

# Final essay Conceptions of knowledge

Graham vs. Hansen on the prevalence of metaphysical speculation in early Chinese thought.

Thijs Wester  
s2635879

## Introduction

When one speaks of ancient China, one often refers to the warring states period. This period, which lasted from the fall of the Zhou dynasty till the reunification of China under the Qi dynasty, is characterized not only by the many wars that were fought, but also by the great intellectual activity at the time. Many of the systems of thought that were conceived of in the warring states period remain influential in modern day society, Chinese or otherwise.

Despite the fact that warring states systems of thought were kept alive and preserved well, many contemporary philosophers disagree on the exact nature of these systems. Two of these philosophers are Angus Charles Graham and Chad Hansen. Hansen believes that ancient Chinese philosophy is mostly a theory of guiding discourse or *Dào*. Graham on the other hand holds that ancient Chinese philosophers focus primarily on metaphysical speculation.

Though these views vary wildly, neither one is necessarily irrational. Both thinkers give arguments and supporting views for their beliefs. This essay will explore these two viewpoints in detail, finishing with a structured opinion section where I will highlight which philosopher I find to be more convincing.

## Hansen

Chad Hansen's theories on Chinese philosophy are based on beliefs he holds about Chinese language<sup>1</sup>. In general, Hansen holds that philosophy cannot be separated from the language in which it is performed. This view is not held by Hansen alone<sup>2</sup> though he does have his own unique spin to the theory. Chinese language specifically would lack the grammatical structure and morphology for metaphysics which is present in Indo-European languages and therefore, Chinese philosophers would be unable to discuss metaphysical theories (in their native language). It seems however that Hansen does believe that one can study and learn other languages and thus gain the ability to discuss metaphysics, this is one area where Hansen differs from other linguistically determinism philosophers.

When reading Chinese, there is no need to combine separate sounds to form a word, as is the case for alphabetic languages. Instead, the characters are able to carry meaning directly independently of their respective words in spoken Chinese languages. For Chinese philosophy, this difference results in little focus on how we compre-

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing "the Chinese language" I refer to the Chinese written language as it was in the warring states period.

<sup>2</sup> See linguistic-determinism and -relativism (Korzybski, 1958; Stewart, 2017; Whorf, 2012)

hend language, painting a stark contrast to western philosophical traditions.

Sentence deconstruction in Chinese relies heavily on the strict word order within a sentence. Instead of the complex morphology of Indo-European languages, the function of a word is determined exclusively by its position in the sentence. Hansen takes this as the reason that Chinese philosophy does not contain a theory wherein reality has many different structures.

Another important factor for Hansen's theory is his "mass noun hypothesis". In short, Indo-European languages make a distinction between mass- and count-nouns. Where count nouns can be directly preceded by a number to indicate their amount<sup>3</sup>, mass-nouns need a count-noun to aid in indicating their amount<sup>4</sup>. Hansen claims that Chinese grammar does not make this distinction between mass- and count-nouns. Instead, all Chinese nouns function as mass-nouns, making yet another grammatical difference that influences the ability to discuss metaphysics in Chinese.

A further difference between Chinese- and Indo-European philosophies is how construction and division is approached. According to Hansen, Chinese philosophers "divide down" while western

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<sup>3</sup> For instance in the constructions "One horse" or "Four glasses"

<sup>4</sup> For instance with the noun "water", one cannot say "One water", one would have to include a count noun such as "One glass of water"

philosophers "add up". What Hansen means by saying this is that Chinese philosophers often start their descriptions of the universe from the ten thousand<sup>5</sup> things. From this position of everything, the Chinese philosophers divide and delimit until the individual is reached. The western philosopher usually starts from the individual, this focus is reflected in saying such as the (in)famous "cogito ergo sum" (Ariew,2019) From this position of the individual, the western philosophers add up until they arrive at the totality of the universe. This difference in Hansen's eyes comes forth from language.

To summarize, Chinese philosophy lacks metaphysical theories because the Chinese language lacks the necessary components for it.

Instead of talking about metaphysics, Hansen takes Chinese philosophers to be discussing theories on "guiding discourse" (Dào). Clear examples of this discussion include Confucian- and Mohist-ethics as well as legalist texts. However, Hansen claims that even texts that are traditionally seen as metaphysical or mystical such as the Dàodé Jīng are engaged in this debate of guiding discourse. The Dàodé Jīng specifically would be a critique of the guiding discourses proposed by the other schools, primarily the Mohist- and Confucian-Dào.

Such a view does not fit within the standard interpretation and

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<sup>5</sup> ten thousand here is an idiom for everything

translation of the *Dào dé jīng*. Therefore, a different translation is required. According to Hansen, we ought to read texts in such a way that they make most reasonable sense in the time in which they were written. We should not be threatened by abstract terms or mystic ideas of ancient texts nor label them as unreasonable. An interpretation that does label a text as unreasonable is neither proper nor accurate.

When this method of translation is applied to the *Dào dé jīng*, the text becomes not only more understandable, it is also more internally consistent. This is visible for instance in Hansen's translation of lines one and two of chapter one. These lines read:

“dào kě dào fēi cháng dào”

“míng kě míng fēi cháng míng”

According to Hansen, these lines are typically translated as:

“The *Dào* that can be told is not the constant *Dào*”

“Names that can be named are not constant names” (Hansen, 2000)

What Hansen points out is that although these lines are extremely similar in the original Chinese, they are translated differently. For instance, “dào” is translated as a capitalized singular (The *Dào*) as if it is a specific entity, whereas “míng” is translated as plural (names) relating to the general term. Hansen's preferred translation reads:

“Ways that can be told are not constant ways”

"Names that can be named are not constant names" (Hansen,2000)

Intuitively, Hansen's translation seems closer to the original Chinese because the lines are more similar than the conventional translation. Many scholars since Hansen have adopted a translation akin to Hansen's such as Ivanhoe and van Norden (Ivanhoe, 2005).

## Graham

Angus Charles Graham holds that while Chinese philosophers are often engaged in political- and ethical-debates, they do not shy away from metaphysical speculation. According to Graham, the discussion of metaphysics in the Chinese context becomes visible when we take an in-depth look at the exact nature and origin of western metaphysics.

In the west, metaphysical speculation was greatly facilitated by the ancient Greek language, both in vocabulary and structure. When translating Greek works into other languages, certain terms and structures had to be artificially injected into those languages. Traditions that developed entirely separately from Greece, such as the Chinese intellectual tradition, therefore never developed the language for metaphysical speculation.

When discussing the uniqueness of the Chinese language, Graham's points are similar to Hansen's aforementioned ones. Graham however further points out that "The philosophers teach orally" and, perhaps more importantly that, "when they write [they] would not necessarily include every spoken word" (Graham,2015,390). This acknowledgement is important for one of the primary lines of argument Graham uses for the existence of metaphysics in Chinese philosophy.

Though Graham thinks that Chinese philosophers disused metaphysics in the spoken form, he also holds that metaphysical language is not wholly absent from written classical Chinese. Though they do not have the exact Greek terminology, Chinese languages do have similar terms and structures that are used for metaphysical deliberation. Furthermore, Chinese languages contain metaphysical terms that are largely absent from Indo-European languages.

A typical example of Greek metaphysical language is Aristotle's categories. Categories such as Substance or Quality are largely absent from Chinese language and philosophy on a surface level. However, Aristotle arrives at the categories by asking certain questions such as "What is it?" or "Of what sort is it?" In Greek philosophy these questions result in the categories of Substance and Quality, in Chinese philosophy, these same questions are asked, but not given specific names or categories.

An example of Indo-European languages lacking Chinese metaphysical terms is the three verbs for "being" in Chinese. The three forms of English term being are Rán/f u, Shì/f i and Y u/wú relating respectively to verbs and adjectives, nominal sentences and affirmation or negation. The Y u/wú pair is particularly interesting because these terms can be used on their own to describe existence and non-existence. An example of this is the Dàodé Jīng Chapter 11 (Ivanhoe,

2005), a chapter which is often seen as highly metaphysical in nature.

Speaking of a vase-like vessel, chapter 11 states:

“But only by relying on what is not there (wú), do we have (y u) use of thee vessel”

In other words, because the vase is empty (wú) there exists (y u) a use for it, had the vase been filled with the clay used to construct its walls, there would be no use for the vase.

Another argument Graham formulates for the existence of metaphysics in ancient Chinese philosophy is the term used to describe philosophy. Often Chinese philosophers described what they were doing as Biàn, disputation. Biàn covered subjects such as classification, naming and being, subjects recognizable as metaphysical.

## Discussion

Graham and Hansen have some similar thoughts about Chinese language and philosophy, but they also differ in significant areas.

Starting with their overlap, Graham agrees with Hansen on the point that Chinese philosophers "divide down" whereas western philosophers "add up". Furthermore, the claim that warring states Chinese philosophy was mostly about practical ethics and politics is shared by both thinkers. However, this is where the major overlap between Graham and Hansen ends.

The differences in theories between Graham and Hansen are much more widespread and significant, though the two thinkers do still agree with parts of each other's theories, starting with Hansen's mass-noun hypothesis. According to Graham, a significant portion of Hansen's arguments concerning Chinese language and philosophy rely on his mass-noun hypothesis. This hypothesis is a fundamental point of contention between these two thinkers. Hansen claims that there is no formal grammatical distinction between mass- and count-nouns in the Chinese language. Graham agrees with Hansen on these terms, but claims that the difference between count- and mass-nouns is recognized by ancient Chinese authors and is visible in their works. This approach by Graham set the tone for the rest of his arguments.

Instead of focusing on the formal rules of the language, he prefers to focus on the actual use in ancient Chinese texts.

Another point of contention between the two thinkers is on the existence of certain structures in the Chinese language that facilitate metaphysical thinking. Specifically, according to Hansen, metaphysical deliberation about reality being structured in multiple ways, as we see in ancient Greek philosophy, is absent from ancient Chinese philosophy. Once again, Graham agrees with Hansen to a certain extent. The thinkers agree that typical western metaphysics is absent from Chinese intellectual history, but they disagree on the presence of metaphysics in general. At points, Hansen seems only to count Greek metaphysics as *actual* metaphysics. Graham, on the other hand, recognizes that (typically) Greek metaphysical structures are absent from Chinese philosophy, while (typically) Chinese metaphysical thinking is absent from western (/Greek) metaphysical thought. Once again, instead of focusing on a rigorous definition of metaphysics determined mostly by the ancient Greeks, Graham recognizes that Chinese philosophers discuss questions about existence, being and classifying, questions which would be counted as metaphysical in the Western (/Greek) context.

## Conclusion

I believe that both thinkers have strong stances, based both in logic and fact. Hansen's method of understanding ancient texts presents them in a way that is more logical and consistent. However, he leaves many seemingly metaphysical texts and chapters unexplored, leaving their "actual" meaning in Hansen's system vague. Graham points at important aspects of the Chinese language and shows that for Chinese language to facilitate metaphysics, it need not be exactly like Greek. That being said, Graham's approach could be criticized for being too loose or vague. The way he approaches language, focusing on its use rather than its rules, is not without controversy. And the topic he recognizes as metaphysical could also be contested.

Ultimately, I feel that Graham has a stronger grasp both on the Chinese written language and the way Chinese philosophers actually used it (in the spoken form). Graham's theory seems more complete, for instance, I think Hansen should have addressed other chapters of the *Dào dé Jīng* including 25, 39 and 42 because they are generally seen as metaphysical chapters perhaps even more so than chapter one. Graham's theory does not, in my opinion, have such gaping holes in it. Leading me to conclude Graham's approach as the stronger one.

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