



# Exploring Criticality in Chinese Philosophy: Refuting Generalisations and Supporting Critical Thinking

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Accepted: 8 September 2022 / Published online: 9 November 2022  
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## Abstract

Much of the literature exploring Chinese international student engagement with critical thinking in Western universities draws on reductive essentialisations of ‘Confucianism’ in efforts to explain cross-cultural differences. In this paper I review literature problematising these tendencies. I then shift focus from inferences about how philosophy shapes culture and individual students, toward drawing on philosophy as a ‘living’ resource for understanding and shaping the ideal of critical thinking. A cross disciplinary approach employs historical overview and philosophical interpretation within and beyond the Confucian tradition to exemplify three types of criticality common in Chinese philosophy. These are criticality within tradition, criticality of tradition, and critical integration of traditions. The result is a refutation of claims or inferences (intentional or implicit) that Chinese philosophy is not conducive to criticality. While this paper focuses on *types* of criticality, it also reveals a common *method* of criticality within Chinese philosophy, in the form of ‘creation through transmission’. This resonates with recent research calling for less confrontational and more dialogical engagement with critical processes. However, I also draw attention to examples of confrontational argumentation within Chinese philosophy, which may provide valuable resources for educators and students. Finally, I conclude careful and explicit consideration is needed regarding the types of criticality sought within Western universities to prevent educators and students from ‘speaking past’ one and other instead of ‘speaking with’ one and other in critical dialogue.

**Keywords** Critical thinking · Criticality · Critique · Chinese philosophy · Chinese international students · Higher education

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## Introduction

Scholars reviewing research on Chinese international student engagement with critical thinking in Western<sup>1</sup> universities have identified tendencies to draw on reductive essentialisations of ‘Confucian heritage’ to explain difficulties engaging with critical thinking (Clark and Gieve, 2006; Heng, 2018; Li, 2017; Moosavi, 2020; O’Dwyer, 2016). This paper reviews and contributes to a growing body of literature problematising such essentialism and generalisation. To avoid these problems, I shift focus from inferences about how philosophy manifests in contemporary culture, specific practices, or groups of students, toward drawing on philosophy—past and present—as a ‘living’ resource for understanding and actively shaping the *normative* concept of critical thinking. This theoretical shift is justified by the fact that critical thinking is not a description of how people *do* think, but an *ideal* of how people *ought* to think in certain situations for certain purposes. Furthermore, the norms and ideals shaping dominant conceptions of critical thinking are typically rooted in, and derived from, the Western philosophic traditions (Tan, 2017). However, this is not because ‘the West’ (an equally problematic term of generalisation) has any monopoly on criticality. Consequently, exploring Chinese philosophy may shed new light on an old concept. Light much needed in the increasingly international contexts of Western higher education.

I begin by providing an outline of critical thinking and its relationship to traditions. The aim is to draw on commonly agreed features of criticality to facilitate exploration of its manifestations within Chinese philosophy. I then review literature problematising tendencies toward cultural generalisation and reductive essentialisation of Chinese philosophy within existing research. Next, I draw on a cross-disciplinary approach, employing historical overview and philosophical analysis to show three types of criticality within Chinese philosophy. These are criticality *within* tradition, criticality *of* tradition, and critical *integration* of traditions. This is done by exploring criticality within the Confucian tradition through examples from the *Analects* and the critical evolution of Confucian theory through Mencius and Xunzi. I then briefly consider the influence of Buddhist metaphysics on Neo-Confucianism to exemplify critical *integration* of traditions within Chinese philosophy. Next, I shift attention beyond Confucianism, to show criticality *of* tradition along with further critical *integration* of traditions. This is done by looking at Daoist and Mohist philosophy of the ancient Warring States Period and the impact of Western philosophy in China beginning in the nineteenth century. I conclude by considering the implications of this work for research and practice.

The prioritisation of breadth over depth in this approach is deemed necessary because the diversity of Chinese philosophy is not well represented in Anglophone critical thinking literature (Moosavi, 2020). Furthermore, attention to breadth serves my primary aims of problematising reductive generalisations and refuting claims or inferences (intentional or implicit) that Chinese philosophy is not conducive to criticality. Importantly, in demonstrating the critical capacity of Chinese philosophy, I make no effort to ‘explain’ or describe Chinese culture or students, both of which are too diverse and dynamic to generalise. This is not to deny the interconnectivity of philosophy, culture, and individuals but simply an analytical separation facilitating focus on one aspect of an interrelated totality. My point is that if Chinese international students struggle with critical thinking, it is not

<sup>1</sup> Research consulted is primarily from the UK and North America.

the inevitable result of inherently uncritical philosophy. Quite the contrary, Chinese philosophy contains great potential as a 'living' resource capable of informing the conceptualisation and practice of critical thinking. In service of actualising this potential, I provide examples of criticality within Chinese philosophy. Importantly, while the focus here is on Chinese philosophy, this work has relevance for anyone interested in exploring and better understanding criticality within and across traditions more generally.

## Criticality and Tradition

Critical thinking has a long history of definition and redefinition (Ennis, 2016; Johnson and Hamby, 2015). For the purposes of this paper, I draw on basic but broadly agreed aspects of critical thinking, conceived of as a process of reasoning about what to believe and how to act, the exercising of which requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Bailin and Siegel, 2003; Ennis, 2016; Facione, 1990). Such a simplified definition cannot capture the complexity of all criticality. However, this very general approach highlights a key aspect of critical thinking; the fact that it is necessarily criteriological (*ibid*). There must be some form of criteria by which reasons for thought and action are justified. The origin and nature of the criteriological framework(s) guiding criticality within and across contexts are the source of much philosophical debate. Some suggest such frameworks can only be achieved through consensus and practice (Rorty, 1991). Others argue the very possibility of commensurability between critical frameworks logically entails transcendent meta-criteria capable of guiding universal rationality, and thus criticality (Siegel, 2017). Biesta and Stams draw on Derrida to claim, "...there are no pure, uncontaminated, original criteria on which we can simply and straightforwardly base our judgments" (2001, p. 68). In this view we are always embedded within a context of assumptions, the ultimate boundaries of which cannot be comprehended or transcended, yet criticality can reveal new possibilities without recourse to foundational, self-selected, or transcendent criteria (2001). This is an important debate for criticality, the justification of critique within philosophy, and questions about the nature of rationality. However, it is not a debate I can settle here. In this paper, I am not claiming to provide a 'new' conception of critical thinking. Instead, I am pointing out the unsettled complexity of the topic and drawing on examples from Chinese philosophy to provide perspectives typically not considered in the critical thinking literature.

What is most relevant for this paper is that the sources of criteria guiding criticality are commonly understood to be contextually dependent on factors such as discipline, practice, and culture (Evers, 2007; McPeck, 2016). What constitutes good reasons, which values guide judgment, and how those values are conceived may vary depending on the purposes toward which critical thinking is directed and the context in which it is practiced. Consequently, to account for contextual variance, the preceding conception of critical thinking can be expanded to include reflexive examination, and potential transformation, of the aims, assumptions, and criteria guiding critical thinking and action. Barnett and Davies call this a form of 'metacritique' (Barnett, 1997; Davies, 2015) and Lipman identifies it as the 'self-correcting' aspect of criticality (2012). Critical thinking, then, is not only a process of reasoning about what to believe and how to act, but also a process that questions the aims, assumptions, and criteria guiding reasoning itself. This conception of critical thinking recognises the 'internal' coherence of reasoning may vary by context. However, it also

requires questioning the aims and assumptions that guide that reasoning. Consequently, the antithesis of criticality is ideology, the unquestioning adherence to any set of aims and assumptions as an immutable guide to reasoning, belief, and action.

The primary 'contexts' under consideration in this paper are various *traditions* of Chinese philosophy. While the boundaries of traditions are difficult to delineate, they also provide enough pragmatic clarity to meaningfully explore criticality without having to resolve debates on the 'ultimate' nature of criticality. Traditions are defined by constellations of aims, assumptions, and criteria. For example, ancient Confucian traditions assume the value of learning and ritual in meeting the aims of social harmony. These, and other aims and assumptions, guide reasoning within the tradition. The fact that traditions (philosophical and otherwise) are shaped by pre-existing aims and assumptions does not preclude, but in fact creates, the possibility for criticality. For example, a tradition may encounter what MacIntyre calls an 'epistemic crisis' resulting from inadequacy in practical explanation or breakdowns of internal coherence (1990; 1988). This can derive from new experiences and ideas or contact with other traditions, which creates opportunities for criticality *within* tradition, *of* tradition, or critical *integration* between traditions. However, holding any assumptions as unassailable, particularly in the face of epistemic crisis or when encountering alternatives, constitutes *uncritical* dogmatism.

These different types of criticality and how they articulate with traditions can be understood through analogy with the playing of a game. In such an analogy, one of the most fundamental assumptions is that a particular game (a tradition) ought to be played. The most likely underlying aim is to 'win' the game. However, other aims, such as enjoyment or display of style may also influence the nature of play. The rules of the game are equivalent to the criteria guiding criticality. Using this analogy, dogmatism is playing the game without questioning the aims or rules. This may be highly *uncritical* if it involves playing in a proscribed manner or by a dictated strategy. However, it may also include a degree of critical (perhaps calculated is a better word) reasoning about overall aims and what moves to make in service of achieving those aims *without questioning the rules of the game*. Criticality *within* tradition, questions the rules of the game. This does not require *breaking* the rules, as there are means by which the rules of a game can be agreeably changed by the participants. Criticality *of* tradition suggests playing a new game altogether. This may result in radical transformation akin to a Kuhnian paradigm shift or serve to strengthen existing assumptions and reaffirm the value of the current game. Critical *integration* between traditions arises when a new game is encountered, providing opportunities to combine criticality *within* and *of* tradition to either internally transform the rules of the existing game, or perhaps create a new game altogether. It is not, however, simply abandoning one game to play another, as that would lack *integration*.

Finally, I must note why I use criticality and critical thinking as interchangeable synonyms. A case can be made for separating the two concepts (Davies, 2015). While I am open to the possibility of such a distinction having value in many contexts, I make no such distinction here because I think this separation sells short the broader aims, and spirit, of criticality in higher education. Many theorists and practitioners lament critical thinking being taught and practiced in Western universities as an instrumentalised processes of proposition evaluation and argumentation (Barnett, 1997; Davies, 2015; Thayer-Bacon, 1998). The intention here is not to diminish the centrality of thinking, or value of logic, to critical thinking, but simply to recognise the types of criticality I aim to identify within Chinese philosophy are not focused only on procedures of thought or discursive processes, but on critical changes to the way people reason and judge what to believe and how to act.

I am concerned with demonstrating criticality that changes the ‘rules’ of the game or proposes an entirely new ‘game’ to play. This is the type of criticality many suggest is absent from Chinese philosophical traditions. My aim is to refute any such assumption.

## Problematising the ‘Construct of the Chinese Learner’

Why do Chinese international students struggle to think critically while studying in Western universities? This is a problematic question, laden with assumptions (that they do), cultural generalisation (that all Chinese students are somehow similar), and, very often, philosophical reductivism (the nature of that similarity is a homogeneous form of ‘Confucianism’). Despite these problems, it is also a question many educators and students find themselves asking, because many students *do* struggle with critical thinking while studying abroad (Durkin, 2007; Sun et al., 2018; Wu and Hammond, 2011; Wu, 2015). Research also shows challenges with critical thinking *within* Chinese higher education (Jiang, 2013; Li and Wegerif, 2013; Tan, 2020; Tian and Low, 2011). This leads some scholars to claim ‘Confucian culture’ is not conducive to ‘Western’ style criticality (Atkinson, 1997; McBride et al., 2002). In an example of extreme generalisation, Dong claims,

*It has been commonly acknowledged that Chinese traditional culture is generally uncritical... Confucianism shaped a tradition that valued respect for parents and the elderly, the collective good, social order, and harmony. This is in contrast with ancient Greek civilization, which valued independent thought, reason, and ability to debate and argue in public (2015, p. 357).*

It is unclear why respect for elders and pursuit of social harmony (aims shared by many Ancient Greek philosophers) are *necessarily* uncritical. Furthermore, implicit in this statement is the idea that ‘Chinese traditional culture’ is essentially ‘Confucian’. While there is no doubt Confucian philosophy has an immense impact on Chinese culture, such an observation overlooks the diversity and plurality of culture, while also obscuring the complexities of Confucian *philosophy* as a resource for actively reshaping culture and reconceptualising normative concepts like critical thinking.

Reductive essentialisation of Confucian philosophy is increasingly seen as problematic. Ryan and Louie contend that treating 2,500 years of ‘Confucianism’ as the same thing is like treating the various manifestations of Christianity as essentially homogenous (2007). After all, it could be (rather reductively) argued that Catholics, Quakers, and the Ku Klux Klan are all ‘Christians’. Furthermore, contemporary politics probably exert more influence on culture, and certainly on the teaching and learning of critical thinking in contemporary China, than any philosophical tradition (Zhang, 2017). Along these lines, any lack of opportunity to cultivate and practice critical thinking in Chinese education as the result of historical or contemporary political circumstances does not necessarily indicate a *cultural* or *philosophical* disinclination toward, or lack of ability to engage in, critical thinking (Bali, 2015; Tian and Low, 2011). It is also important to note research showing the challenges of engaging with critical thinking in a foreign language (Floyd, 2011). Linguistic barriers should not be misconstrued as conceptual impediments or lack of capacity. Furthermore, research also shows that while many Chinese students initially struggle with critical thinking while studying abroad, they are capable of developing and learning the required skills and dispositions over time (Wu, 2015). Thus, it is problematic to assume the difficulties some Chinese students face while studying abroad are the result of ‘deficit’

instead of merely challenges arising from *difference* (Heng, 2018). Indeed, it is likely most Chinese students do not *lack* critical thinking, but simply engage in the process differently (Evers, 2007; Mason, 2013; Shaheen, 2016).

This leads some to argue that imposing a Western-centric theory of critical thinking in culturally diverse contexts could be construed as a form of ‘intellectual colonialism’ (Indelicato and Prazic, 2019; Moosavi, 2020). Indeed, as Hammersley–Fletcher and Hanley point out, critical thinking may become ironically uncritical if it finds itself as a mechanism for “reproducing the interests of particular groups and constraining thought within the boundaries of Western traditions” (2016, p. 990). However, there is nothing ‘colonial’ about Western universities drawing on Western intellectual traditions and practices. Indeed, many international students may choose to study abroad precisely *because* they want exposure and experience with these traditions and practices. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the teaching and practice of critical thinking without consideration of its conceptual heritage and underlying assumptions may simply fail to be as efficient or effective in cross-cultural contexts. What is at stake is not necessarily a matter of *aims* but of *effectiveness*. However, as I discuss in the conclusion of this paper, questions about the *aims* of students, educators, and institutions regarding their *type* of criticality each seeks are important and potentially problematic if implicit or unaligned.

Existing research on Chinese student engagement with critical thinking gives very little attention to how criticality manifests in Chinese philosophy. This is surprising given the degree to which Western philosophy is mined for resources (e.g., epistemological theory, logic, dialectic argumentation) for conceptualising and practicing critical thinking. If critical thinking is more than a ‘Western’ construct, it would seem relevant to explore the phenomenon in other traditions. Some scholars have been making headway in this area. For example, Tan articulates a ‘Confucian conception of criticality’ as a form of action oriented judgment (2017). Lam works to reconcile Confucianism and a generally Western-derived conception of critical rationalism (2017). Sigurosson, acknowledges Confucianism is rarely seen to promote criticality and typically regarded as conservative, reactionary, and ideological (2017). In aiming to rectify this, he argues that the “transformative self-critical attitude” of ancient Confucian philosophy exemplifies a form of deep criticality often neglected within Western conceptions (2017, p. 133). However, such work seems to be the exception, not the norm. Furthermore, while these more nuanced examinations of Confucian conceptions of criticality are valuable, it is less common to see consideration of Chinese philosophy *beyond* Confucianism within the Anglophone critical thinking literature. This paper builds on the work of those aiming to understand the value of Confucianism for critical thinking, while also expanding the project to consider other aspects of Chinese philosophy for the same purposes. The goal here is not to ‘explain’ culture or individual student behaviour, but to provide historical and philosophical resources for better understanding the *concept* and *practice* of critical thinking, which is not a *description* of something we are bound to by tradition, but an *ideal* of how we ought to think and act within and across traditions.

## Confucian Criticality

This section explores manifestations of criticality within the Confucian tradition. The natural starting place is with Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE), whose project is undoubtedly conservative. Confucius aims to rectify an idealised past, not to create a new future. Along

these lines he proclaims, “I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity” (*Analects*, 7:1). However, transmission of the past into the present is an invariably interpretive, creative, and critical endeavour. Fung calls this a process of, “creation through transmission” (1937, p. 48), which begins to shed light on the subtle nature of criticality in the Confucian tradition. Here, it is important to note that many ancient Chinese texts derive from oral traditions and appear in multiple versions before reaching their current common forms (Fung, 1937). Furthermore, I am drawing on these texts in English translation, which introduces another layer of interpretation. The hermeneutic process of transmission, translation, and interpretation itself constitutes an important form of ‘creation through transmission’ in Chinese traditions (Ames and Hall, 2003). However, the creative and critical elements of Confucius’ transmission of antiquity reach beyond mere translation and interpretation. Fung claims, “Although Confucius was conservative as regards political change, he was in other respects revolutionary” (1937, p. 314). The primary thrust of this ‘revolution’ is the establishment of a scholarly class independent of ruling elites (Chan, 1963). The aspiration of a Confucian scholar is to become a *junzi* (gentleman).<sup>2</sup> The use of the term *junzi* embodies elements of radicality, as the word, literally meaning ‘son of a royal’, is stripped of its hereditary and elite connotations and opened for the aspirations of common people (Fung, 1937). The scholarly class originating with Confucius opens the door for social status and public service based on merit instead of birth, no small feat for a society of his (or any) time.

Confucius contends that achieving individual and social harmony requires following the *dao* (way) of the ancient Zhou Dynasty through the proper practice of *li* (ritual) and diligence in *xue* (study) to develop *de* (virtue), culminating in *ren* (benevolence/humanity) which facilitates action in accordance with *yi* (rightness) to become a *junzi* (gentleman). This requires a bit of unpacking. Confucius conceives of *dao* as the ‘way’ of ideal human action, which is necessarily relational and ethical (Zhang, 1989). Acting in accordance with *dao* manifests as *de* (virtue). There are many ideal virtues, but the most important is *ren*, which can be seen as the virtue both containing and coordinating all others (Ames and Rosemont, 2011). *Ren* helps a person to discern *yi* (rightness), which is not fixed by rule but must be understood contextually (Slingerland, 2001). A *Junzi*, then, is a benevolent person that does the right thing in any given situation. The two key tools in becoming a *junzi* are study and ritual propriety.

Confucius’ attention to *xue* (study) and *li* (ritual) can seem rather *uncritical* if taken as literal prescriptions of fixed rules. However, they are better understood as tools of (a type) of liberation than fixed rules guiding thought and action (Slingerland, 2001). This interpretation is not immediately evident as the *Analects* prescribes precise rituals and specific studies. However, Confucius is clearly concerned with *active thinking*, not passive knowledge acquisition. He refuses to teach anyone who, after being shown “one corner of a square”, cannot come back with the “other three corners” through their own reasoning (*Analects*, 7:8). Furthermore, while Confucius is exacting in the conduct of rituals, there are also examples of critical alterations (e.g., *Analects* 3:15, 16:22, 9:3). Ultimately, there is no intention for study of tradition to comprise the totality of all knowledge, nor for rituals to prescribe ‘correct’ action for *every* person in *every* situation (Ivanhoe, 2000). Instead, study and ritual are tools for cultivating the virtues that sustain an *adaptive moral intelligence*. Slingerland notes,

<sup>2</sup> Confucius’ philosophical and educational concerns focus on adult men. Removing the misogyny and ageism of the time, it is evident the philosophy is applicable to all people.

... once a practice has been mastered, in the sense that the requisite virtues have been fully developed, this mastery brings with it a certain independence from the rules that constitute the practice: the master is able to reflect upon the rules and may even choose to transgress or revise them... Practice mastery thus brings with it a type of transcendence: freedom to evaluate, criticize and seek to reform practice tradition itself (2001, p. 102).

The practices under discussion include skilled activities like music, archery, and charioteering, along with the *moral* practices necessary to navigate the social world. Thus, the ‘rules’ of the Confucian tradition are not provided by fixed knowledge or rituals, but by self-cultivation of an adaptive moral intelligence, guided by *ren*, capable of changing learning and ritual. This is a debatable interpretation. Some agree with the intentions but argue such an approach is psychologically infeasible (Slote, 2016). Others interpret Confucius as aiming to identify universal principles to guide ethical duty with a more deontological tilt (Roetz, 1993). Despite these interpretive debates, I argue the Confucian focus on reflexive and adaptive moral intelligence is substantiated by the evolution of Confucianism after Confucius, particularly through the work of Mencius (372–289 BCE), who claims “a great man will not observe a rite that is contrary to the spirit of the rites, nor will he perform a duty that goes against the spirit of dutifulness” (*Mencius*, 4B:6). Understanding this ‘spirit’ requires critical reflection on the practices intended to cultivate virtues, and the virtues themselves, which must guide adjustment of those practices. As others have argued, this is a necessarily *critical* process of reflexive self-cultivation (Sigurosson, 2017) and moral judgment (Tan, 2017). This reflexive process is essential to understanding, and facilitating, criticality *within* the Confucian tradition, as it creates the possibility for changes not only in practice, but for reinterpretation of how reasoning proceeds (rules of the game) from fundamental assumptions.

For example, Mencius employs ‘creation through transmission’ to reframe reasoning regarding obedience to social hierarchy. Some degree of allowance for disagreement and critique within hierarchy is necessary, as the idealised Zhou Dynasty from which Confucius draws his inspiration usurped power from a reigning emperor. This is a topic Confucius skirts around, but Mencius addresses at far more length, with powerful implications. In speaking with a local king Mencius asks, “If the Marshal of the Guards was unable to keep his guards in order, then what should be done about it?” The King naturally replies that he should be removed from office. Mencius then asks, “If the whole realm within the four borders was ill-governed, then what should be done about it?” At this, the king “turned to his attendants and changed the subject” (*Mencius*, 1A:7). In the next passage, perhaps getting a bit worried, the King asks, “Is regicide permissible?” Mencius replies, “He who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator; he who cripples rightness is a crippler; and a man who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an ‘outcast’. I have indeed heard of the punishment of the ‘outcast [of the slain king Tchou]’, but I have not heard of any regicide” (*Mencius*, A:8). Mencius is making the point that a ruler failing to rule with *ren* is not a legitimate ruler, thus their removal from power is in accordance with *yi* and does not amount to a disruption of the socio-political order. This bit of ‘creation through transmission’ demonstrates a critical change in the criteriological framework guiding reasoning (rules of the game) with meaningful implications for thought and action.

Mencius’ extends this critical development further while discussing the legitimacy of rulers and succession by arguing that while emperors must receive the ‘mandate of heaven’ (a traditional source of approval beyond human control), the disapproval of the people constitutes a sign that no such mandate has been given (*Mencius*, 5A:5). In a subtle yet highly



critical move, Mencius shifts the very foundations for political legitimacy. The plight of a ruler is not merely a matter of birth or heavenly fate, but of human action (Chan, 1963). The same sentiment is expressed more explicitly when Mencius says, “the people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler” (*Mencius*, 7B:14). These ideas diverge from the *Analects*, providing an example of ‘creation through transmission’ leading to criticality *within* the Confucian tradition. Fundamental assumptions regarding the necessity of an emperor and a hierarchical social order remain intact, but the reasoning drawn from these assumptions is transformed with meaningful implications for thought and action. The ‘game’ remains the same, but some of the ‘rules’ have been changed. The subtle nature of this approach aims, and typically succeeds, at maintaining stability *while still facilitating criticality*.

An example of more confrontational and explicit argumentation *within* the Confucian tradition is available through consideration of the most famous and perhaps more lasting of Mencius’ critical innovations, his conception of *renxing* (human nature) derived from the emotional experiences of familial relations and extension of empathy to provide a moral psychology capable of orienting and animating the pursuit of *ren*. Put more simply, Mencius solidifies the Confucian assumption, still dominant today, that human nature is good, or at least contains the ‘sprouts’ of potentiality for goodness (Fung, 1937). Instead of elaborating Mencius’ argument, made through a combination of thought experiment, anecdote, and analogy, it is more relevant to the purpose of this paper, aimed at shedding light on manifestations of criticality, to look at one of Mencius’ primary rivals, Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE) who sharply critiques Mencius’ view on human nature.

Chan claims Xunzi is “the most critical of ancient Chinese philosophers” (1963, p. 124). Graham sees Xunzi’s work as marking an important step forward in systematic and critical philosophy, remarking that:

*[Xunzi’s] attack on the Mencian theory of human nature illustrates the progress of argumentation in the Confucian school. Mencius’ case has to be re-assembled from scattered dialogues and discourses; [Xunzi] develops his in a consecutive essay... with Mencius as the named target, and a terminology clarified... by scrupulous definitions (2003, p. 244).*

Xunzi’s critique of Mencius’ view of human nature is pointed. Book 23 of the *Xunzi* is titled “Human Nature is Bad” and sets out to make a reasoned argument for why this must be the case (*Xunzi*). One such argument is that if human nature were indeed good, and each individual capable of looking inward to cultivate *ren*, “then what use would there be for sage kings? What use for ritual and *yi*?” (*Xunzi*, 23:160). Ritual is necessary only because human nature must be shaped through conscious rational effort. In contrast to Mencius, Xunzi uses metaphors of craftsmanship regarding the need to mould (or ‘mutilate’ as Mencius would say) human nature as a craftsman bends wood or tempers metal. Xunzi values rationality over sentimentality and sees the need for mind and will to check the dangers of emotion and desire (Fung, 1937). This demonstrates an example of confrontational argumentative criticality *within* the Confucian tradition.

Thus far, the focus has been on criticality *within* the Confucian tradition of the classical era. Moving beyond this period sheds light on critical *integration* of traditions. After a brief but severe stint of repression under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), Confucianism is codified and institutionalised during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) with the scholarly class of Confucians becoming an integral aspect of the aristocracy and government (Fung, 1953). The thrust of Confucianism shifts from a critical philosophy exploring how best to live, toward a scholarly bureaucracy of status, politics, and power (Bol, 2008). This

coincides with the arrival of Buddhism from India, beginning in the fourth century CE. There is immense diversity within early Chinese Buddhist thought and the tradition transforms significantly over time, with Chan Buddhism (which becomes Zen Buddhism upon migrating to Japan) eventually becoming the most dominant (Chan, 1963; Fung, 1953). The fundamental Buddhist aims of transcending the illusory nature of the phenomenological world based on the assumed existence of a ‘truer’ underlying reality challenge prevailing Confucian assumptions about the nature of the world, its relation to the mind, and the appropriate grounding of knowledge and morality (Chan, 1963). This requires Confucianism to face, and attempt to answer, new questions in new ways. Consequently, beginning in the Tang (619–907) and culminating in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) a diverse range of thinkers with varying and often incompatible perspectives address the more ‘metaphysical’ questions raised through contact with Buddhism, marking the origins of what later becomes broadly categorised (despite great internal diversity of ideas) as Neo-Confucianism (Angle and Tiwald, 2017). This is an excellent example of criticality *within* the Confucian tradition through critical *integration* of concepts from another tradition.

In this process new concepts are integrated by reinterpreting existing ideas. One such old concept made new is that of *li*, typically translated as ‘Pattern’. This term appears very sparsely in the Confucian literature of the ancient period (Neo-Confucian *li* 理 is not to be confused with *li* 禮 as rite/ritual in ancient texts), and rarely warrants detailed commentary (Zhang, 1989). However, by the Song and Ming period, *li* (along with a constellation of other revitalised concepts and terms) is central to Confucian debate (Angle and Tiwald, 2017). Chan says of *li*, “all things exist because of it and can be understood through it. It is universal truth, universal order, universal law” (1963, p. 519). This conveys the ambitious aims of articulating a theory of *li*, which are nothing short of understanding the Pattern giving rise to and underlying every aspect of reality. It also indicates a substantial shift from intensive focus on ancient rituals, normative ethics, and political bureaucracy toward a new set of concerns and concepts conducive to empirical investigation of the natural world and new theories of how the mind relates to reality (Chan, 1963). This shift is the result of critical *integration* of questions and ideas encountered in a foreign tradition.

Thus far, it is evident Confucianism contains the capacity to question and ‘re-interpret’ fundamental assumptions in ways that change the ‘rules’ guiding reasoning and judgment. However, it remains difficult to gain a perspective from *within* the Confucian tradition capable of facilitating criticality *of* that tradition. Consequently, to understand criticality *of* tradition within Chinese philosophy it is helpful to look beyond Confucianism.

## Beyond Confucianism

This section explores philosophies directing criticality at the fundamental aims and assumptions of the Confucian tradition. This is done by looking at two chronologically disparate, but circumstantially similar periods of history. The first is that of the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), also known as the time of ‘100 schools of thought’, in which rival philosophies take direct aim at each other in confrontational critical debate. A similar such period occurs when the Qing Dynasty falls in 1911, beginning the Republican Era, during which China finds itself in a life-or-death struggle for

modernisation, leading to eclectic and integrative philosophical thinking drawing on all types of criticality. Consequently, these are two exemplary periods for understanding criticality *of* tradition within Chinese philosophy.

### Warring States Period (475 – 221 BCE)

The Han historian Sima Qian recognises six philosophical ‘schools’ as having strong influence through the Warring States Period (Fung, 1937). Along with Confucianism, these include the Yangists, perhaps best understood as anarchist individualistic naturalists advocating the renunciation of society and a return to simple, self-sufficient living (Graham, 2003). Simultaneously, the Logicians explore logical and metaphysical questions similar to those central in the Greek tradition (Chan, 1963). The Legalists integrate aspects of Xunzi’s Confucianism, with the argumentation of the Logicians to forge a highly pragmatic (and temporarily influential) political philosophy. The Mohists, espouse a kind of utilitarianism sharply attacking Confucian tradition at the most fundamental level, arguing against filial piety, and for elimination of unnecessary rites and rituals (Johnston, 2013). Mohism is of particular interest because it is equal to, if not dominant over, Confucianism until the Han Dynasty (Chan, 1963). It also offers one of the strongest examples of criticality *of* tradition. However, the starting point for understanding Chinese philosophy *beyond* Confucianism is with Daoism.

‘Daoism’ is not a school in any formal sense during the Warring States Period. Nonetheless, it exerts a powerful influence on philosophies of the time, and into the present (Zhang, 1998). The two most influential thinkers in early Daoist philosophy are Laozi, believed to have lived roughly contemporary to the time of Confucius in the sixth century BCE, and Zhuangzi, likely to have lived in the fourth century BCE (Chan, 1963). Laozi is traditionally credited with writing the *Daodejing*. However, like Confucius’ relationship to the *Analects*, it is unlikely he ever wrote anything (Fung, 1937). Instead, the text associated with his thought is compiled by subsequent followers in a variety of versions. The text bearing Zhuangzi’s name is also compiled, most likely over centuries, before reaching its current form. However, the first seven ‘Inner Chapters’ are generally agreed to have been written by one person (Graham, 2003).

The first lines of the *Daodejing* state, “*dao* that can be put into words is not really *dao*, and naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming” (p. 77). This oft-cited passage can be translated and interpreted in several ways. I follow Ames and Hall in taking this to indicate that as a process of constant transformation, *dao* is neither fixed nor constant, thus no fixed or constant practices (or language) can consistently align with or describe the true Way (2003). Consequently, knowledge and rituals drawn from the past are not the best means for gaining knowledge in the present. For example, chapter 38 of the *Daodejing* calls ritual propriety “the thinnest veneer of doing one’s best and making good on one’s word,” while referring to the Confucian claims of knowledge as “tinsel decorating the Way” (*Daodejing*, p. 136). While Confucianism and Daoism share concepts like *dao* and *de*, they are conceived of in meaningfully different ways. For example, the *dao* of Laozi is more naturalistic and cosmological, running contrary to what Tan calls, the ‘humanist’ Confucian conception of *dao* as ideal normative behaviour (2017). This can be seen as a form of ‘creation through transmission’ of shared concepts predating both Confucian and Daoist thought. However, Laozi also critiques Confucian *methods* for attaining *dao*, shifting focus from ritual and study toward intuition and experience. I argue these divergences constitute criticality *of* tradition.

Daoist criticality is perhaps best exemplified in the *Zhuangzi*, which is a unique text for its time, and remains unique to this day. It is poetic and lyrical, filled with fantastical stories of talking animals, magic, and mystical transformations. Confucius and his disciples appear as frequent characters (indicating *Zhuangzi* is well read in the classics), often to espouse views contradictory to their own philosophies. The *Zhuangzi* is also filled with uncertainty and contradiction, leading many to speculate an intentional avoidance of precise articulation meant to facilitate interpretation as opposed to providing explication (Kupperman, 1996). Watson suggests, if there is a central theme to the text, it is “freedom” (1968, p. 3). But exactly what kind of freedom is *Zhuangzi* striving for? It appears to be different from Laozi’s more explicit call toward withdrawal from the world (Slingerland, 2003; 2014). Furthermore, unlike later Buddhism, *Zhuangzi* does not see the material world as illusory or something that must (or even ought) be transcended (Chan, 1963). Instead, it is the *human world* of constructed meanings and arbitrary divisions that *Zhuangzi* aims to free people from (if he aims at anything at all). This is freedom from the prescriptions and fixed perspectives that divide and dim the power of unmediated experience.

*Zhuangzi* is explicitly critical of Confucians and Mohists, the two most prominent philosophies of his time, stating, “what one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity (*Zhuangzi*, p. 39).” The ‘clarity’ *Zhuangzi* advocates comes from unburdening the mind from the preconceptions and habituations imposed by traditions. Only once freed from the preconceptions and constructs (including language) dividing the genuine flow of experience can one develop *de* and naturally (spontaneously) react, act, and interact with *dao*. *Zhuangzi*’s intention is to cut beyond simple recognition of differing opinions and point out the ‘groundlessness’ of *any* fixed opinion or perspective. He is not suggesting changes to the ‘rules’ of an existing game but suggesting the need for a ‘new game’ altogether. In a frequently quoted and variously interpreted passage, *Zhuangzi* proclaims,

*Everything has its ‘that’, everything has its ‘this’. From the point of view of ‘that’ you cannot see it, ‘that’ comes out of ‘this’ and ‘this’ depends on ‘that’ – which is to say that ‘this’ and ‘that’ give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth* (*Zhuangzi*, p. 39).

Ziporyn argues this is *Zhuangzi*’s way of recognising the necessarily perspectival nature of *indexical* knowledge. That is, whether something is a ‘this’ or ‘that’ depends on the location of the perspective of reference (Ziporyn, 2009). While I am holding something, it is ‘this’, when I set that thing down and walk away, it becomes ‘that’. While there is obvious application of indexical perspectivism regarding perception and interaction with the physical world, *Zhuangzi*’s deeper point is *moral* (Slingerland, 2003; 2014). Whatever ‘this’ a Confucian holds as ‘good’ can only be so in reference to a ‘that’ which is ‘bad’. This is *Zhuangzi*’s way of recognising that not only are divergent perspectives relative, but any apparent contradiction or opposition is only superficial, because opposites form a necessary and indivisible unity. There can be no ‘this’ perspective without a ‘that’ perspective. Furthermore, drawing on observations from the natural world, in which opposites (e.g., night/day, summer/winter, birth/death) do not simply define each other in conceptual stasis, but through processual transformation, any effort to maintain a fixed perspective in an always changing world is to struggle against *dao*. It is common to interpret the *Zhuangzi* as a collection of various types and degrees of skepticism and/or relativism (Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, 1996). Given that

criticality is *necessarily* a form of skepticism (to at least some degree) and the importance of contextualised perspective within many contemporary philosophies and practices, Zhuangzi should be recognised as one of the most critical and curious contributors to Chinese philosophy.

I shift now to the one of the most prominent and influential philosophies of the ancient period, that of Mohism. While Mozi (479–381 BCE) is the founding figure of Mohism, the school of thought develops continuously into the Han period, with substantial shifts from the earlier to later incarnations (Chan, 1963; Graham, 2003). Mohism applies a more logical (and methodological) approach to articulating a systematic philosophy in distinct contradiction to Confucian and Daoist norms (Fung, 1937). This includes explicit critique of fundamental assumptions and aims underlying Confucian philosophy. For example, Chapter 39 of the *Mozi*, entitled ‘Against the Confucians’ explicitly attacks the idea of “following but not creating” by recognising that someone had to *create* the rituals Confucians so revere, thus showing the very sources of their reverence is for people that ‘created but did not follow’ (*Mozi*). Here, the Mohist seems to identify a kind of logical infinite regress in the normative foundations of Confucian theory. If current practices are based on the past, what were past practices based upon?

This leads Mohists toward recognition of the need for a universal grounding for *yi*, conceived of as justice (Johnston, 2013). The central concept in this effort is the utilitarian idea of *jian ai*, often translated as ‘universal love’, though perhaps better understood as ‘equal concern for each person’ (Graham, 2003). The implications of this cosmopolitan consequentialism are profound. Mohists rail against the most fundamental assumptions of Confucianism, namely the priority of filial piety as a source for cultivating positive moral psychology and the importance of rites and rituals in cultivating virtues capable of guiding action in accordance with *yi* (*Mozi*). They see the privileged and special bonds of family as problematically impeding establishment of *jian ai*, the excess of rituals as unnecessarily wasteful, and the perspectivism of Daoism as unacceptably anarchic and morally relativistic (Chan, 1963). For the Mohist, society requires unity of purpose and values as the foundation for calculating and justly distributing benefit (Johnston, 2013). This is clear evidence of strong criticality of tradition. Importantly, Mohist critiques are addressed in the *Mencius* (e.g. 3B:9) and, at greater length throughout the *Xunzi* (e.g. Books 6 & 10), showing active and explicit critical debate *within* and *between* these traditions.

## Republican Era to the Present

We jump forward now to the waning years of the Qing Dynasty (1636–1911). As part of an effort to overcome the challenges of internal division and external threats, the education system is overhauled, including elimination of the Imperial civil service exams in 1905, marking the end of a practice over 1000 years old (Bol, 2008). Six years later, the Qing dynasty falls, and the Republic of China is formed, marking the end of dynastic rule. Chan claims, “not since the third century B.C. have there been ‘one hundred schools’ of thought contending in China as in the twentieth century. The combination of Western thought and revolt against traditional heritage caused many intellectual currents to run in all directions” (1963, p. 743). The Republican Era brings about radically divergent perspectives, but all are grounded in, and aim to resolve, the same problem: how to modernise China (Cua, 2003). This is a time rife with criticality of all forms. In keeping with the current project, I only highlight a few prominent thinkers or ideas, which exemplify the various ways in which criticality manifests during this period in Chinese philosophical history.

At this juncture, thinking critically about fundamental philosophical aims and assumptions becomes explicit. Some advocate total westernisation, others aim to integrate Chinese and Western ideas, while some argue for rectification and globalisation of Chinese traditions (Fung, 2010). Amidst these debates, Liang Qichao uses the term *lixiang* to represent "... the things that everybody imagines and are commonly taken as the most reasonable principles... inherited social customs of thousands of years (in Xiao, 2002, p. 19). He goes on to argue for transforming, and perhaps discarding, aspects of *lixiang* as essential to the survival of Chinese civilisation. This demonstrates the degree to which criticality of the Republican Era is marked by intentional effort to restore, reshape, or sometimes discard the fundamental aims and assumptions of Chinese philosophy. In this effort, many philosophers see the way forward as requiring critical *integration* of Chinese and Western philosophical traditions. For example, Zhang Dongsun draws heavily on Kant to articulate a theory of culturally contextual epistemological pluralism intended to reconcile the seemingly incommensurate differences between Chinese and Western traditions (Jiang, 2002). Hu Shih, after studying at Columbia University with Dewey, is central to The New Culture Movement (Xinhe, 2002). It is difficult to find more explicit criticality of tradition than a movement founded on the aim of forging a 'new culture'. Hu draws on Nietzsche's notion of 'transvaluation of all values' to espouse the need for a 'critical attitude' toward institutions and traditions (Hu, 2013). He aims to put Confucian and non-Confucian philosophies on equal footing to be analysed through the lens of contemporary thought, claiming, "the future of Chinese philosophy would seem to depend much on the revival of those great philosophical schools that once flourished side by side with the school of Confucius in Ancient China" (Hu in Xinhe, 2002, p. 92). In this process he warns against imported 'isms' as necessarily ideological and dogmatic, thus not contributing to critical philosophy or meeting the needs of the contemporary Chinese context (Xinhe, 2002).

Ultimately, however, it is an -ism, that of Marxism-Leninism, that prevails in reuniting the Middle Kingdom into the People's Republic of China in 1949. The critically integrated philosophies guiding the Communist revolution eventually give way to *uncritical* dogmatism in the form of Maoism, which reaches its heights during the Cultural Revolution and essentially paralyzes philosophical development within Mainland China for several decades (Chan, 1963). Despite temporary devolution into *uncritical* dogmatism, there may be no better example of criticality than the creative integration of a foreign philosophical theory as the foundation for a new nation to preserve a culture facing the very real prospect of destruction. The deft manoeuvrings of Deng Xiaoping navigating the transition from Maoism to the 'opening' of China, is perhaps one of the best modern examples of highly practical criticality *within* and *between* multiple traditions simultaneously (Vogel, 2011). Finally, it is important to recognise that Chinese philosophy is a dynamic and continually developing field, with an invariably comparative and/or integrative aspect (Cheng, 2002). For example, Mou Zongsan integrates Kant and Heidegger with Buddhist and Daoist philosophy to 'reconstruct' Confucianism, while also making meaningful contributions to 'Western' theory (Lee, 2021). This might better be considered 'world' philosophy (Mou, 2009). The Western imperialist legacy creates an imbalance of power that *requires* China to engage with Western philosophy in a way the West has not been forced to reciprocate. Many Western scholars have taken great interest in Chinese philosophy, but not with a sense of cultural survival on the line, as was the case in 19th and early twentieth century China. This is an imbalance contemporary philosophers should be working to eliminate (Rošker, 2020). Thankfully, the increasing internationalisation of education provides just such an opportunity.

## Implications for Practice

This broad overview cannot do justice to the depth of specific concepts, theories, and debates within Chinese philosophy. However, it shows criticality *within* traditions, *of* traditions, and critical *integration* of different traditions. This should caution researchers, practitioners, and students against making inferences about culture or students based on reductive essentialisations of ‘Confucianism’, which may fail to consider the complexity of actual Confucian *philosophy*. Importantly, this approach does not preclude the fact that some aspects of Confucian philosophy, particularly those ossified into socio-cultural traditions, may discourage development of critical capacities and the practice of criticality. My point is that this does not indict the *entirety* of Confucian philosophy as *necessarily* incompatible with critical thinking, nor does it obviate the *potential* of that philosophy for deeply meaningful criticality. Furthermore, Confucianism is not the only resource within Chinese philosophy with relevance to critical thinking. Consequently, the research and practice of critical thinking may benefit from more nuanced consideration of Chinese philosophy. In the realm of practice, this could include attention to ongoing professional development for staff teaching critical thinking, whether embedded within a subject or more explicitly, particularly in contexts with large numbers of Chinese international students. Similarly, this paper may inspire reconsideration of reading and course content aimed at exploring or demonstrating criticality. Exploration of philosophies less prominent or dominant in contemporary theory and practice may help realise the critical potential of Chinese philosophy. For example, Xunzi, Mozi, and Zhuangzi may not exert as ‘measurable’ of an influence on contemporary culture and education, but their philosophies could contribute to understanding and potentially reimagining criticality. It could be instructive to investigate Xunzi’s forms of argumentation, the implications of *jian ai* for critical thinking, or explore the interplay between embodied cognition, skeptical perspectivism, and criticality in the *dao* of Zhuangzi. I hope this paper inspires further inquiry into the broader critical resources within Chinese philosophy and their applications for theory and practice.

In this paper I have also drawn attention to ‘creation through transmission’ as a *method* of criticality. This process does not contain the explicit argumentative form typical of much Western philosophy, and common in the teaching and practice of critical thinking. Recognition of this method of criticality corroborates conclusions drawn from philosophically informed empirical work exploring Chinese student engagement with critical thinking. For example, Tan argues, “... the image of a critical thinker as an independent and truth-driven champion of propositional knowledge, syllogism and adversarial debates is foreign to the Confucian traditions” (2017, p. 337). This leads her to suggest dialogical instead of dialectic critical engagement. My analysis substantiates this suggestion. However, I argue that this important observation fails to provide a complete picture. There are ample instances of explicit argumentative criticality within the history of Chinese philosophy. For example, Xunzi’s criticality *within* the Confucian tradition and Mohist criticality *of* the Confucian tradition, along with Zhuangzi’s criticality *of* Confucianism, Mohism, and skeptical questioning of the foundations of morality. Furthermore, the past two centuries of Chinese philosophy have engaged in adversarial debate at a (literally) revolutionary scale, transforming both society and philosophy multiple times. What can be drawn from this is both a need to recognise the nuances of ‘creation through transmission’ as a dialogical form of criticality and the existence of resources within Chinese philosophy exemplifying explicit critical debate and action.

Finally, attention to the fundamental *types* of criticality identified in this paper may help educators and students better understand what is being asked within a particular context. If a tutor thinks they are engaging in criticality *within* tradition without recognising the requirement on students to grapple with criticality *of* their traditions, there is a risk of ‘speaking past’ each other instead of ‘speaking with’ each other. The same is true of students working diligently to filter learning into familiar traditions without confronting the possibility – perhaps the necessity – of questioning fundamental assumptions through criticality *of* those traditions. While this paper focuses on traditions of Chinese philosophy, understanding how aims and assumptions guide reasoning to form the boundaries of traditions more generally (e.g., social, political, academic, professional) reveals the broader applicability of the *types* of criticality discussed here. Of course, not everyone can be an expert on *every* tradition. Thus, the onus is on all participants to explore the limits of their own assumptions in service of helping others do the same. And because it can be difficult to gain a perspective from *within* a tradition to facilitate criticality *of* that tradition, diverse educational contexts offer opportunities for engagement with perspectives conducive to expanding critical possibilities (MacAllister, 2016). Such a process, however, requires *explicit* attention to differences between traditions to create meaningful critical dialogue.

This means universities must clarify the *types* of criticality they aim to teach and practice. Do universities aim for criticality *within* tradition, *of* tradition, and/or to facilitate critical *integration* between traditions? Given the increasingly diverse demographic of Western universities, it seems impossible to avoid criticality *of* traditions without severely limiting the scope of critical thinking. So, should Western universities engage with types of criticality not taught (or allowed) in Chinese higher education? After all, this may be one reason many Chinese international students choose to study abroad, and if not, it may be an opportunity worth contemplation. Conversely, perhaps universities should bend toward critical aims better aligned with the backgrounds and likely future contexts of application for Chinese (and other) international students? The type of critical thinking drawn on in this paper would require *all* students from *every* background to seize the opportunity provided by diversity of traditions and perspectives to identify and critically reflect on their own aims and assumptions in any context that calls itself ‘critical’. To contribute to such a process, this paper dispels reductive cultural generalisations and provides resources for understanding and expanding criticality through Chinese philosophy.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to thank James MacAllister, Gale Macleod, and Gert Biesta for their helpful feedback on prior drafts of this paper. I am also thankful for the insightful comments of those that peer reviewed this paper.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** I have no conflicting interests related to this research.

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