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978-0-521-80971-9 - Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry

Stephen C. Angle

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Human Rights and Chinese Thought

China poses great challenges to human rights in theory and practice. In practice, China is considered, by the measure of most Western countries, to have a patchy record of protecting individuals' human rights. In the theoretical realm, Chinese intellectuals and government officials have challenged the idea that the term "human rights" can be universally understood in one single way and have often opposed attempts by Western countries to impose international standards on Asian countries.

What should we make of these challenges – and of claims by members of other groups to have moralities of their own? *Human Rights and Chinese Thought* gives an extended answer to these questions in the first study of its kind. Stephen C. Angle integrates a full account of the development of Chinese rights discourse – reaching back to important, although neglected, origins of that discourse in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Confucianism – with philosophical considerations of how various communities should respond to contemporary Chinese claims about the uniqueness of their human rights concepts.

Drawing on Western thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Allan Gibbard, and Robert Brandom, Angle elaborates a plausible kind of moral pluralism and demonstrates that Chinese ideas of human rights do indeed have distinctive characteristics. His conclusion is not that we should ignore one another, though. Despite our differences, Angle argues that cross-cultural moral engagement is legitimate and even morally required. International moral dialogue is a dynamic and complex process, and we all have good reasons for continuing to work toward bridging our differences.

Stephen C. Angle is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wesleyan University. He is the co-editor and co-translator of *The Chinese Human Rights Reader* (2001) and has published articles in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Philosophy East and West*, and *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.

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Wesleyan University



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For Debra, Samantha, and Rachel

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The beginnings of this book lie in a chapter that I decided not to write for my dissertation. I was intrigued by what Liu Shipei had written about “*quanli*” – his term for rights – in the first years of the twentieth century. I was coming close to finishing my dissertation on the nature of cross-cultural ethical differences, and I thought that a study of the differences between Liu’s concept of *quanli* and Western ideas of rights current in his day would enhance what I had already written. At some point, though, it occurred to me that if I didn’t write the chapter on Liu, I could finish the dissertation that much sooner – and maybe, if I was lucky, get a job. My advisers agreed, and I filed away my notes on Liu for another occasion. My thanks once again to an excellent trio of graduate advisers, Don Munro, Peter Railton, and Allan Gibbard, both for all their help and for knowing when I should stop.

A few months later, luck had come through and I was starting a job at Wesleyan University. Soon after I got there I learned that a major East-West Philosophers’ Conference was to be held the following January in Hawaii, and that Wesleyan would pay for me to go if I could get my name on the program. This sounded like too good an offer to pass up, so I called Roger Ames and asked if there was anything he could do for me. I was hoping for an easy role – discussant, something like that. Instead he suggested I give a paper. And so out came those notes on Liu Shipei. The paper I gave at the conference now forms the latter half of Chapter 6 of this book. My thanks go to Roger for getting this ball rolling.

The more I read about “*quanli*,” the more intrigued I became. I was aware that one shortcoming of my dissertation had been the relatively static nature of its analysis; the development of Chinese discussions of *quanli* offered an opportunity to explore the ways that an ethical discourse in one language changed over time, in part through its (chang-

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ing) interactions with various foreign discourses about rights. The opportunity to look back into Chinese history, thinking about the different sources of what I started calling “Chinese rights discourse,” was also appealing because it opened up the possibility of drawing on the work I had done in graduate school on neo-Confucianism. I was finding hints in Liu’s writings that he was consciously drawing on some of the neo-Confucians, and as I looked more widely, I saw more evidence of the same. My thinking about the relations between the Confucian tradition and Chinese rights discourse was dramatically enhanced by the knowledge, friendships, and conversations that grew out of my participation in two conferences on Confucianism and Human Rights organized by Ted de Bary and Tu Wei-ming. I thank them both for their personal support, and for the opportunities that their leadership provided.

For all I enjoy the neo-Confucians and their heirs in the nineteenth century, this book is about much more than looking backward. My training as a graduate student at Michigan helped me to find tools that would illuminate how we understand and engage with one another, both within and across cultures, in the present day. I believe it was my friend Jeff Kasser who first introduced me to Robert Brandom’s philosophy of language, which came to play an ever-increasing role in my thinking about these subjects after I left Ann Arbor. Another stimulus to using what I had learned in graduate school to help understand our present world came in the form of a challenge: My friend Roger Hart, whose idea of “philosophers” ran more to Derrida, Lacan, and Bourdieu than to Davidson, Brandom, and Raz, questioned whether Anglo-American philosophers really could shed any light on issues that mattered in the real world. I think Roger and I have each learned from one another, and I know this book is the better for our ongoing conversations.

There is one more dimension of the book that I must explain, namely what happened between the time of Liu Shipei and the present day. Two friends in particular deserve thanks for helping me understand these hundred years – and indeed, in both cases, much more besides. The first is Peter Zarrow, whom I met at the East-West Philosophers’ Conference mentioned above. Peter has been a great source of guidance and good ideas, and I will forever be in his debt for the care and insight with which he read and commented on this entire manuscript. The second is Marina Svensson. We have generated a staggering amount of email traffic between Middletown, Connecticut, and Lund, Sweden, over the last several years. Her knowledge of and passion for Chinese intellectual, cultural, and political history, particularly as it relates to human rights,

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never fails to impress me. She has also been a model collaborator as we have labored together to complete *The Chinese Human Rights Reader*, a collection of 63 translated essays and speeches that in many ways serves as a companion volume both to my book and to her *Debating Human Rights in China: A Conceptual and Political History*, which is due out around the same time as my book. We look at the issue of human rights in China from differing vantage points and often ask different questions, but we have come to see these differences as complementary rather than contradictory. There is no one from whom I have learned more about twentieth-century Chinese discussions of rights.

Colleagues here at Wesleyan, both in philosophy and in East Asian studies, have made this an ideal environment in which to learn and to teach. Brian Fay, Steve Horst, Bill Johnston, Don Moon, Joe Rouse, Sanford Shieh, and Vera Schwarcz, plus members of the Ethics and Politics Reading Group, have all read and commented on one or more chapters of the manuscript. More generally, the enthusiasm of my colleagues trained in Western philosophy for my work in Chinese materials has been exhilarating. Another source of inspiration and advice has been my students. All the participants in my seminars on Chinese Philosophy and Human Rights made contributions of one kind or another, for which I am very grateful. Those students who wrote senior theses or essays under my direction contributed even more directly to the development of my thinking. The work of Joe Casey, Andy Crawford, Ernest Kow, Wing Ng, and Whitney Trevelyan was particularly relevant to my own concerns, and I thank them for all they taught me.

I am grateful to both Wesleyan University and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for the support they provided me as I wrote this book. The time I was afforded to focus, read, and write was invaluable. Thanks, too, to the staff of Wesleyan's Olin Library, particularly those in the Inter-Library Loan office. Virtually nothing seems to escape their reach. I would also be remiss if I did not mention the two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press, whose scrupulous and well-informed comments did much to improve the book. My editor, Mary Child, has been a great help in bringing this project to fruition. Large parts of Chapter 6 first appeared in journal articles in *Philosophy East and West* and *The Journal of the History of Ideas*; I very much appreciate permission to reprint that material.¹

¹ Stephen C. Angle (1998), Did Someone Say "Rights"? Lui Shipei's Concept of "Quanli," *Philosophy East and West*, 48:4, 623–625; (2000), Should We All Be More English? Liang Qichao, Rudolf von Jhering, and Rights, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61:2, 241–261.

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I turn finally to my family – those who have meant the most to me over the years I wrote the book. My mother, stepfather, and sister-in-law all read and commented on the manuscript, and even seemed to enjoy it. It has been fun talking and debating about the book’s themes with everyone in the family. But the truth is, the book has really been a pretty minor presence in my life over these last seven years, at least when compared to the new and constant joys of being a parent. This book is dedicated to my wife – my co-parent and closest companion – and our two wonderful daughters.

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Mencius, *Mencius* (4th c. B.C.E.)

Xunzi, *Xunzi* (ca. 310–208 B.C.E.)

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