhelm Leibniz offers a synoptic comparison between the contributions made by European and Chinese culture. In theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and in particular, theology, Leibniz argues, there is a clear European superiority. Indeed, for Leibniz, we Europeans “excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material.” We own the theoretical sciences and surpass the Chinese in those rational tools of the intellect that lead us to demonstrable truth, while the Chinese struggle with a kind of empirical geometry owned by most artisans.

On Leibniz’s reading, by contrast with this European gift for theoretical and spiritual abstraction, the Chinese excel in the pursuit of civil philosophy where Chinese “civilization” in this important respect has set a standard far superior to that found in Europe. In Leibniz’s own words:

But who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life? Yet now we find this to be so among the Chinese, as we learn to know them better. And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals.

Considering the dearth of information on China available to Leibniz in his own time, this philosopher, resisting his own formalist and universalist philosophical proclivities that should have inclined him steeply in the opposite direction, was indeed a surprisingly keen and honest observer of cultural continuities and differences. He continues:

Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible. . . . Certainly the Chinese above all others have attained a higher standard. In a vast multitude of men they have virtually accomplished more than the founders of religious orders among us have achieved within their own narrow ranks.¹⁰

Leibniz, in thus advancing his own generalizations about European and Chinese cultures, saw a clear contrast between the value invested in those abstract, theoretical disciplines in the European academy that are in search of axiomatic-deductive demonstration, and the more aesthetic and pragmatic applications of the Chinese tradition, a distinction that broadly distinguishes a European confidence in the dividends of the rational sciences from those alternative rewards that can be derived from virtuosity in the art of living. In fact, it was more than a fundamental sympathy and respect for Chinese culture that led Leibniz in the long-simmering Rites Controversy that came to a boil in Rome towards the end of his own life to defend Matteo Ricci’s advocacy of an accommodationist Christianity. Leibniz’s

commitment to accommodationism was based upon his conviction that the precepts of any universal civil philosophy that would seek to construct a framework for optimizing the social, political, and indeed religious life of human beings in community would do well to take into account the substantial accomplishments of Chinese culture in this same effort.

As a second example of a distinguished philosopher of culture, Qian Mu 錢穆, in attempting to provide a corrective to the key Confucian philosophical terms that have been compromised by a Christian “conversion,” is adamant that this vocabulary expressing the unique and complex Confucianism vision of a moral life simply has no counterpart in other languages.¹¹ Qian Mu’s point in making this claim is not to argue for cultural purism and incommensurability; on the contrary, he would allow that with sufficient exposition made through thick generalizations (the ambitious objective of philosophers of culture), the Confucian world can be “appreciated” in important degree by those from without. Qian Mu’s claim is in service to the uniqueness and the value of a tradition that has defined its terms of art through the lived experience of its people over millennia, and anticipates the real difficulty we must face in attempting to capture its complex and organically related vocabulary in other languages without substantial qualification and explanation.

In accordance with Qian Mu’s project, I want to contest the resistance among some contemporary scholars to accept the kind of thick cultural generalizations being made by both Leibniz and Qian Mu that I believe are necessary if we are to respect the rich differences that obtain among traditions and if we are to avoid as best we can an impoverishing cultural reductionism. I would argue that the canopy of an always emerging cultural vocabulary is itself rooted in and grows out of a deep and relatively stable soil of unannounced assumptions sedimented over succeeding generations into the language, the customs, and the life forms of a living tradition. And further, I would argue that to fail to acknowledge the fundamental character of cultural difference as an erstwhile safeguard against the sins of either “essentialism” or “relativism” is not itself innocent. Indeed, ironically, this antagonism to cultural generalizations leads to the uncritical essentializing of one’s own contingent cultural assumptions and to the insinuating of them into one’s interpretation of the ways of thinking and living of other traditions.

I think that in my advocacy of “self-conscious generalizations” in translation, and in my appeal to the postulate of “continuities in change” from the *Book of Changes*, I am rehearsing what Patrick Olivelle has insisted upon when, in his own efforts at cultural translation, he rejects cultural essentializing while at the same time affirming the need to register and respect cultural continuities. In Patrick’s own words:

For sure, there are continuities and commonalities in both traditions, given that the cultural and religious ideas and institutions influenced thinkers of every age. But continuities do not constitute an essence. It is best for us to leave Aristotle behind

and follow the Buddha, who insisted on the absence of any substance, any soul, behind the composite entities we encounter, including ourselves. A culture, the Buddha would have said, is like a river; there is an illusion of substance but the water is never the same.¹²

Indeed, one might argue that the bugbear of “essentializing” that quite properly worries Patrick is itself, like any such corollary of “universalism,” largely a culturally specific deformation. Indeed, I am anxious to defend a rather thick generalization that Patrick himself makes when he observes that “this assumption, I think, is a remnant of our Aristotelian heritage.”¹³ Such essentialism broadly conceived must be closely associated with Aristotle’s substance ontology, and has been rejected broadly as a shared target in the post-Darwinian internal critique of the Western philosophical narrative beginning in the late nineteenth century with Nietzsche’s “God is dead.” After all, we can only “essentialize” if we are predisposed to believe there are such things as “essences,” a way of thinking about things that did not recommend itself to the formative, analogizing philosophers of classical China. Essentialism itself arises from familiar classical Greek assumptions about ontology as “the science of being *per se*”—the self-sufficiency of being—and from the application of strict identity as the principle of individuation. It is this notion of “essences” that grounds Platonic idealism as well as Aristotle’s doctrine of species (*eidos*) as immutable natural kinds. It is also the assumption of strict identity that grounds Aristotelian logic with its exclusionary “A or not-A” principle of non-contradiction.

In advancing the agenda of philosophy of culture, without going to the self-defeating extreme of essentializing, there are still important cultural continuities that must be registered. A point that was drilled into me by my teachers when my hair was still blonde was that different cultures think differently, and that we elide important distinctions among them at our peril. My teacher Angus Graham, for example, ascribes unique and evolving categories and conceptual structures to different cultural traditions, and in so doing, is challenging the Saussurian structuralist distinction between *langue* (universal and systematic linguistic structures and rules governing all languages) and *parole* (diverse and open-ended speech acts in any of our natural languages).¹⁴ Like many (but not all) of us, Graham is persuaded that different populations within their always changing cultural milieus appeal to different concepts and ways of thinking and living. For Graham, getting at such conceptual differences is not an easy task:

That people of another culture are somehow thinking in other categories is a familiar idea, almost a commonplace, but one very difficult to pin down as a topic for fruitful discussion.¹⁵

In trying to overcome this difficulty of stipulating conceptual differences, we might recall Nietzsche’s appeal to a “common philosophy of grammar” as having anticipated Graham in this respect. Nietzsche asserts that a particular worldview

has over time been sedimented into each member of the family of Indo-European languages to both shape and constrain the semiotic structures of these disparate yet in some ways continuous cultures. As a consequence of this shared history, our culturally specific Indo-European languages in their various modes of expression encourage certain philosophical possibilities while discouraging others:

The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is an affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar—I mean owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions—that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation.¹⁶

Graham, like Nietzsche before him, looks to what languages reveal grammatically and by extension, conceptually, to get at the slippery issue of other cultures “thinking in other categories.” Graham has consistently warned us that serious equivocations emerge when we elide the distinction between classical Greek ontological commitments and those assumptions grounding a classical Chinese processive, procreative cosmology. Ontology privileges “being *per se*” and a substance language with its “essence” and “attribute” dualism—that is, substances as property-bearers and properties that are borne, respectively. Process cosmology, on the other hand, gives privilege to “becoming” and to the vital, interdependent, correlative categories needed to “speak” process and its eventful content. Graham is quite explicit about the nature of these philosophical differences and their linguistic entailments:

In the Chinese cosmos all things are interdependent, without transcendent principles by which to explain them or a transcendent origin from which they derive. . . . A novelty in this position which greatly impresses me is that it exposes a preconception of Western interpreters that such concepts as *Tian* “Heaven” and *Dao* “Way” must have the transcendence of our own ultimate principles; it is hard for us to grasp that even the Way is interdependent with man.¹⁷

Thus, my defense against the familiar charge made by some that philosophy of culture “essentializes” the Other, is first to acknowledge that cultural narratives are contingent. We are referencing holistic, protean, and always reflexively inflected historical *narratives* of populations—not reified *other minds*. Recently, and specifically in reference to the classical Chinese language, Graham concludes that in reporting on the eventful flow of *qi* cosmology, “the sentence structure of Classical Chinese places us in a world of process about which we ask . . . ‘Whence?’ and also, since it is moving, ‘At what time?’”¹⁸ I have followed him in consistently advocating a holistic, narrative understanding of Chinese culture as being more revealing of underlying cultural assumptions than any detemporalizing and essentializing analytical approach.

Further, the entertainment of other cultural narratives is always a reflexive exercise. If we acknowledge that the experiencing of other cultures is inevitably a matter of mutually shaping stories, then in failing to articulate apposite generalizations, we are at real risk of imposing on them cultural importances not their own. After all, without struggling with imagination to identify, refine, and ultimately defend such distinguishing characterizations, the default position is an uncritical cultural assimilation. Such cultural reductionism follows from the seemingly respectful and inclusive assertion that we are all the same, a claim that, far from being innocent, is in fact insisting that “they” are the same as “us.” And in the cautionary language of Richard Rorty, such forced redescription is not only condescending but, indeed, is cruel and humiliating.

The distinguished scholar of comparative literature Zhang Longxi, for example, in his commitment to pursuing intercultural understanding, is quite critical of those of us (singling out Jacques Gernet as one primary example) who would describe the tension between Christianity and Chinese as not only one “of different intellectual traditions” but also “of different mental categories and modes of thought.”¹⁹ Zhang becomes impatient when “the cultural difference between the Chinese and the Western is formulated as fundamentally distinct ways of thinking and speaking, as the ability, or lack of it, to express abstract ideas.” Zhang does not recognize that in thus giving abstract and theoretical ideas pride of place as the marker of the highest theoretical and spiritual ascent, he is advocating for decidedly Western philosophical assumptions that are not only absent in the classical Chinese tradition, but in fact are under assault within Western philosophy’s own ongoing, internal critique.

My teachers thought that those who would claim that other peoples and cultures are too complex to make the necessary generalizations, or by default, that they are somehow “equal” in their ability to think, while probably intended to be inclusive and respectful, is anything but innocuous. Why would we assume that to allow that other traditions have culturally specific modalities of thinking is to claim such traditions do not know how to think, unless we ourselves believe that in fact there is only one way of thinking, and that this way of thinking—that is, *our* way of thinking—is the only way? The uncritical assumption that other cultures must think the same way as we do is for me the very definition of essentialism and ethnocentrism. I would argue that it is precisely the hard work needed to excavate, to recognize, and to appreciate the degree of difference obtaining among cultures in their modes of living and thinking that properly motivates cultural translation in the first place, and that ultimately rewards the effort. Surely arguing that there are culturally contingent modalities of thinking can itself be pluralistic rather than relativistic, and can be accommodating rather than condescending. At the very least, if comparative studies is to provide us with the mutual enrichment it promises, we must strive with imagination to take other cultures on their own terms and appreciate fully the differences that obtain among them.

This same point can be made another way. I would argue that the only thing more dangerous than striving to make responsible cultural generalizations is failing to make them. Generalizations do not have to preclude appreciating the richness and complexity of always evolving cultural traditions; in fact, it is generalizations that locate and inform specific cultural details and provide otherwise sketchy historical developments with the thickness of their content. There is no alternative in doing philosophy of culture, and in making the needed cultural comparisons, to an open, hermeneutical approach that is ready to modify always provisional generalizations with the new information that additional detail yields as it is interpreted within the grid of generalizations.

Edward Said, in his influential book *Orientalism* that was published in 1978, on behalf of the idea that “many voices should be heard,” made the claim that largely for political reasons, “Oriental Studies” in the Western academy has constructed a distorted description of Islamic cultures in service to its own self-image and understanding. In the decades since the cautions of Said regarding the projection of “orientalist” prejudices in the study and teaching of other cultures, the tendency in academic circles has been to steer clear of what has come to be understood as “essentialist” constructions of culture. This cautionary corrective has resulted in valuable efforts to peel back layers of exotic and universalizing veneer that previous generations of scholarship had effectively laid over cultural realities, and to bring to light the often complex and convoluted striations of living and always changing cultures. In rejecting cultural essentializing, a genuine endeavor has been made in the scholarship to try with imagination to take other cultures on their own terms. However, this important attempt to rethink and to get past the naïve constructions of cultural others now runs the risk of obscuring the crucial and still vital role played by assaying differences in their ways of thinking and living, and of failing to acknowledge persistent cultural ideals in engendering and sustaining cultural change.

The story is complex. As a consequence of the challenge of new directions in historiographical thinking, the assumption that cultural families develop their distinctive patterns of values, norms, and practices in relative isolation from one another has become markedly less trenchant over the past several decades. Both historians and philosophers have come to recognize significant distortions that attend any unreflective tendencies to compartmentalize the ancient and premodern worlds according to currently prevailing spatial and conceptual divisions and their underlying (often highly political) rationales. In particular, critical assessment is now well underway regarding the degree to which persistent prejudices about metageography—especially the “myth of continents”—have shaped and continue to shape representations of history and cultural origins.²⁰ The classic assertion of “independently originating” European and Asian cultures on either side of the Ural mountains, for example, is being abandoned in favor of highlighting “Eurasian” characteristics in the complex cultural genealogies of both

“West” and “East.” Indeed, since cultures arise interculturally, or better yet, *intra*-culturally, in wide-ranging, intimate commerce with one another over time, it would seem that no culture *can* be fully understood in isolation from others. There is a borderless ecology of cultures that has only an inside without an outside.

Again, we need to think genealogically as well as morphologically. That is, the development and growth of cultures does not take place only by way of historical interactions among them, resulting either in accommodations of differences as conditions for mutual contribution, or in competition for acknowledged superiority. Cultures change not only in adaptive response to others and to political, economic, or environmental exigencies, but are also animated by an internal impulse as an expression of their own particular aspirations. Quite often, this change involves and requires envisioning ways of life distinctively other than those that are near and familiar, revealing with greater or lesser clarity what present cultural realities are not, and do not promise. Cultural change *does* occur in response to differing circumstantial realities, but it also takes place as a function of pursuing new or not-yet-actualized ideals. Said differently, ideals as “ends-in-view”—what Charles Taylor calls “hypergoods”—are also realities that live in history, and that at least in degree, have the force of directing the patterns of change.²¹

This recognition of the indigenous impulse has as its own corollary the insight that the histories through which cultures narrate their own origins and development are not primarily aimed at accurately depicting a closed past, but rather at disclosing arcs of change projected into open and yet more or less distinctly anticipated futures. The cliché that history is written by the winners is perhaps better couched in terms of history being written to affirm that what has occurred *amounts to* a victory. Cultural change is inseparable from the process, at some level, of both valorizing and actualizing new (or at least alternative) interpretations of the changes that have occurred.

Thus, in seeking a new geopolitical order by trying to glean valuable resources from our several past cultural narratives, we must be self-conscious of the fact that our redescrptions of these cultures, *including our own*, while certainly being informed by their past, are also being reformulated to serve our own contemporary needs and interests. Patrick quite rightly gives us the example of how the notion of nation “state,” that in our time has become the lowest common denominator in thinking about international relations (IR), is only of recent origin and has little relevance for the cultures of either ancient India or China. He asks, in formulating an alternative to our contemporary notions of IR, whether the Indian and Chinese traditions offer an alternative to what is a conflicted and fragmenting Westphalian model of independent, sovereign states. One example provided in Patrick’s own answer is to select what he recommends as the most influential model of IR in Indian history, the *dharma* of Manu as it is consonant with the Brahmanical *Vedas*.

Let me try to summarize what Patrick says about this Manu tradition in his own words as preliminary to offering at least my own interpretation of an alternative

but equally robust classical Confucian notion of IR captured in the expression *tianxia* 天下, or “All-under-the-heavens.” First, Patrick draws from the *dharma* of Manu “the thesis that law—moral, civil, and criminal—defined as *dharma* is universal and not constrained by territory or government,” an idea captured in the insistence that “kings don’t make laws; they only enforce them.” Further, what makes Manu particularly relevant to our search for new resources for a changing global world order is that “this concept of *dharma* also governs what is lawful and permissible in the conduct of war, and in Ashoka even interstate relations.”

To this universal and capacious reach of *dharma*, Patrick offers a further, seemingly inclusive refinement:

Manu allows for localized *dharma*: the *dharma* of a region, a village, or even a family. So we have a universal *dharma*, often articulated in legal treatises, and local *dharma* contained in the customs of the people, called *ācāra*. The only requirement is that the local *dharma* cannot contravene the universal *dharma* articulated in the authoritative legal texts.

There is a Confucian alternative to this “one-behind-the-many,” universal and self-sufficient conception of Manu’s *dharma* that might have some immediate relevance to the precipitous change in the geopolitical order of the world we have witnessed over the last decade with the rise of China. At the end of 2013, China introduced what it calls the “One Belt, One Road Initiative” (*yidaiyiluchangyi* 一帶一路倡議) (usually referred to in English-language reports as BRI). From the Chinese perspective, this bold BRI initiative is touted as nothing less than an evolving program of collaboration between China and its extended neighbors that will transform the existing world order from top to bottom and in all of its parts. Rhetorically there are two espoused values that ground this vision of BRI, “equity” (*gongying* 共贏) and “diversity” interpreted through the language of a “shared future for the human community” (*renleimingyun gongtongti* 人類命運共同體). Rhetorically at least, China has on offer here an inclusive “win-win” vision of what we might call a doctrine of “intra-national relations” in the sense that it advocates for an ecological model of IR within which “transformation” (*hua* 化) means that just as the one changes the many, so the many change the one. And the BRI claim is that the roots of this new Chinese IR initiative are grounded in traditional Chinese thinking—cosmological and political—reaching back as early as the *Book of Changes*.

One important distinction Confucian philosophy might bring to BRI and its corollary IR theory is the difference between “inter-national relations” and “intra-national relations.” We use the prefix “inter-” to suggest a joint, external, and open relationship that conjoins two or more separate and in some sense comparable entities. By way of contrast, “intra-” meaning—“on the inside,” “within”—references internal and constitutive relations contained within a given entity itself. “Intra-” has immediate organic, ecological implications—an inside without an outside. It references a radical contextuality—the inseparability of the one and the many

(*yiduobufen* 一多不分)—where the global order is the always provisional and emergent totality of all orders without any single privileged and dominant order among them. What recommends the neologism “*intra-national*” over “*international*” is that, rather than referencing the external relations that obtain between or among separately individuated and sovereign polities, the assumption behind *intra-national* is that we are describing a matrix of internal relations—a “field of polities” or a “political ecology”—where each “polity” owns its unique aspectual perspective on the unsummed totality, and where together in their constitutive relations with each other, these polities comprise our shared, interdependent, interpenetrating, and irreducibly social and political identities.

Intra-national gives us a focus-field understanding of our relationality, where each polity is holographic as a specific construal of all relations within the unbounded ecology of *intra-national* relations. In contrast to a world of “things” that follows from Aristotle’s substance ontology and the doctrine of external relations that define them, this Confucian ecological cosmology is a world of interpenetrating “events” defined in terms of organic, internal, and constitutive relations. This model resonates immediately with Patrick’s appeal to a nonessentialist description of cultures wherein all identities are interdependent, interpenetrating, and mutually entailing, ideas immediately associated with the Buddha’s doctrines of “no-self” (*anattā*) and “co-dependent arising” (*pratītya-samutpāda*).

One corollary of this Confucian process cosmology is that in the absence of a nature-nurture dualism, human culture is not only perceived as being integral to nature, but in the Confucian canons, erstwhile distinctively human values such as “sincerity” (*cheng* 誠) and “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝) are themselves elevated to cosmic status.²² As Patrick would suggest with the Manu conception of a universal *dharma*, the coincidence of the human and natural norms means that the *yiduobufen* global order has immediate environmental and ecological implications as well. Again, applying this insight to IR, we have to allow that there is no one true world order, but only the many, equally revealing perspectives on a planetary order that, in their totality, come to constitute its always emergent, continuous and yet multivalent order.

While the uncritical Western assumption that China’s ambitious strategy for effecting an alternative world order must necessarily be a contemporary iteration of the West’s own imperialistic history, this notion of *tianxia* so conceived through a traditional Confucian process cosmology provides an alternative explanation. *Tianxia* provides an ecological model of IR that begins from an acknowledgment of interdependence in all political and economic activity, and that advocates for hybridity rather than assimilation. As with the *yiduobufen* syncretism, in the absence of one universal *dharma* order to which all particular *dharma* orders must conform, there is only a continuity and interdependence among a manifold of geopolitical orders, each of which is construed from one particular polity or another.

China, in its unwavering commitment to proceed with this geopolitical strategy for an unprecedented scale of world economic development, if viewed sympathetically in terms of its understanding of its own history and identity, might be seen as parlaying *tianxia* into a new world politics. BRI has a political, an economic, and a cultural dimension. Such an idealized cultural reading of *tianxia*, laid out clearly by the Chinese academy as the interpretive context for BRI, might have the positive benefit, both domestically and internationally, of setting in a concrete way the appropriate aspirational targets for this initiative for the economic and political forces, and of providing a basis for evaluating their successes and failures. If BRI is to be successful, it needs to take into account China's earlier attempts at collaboration over the past few decades, such as its very mixed African adventure. A standard can be established for assaying and defending the successes of BRI, and at the same time, for recognizing and thus acting to minimize its failures. BRI to be successful must certainly have an economic and a political component. But absent the cultural assumptions that must guide these forces, a failed BRI would become an Asian imperialism that simply replaces one race with another. Intellectual China must get past its reticence of being "tutor to the emperor" (*dishi* 帝師), and step up to fulfill its responsibility to bring real clarity to these assumptions. Indeed, the notion of *tianxia* as a way of articulating and promoting the values of a cultural and spiritual China drawn from its own canonical texts must be used to exhort the economic and the political Chinas to live up to their own rhetoric, and to thus lead the way into a more equitable world order.

Patrick Olivelle and I think somewhat differently about cultural translation and have set our own priorities in how we should proceed. But in service to a healthy pluralism, these differences can certainly be read as cautionary and in many cases compensatory for one another. His essay has certainly inspired me to continue to reflect carefully on my own assumptions, and to try to make them more explicit.²³ If we can rise above any exclusivity in our critical dialectic, we might well have to concede that there is something to recommend each of our positions, and that we would certainly have less if we had only one of them.

NOTES

1. Paul R. Goldin, "The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth," *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008): 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 24–25.
4. Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 28. Emphasis in original.
5. Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 83.
6. Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1934), 478.
7. Hans-Georg Gadamer uses "prejudices" not in the sense that prejudice is blind, but on the contrary, in the sense that our prejudgments can facilitate rather than obstruct our understanding. That is, our assumptions can positively condition our experience. But we must always entertain these

assumptions critically, being aware that the hermeneutical circle in which understanding is always situated requires that we must continually strive to be conscious of what we bring to our experience and must pursue increasingly adequate prejudgments that can inform our experience in better and more productive ways.

8. *Book of Changes* B2: 《易》, 窮則變, 變則通, 通則久。

9. Nathan Sivin, foreword to Manfred Porkert, *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), xi.

10. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Writings on China*, trans. Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 46–47.

11. Jerry Dennerline, *Qian Mu and the World of Seven Mansions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 9.

12. See Patrick Olivelle's chapter in this same volume, p. 40.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Saussure uses the analogy of a chess game, where *langue* are the fixed rules that govern the game while *parole* are the actual, varied moves made by different people that come to constitute any particular game.

15. A.C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 360.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), 20.

17. A.C. Graham, "Replies," in *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, ed. Henry Rosemont Jr. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991), 287.

18. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy*, 360–411.

19. See Zhang's "Translating Cultures: China and the West," in *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, ed. Karl-Heinz Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 44. His reference is to Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. J. Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8.

20. See Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

21. "Hypergoods" is a useful neologism introduced by Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 62–63: "Most of us not only live with many goods but find that we have to rank them, and in some cases, this ranking makes one of them of supreme importance relative to the others. . . . Let me call higher-order goods of this kind 'hypergoods,' i.e. goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about."

22. See elevation to cosmic status of the human values of "resolution" (*cheng* 誠) and "family reverence" (*xiao* 孝) in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); and Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger T. Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing 孝經* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

23. Inspired by this exchange with Patrick Olivelle, I have recently written a more comprehensive essay defending philosophy of culture against the "essentialism" charge: "Unloading the Essentialism Charge: Reflections on Methodology in Doing Philosophy of Culture," in *Comparative Philosophy and Method: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*, ed. Steven Burik, Robert Smid, and Ralph Weber (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2022).