





# Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

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Gary Mar, Editor

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## ARTICLES

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### ***Report on “Migrant Laborers Building the Master’s House: Enslaved Africans, Indentured Coolies, and Latino Contract Workers”***

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On Monday, December 28, 2009, at the Eastern Division APA meeting, there was a special program in the main session: **Migrant Laborers Building the Master’s House: Enslaved Africans, Indentured Coolies, and Latino Contract Workers**. This panel, organized by the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies, was the first such APA panel to be co-sponsored by the APA Committee on Hispanics and the APA Committee on Black Philosophers. The panel also brought together three prominent scholars in the field of Asian American Studies with three prominent philosophers in the areas of Latin American, Africana, and Asian American Philosophy.

The panel was introduced by **Gary Mar** and **John Kuo Wei Chen**, Associate Professor of History and Founding Director of NYU’s Asian/Pacific/American Institute and co-founder of the Museum of the Chinese in America, as moderator helped to summarize and frame the issues as the panel unfolded.

The first speaker, **Lisa Yun**, co-founder and former associate director of the Department of Asian and Asian American Studies at Binghamton University and author of one of Choice’s outstanding academic books for 2008, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese and Africans of Cuba* (see review below), spoke on “The 21st Century: The Era of the Contract Coolie.” The following is an excerpt from her paper:

“Last Monday, an article entitled ‘Uneasy Engagement: Chinese Export of Labor Faces Scorn’ appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*. It concerned violent backlashes against Chinese migrant laborers at sites across Asia and Africa. China, the article stated, is ‘famous for its export of cheap goods, is increasingly known for shipping out cheap labor... (f)rom Angola to Uzbekistan, Iran to Indonesia...’ As an example, the article describes one site where hundreds of them ‘toil by day on a dusty construction site and are cloistered at night in dingy dormitories.’ Finally, the article notes a poem written on a wooden door testifying to the rootless nature of migrant lives: ‘We’re all people floating around in the world. We meet each other; but we never really get to know each other.’

“The article brings to mind a long arc of history, the story of today’s floating people related to those of generations before:

itinerant farm hands, migrant laborers, indentured laborers. The voracious need for migrant labor; and the simultaneous scorn for them, is part of a longer story of desire and denial. Migrant labor is key to satisfying global consumption, national needs for production, and corporate needs for profit. Yet the migrant laborer is the scorned human by-product, the indispensable yet disposable body that visibly reminds us of what and who we are, what we are not, where we come from, and how the long global cycle of exploitation has permeated and constructed our lives.

“What I offer here is some provocation by recuperating notes and materials for our readings of migration, and for troubling our conceptions of ‘slave’ and ‘free.’ I look back now on the massive transition of slavery to free labor in the Americas, from chattel slavery to systems of the disposable human. In this case, the precursor to global disposable labor today—an early and immense experiment on a quarter million contract coolies from Asia to the Caribbean and Latin America.”

Professor Yun argued convincingly that the ideological apparatus of “lawfare” was used to entrap and keep Chinese migrant workers such that the distinction between formal slavery and free indentured or contract labor system broke down. Yun’s research brought to light new historical research that established that American and British crews were involved not only in the Coolie Trade but also in the trafficking of Chinese girls as prostitutes. This means that global sex trafficking with Asian girls and women actually started in the nineteenth century disguised within the coolie trade. (As Lewis Gordon noted, enslaved indigenous American and African women were also used for sex, and since the Spanish Empire was global, global sex trafficking actually dates back to the sixteenth century, and so the practice itself is more than several millennia old.)

The second speaker, **Linda Martín Alcoff** (Hunter College and Graduate Center–City University of New York), well known in the profession for her many books and edited and co-edited anthologies including among others, *Thinking From the Underside of History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), *Singing in the Fire: Tales of Women in Philosophy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford, 2006), *Feminist Epistemologies* (Routledge, 1993), *Real Knowing* (Cornell, 1996), *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (Palgrave, 2006), and *Constructing the Nation: A Race and Nationalism Reader* (SUNY Press, 2009). The following is an excerpt from her paper:

“Immigrants are today the most reviled group in America. On sidewalks day laborers waiting for employment report routine verbal and physical harassment, from having soiled food thrown in their faces to being shot at. The Southern Poverty Law Center has recently reported 144 new groups they define as ‘nativist extremists’ whose main agenda is the intimidation of immigrants. Some of these groups have been found by authorities to be stockpiling semi-automatic weapons, grenades, ammunition, as well as assorted smaller weapons of

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harassment such as pepper spray, knives, and Molotov cocktails, with the intention of using these against specific immigrant communities. Targeted violence against immigrants has become a routine weekly story across the country, whether instigated by high school kids or those more ideologically mature. From both mainstream news sources as well as the halls of Congress, it is today routine to hear vitriolic denunciations of anyone who suggests providing health benefits—evenly privately purchased—or education, or worker protections for the 12-20 million undocumented persons estimated to be living in the U.S. whose labor every one of us relies upon. The level of acceptable violence and sheer misery inflicted on this population is perhaps most profoundly symbolized by the popular support for Sheriff Joe Arpaio's Abu Graib-style prison practices in Arizona, which include public sexual humiliation. Meanwhile, the hundreds of nameless bodies and bones uncovered every year on our southern border go unmemorialized, and largely unremarked. They die trying to achieve the chance to work in the U.S. under conditions in which, according to AP reports, Mexicans are killed in on-the-job accidents at a rate four times higher than U.S. born workers.<sup>1</sup>

"In reality, as we know, the target here is in the main not an unspecified or generic immigrant population, but Latino immigrants and especially those from Mexico and Central America. Varied non-white groups experience varied forms of vilified treatment, based on their representation as potential terrorists, as threats to national security, or as global intellectual competition, while Mexicans, Central Americans, and other Latinos receive abuse mainly as a labor supply of unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Their interpellation in the public imagery is not as generic, undifferentiated workers, but workers from south of the border. And this group is the principal connotation activated by the identity-term 'immigrants' in the national discourse, though in some local contexts other groups may be more relevant. The actual meaning of 'illegal immigrant' or 'illegal alien,' then, is Latino. And thus the arsenal of attacks on immigrants is largely aimed squarely at Latinos.

"Latinos occupy a particular place in the dominant imaginary for good reasons: given the location of the United States in the Americas, where Spanish is dominant throughout the hemisphere and no border has proven to be un-navigable. No other minority can realistically pose the threat of ballooning numbers that we can. Thus, public attitudes toward Latinos cannot be disentangled from the host of attitudes toward immigration and its effects on the future of the imagined community of the nation."

In her paper Alcott (1) argued that we need a specific formulation of anti-Latino racism in order to represent and address this phenomenon, which views Latino immigrants as a group to be vilified at the same time that it is seen as a constructive presence; (2) proposed that we do so by exploring racism along the axis of culture and "ethnorace"; and (3) argued for "identity proliferation" through which it is possible to disarticulate the problems facing specific populations in order to arrive at a much more complex and fruitful "fine-tuned" analysis.

The third speaker, **Lewis Gordon**, the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy at Temple University and the Jay Newman Visiting Professor of Philosophy of Culture at Brooklyn College, whose *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) was a winner of the Gustavus Myer Award for Outstanding Books on Human Rights, whose co-edited *A Companion to African-American Studies* was the NetLibrary Book of the Month in February 2007, and whose other books include *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Humanities Press, 1995), *Fanon and the*

*Crisis of European Man* (Routledge, 1995), *Existential Africana* (Routledge, 2000), *Disciplinary Decadence* (Paradigm, 2006), *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge UP, 2008), the co-authored *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age* (Paradigm, 2009), and who was most recently President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, spoke on "Labor, Migration, and Race: Toward a Secular Model of Citizenship." The following is an excerpt from his paper:

"It has become a truism of recent thought that labor, migration, and race converge in the portrait of exploitation occasioned by modern capitalism. Often overlooked, however, are the theological underpinnings of their relation to the wider, global models of human organization and politics at hand. These foundations also offer a grammar of recurring themes by which, as Cassirer and Levi-Strauss observed, the path from the mythic to the scientific is a transformation more of name than form. We are left, then, with the questions of the tenability of moving forward in an age that seems to be struggling with which past to force onto the present.

"The topic at hand points to a poetic theme from Audre Lorde, one that has achieved mythopoetic status—namely, her oft-cited maxim of the master's tool not being able to tear down the master's house. My co-editor Jane Gordo and I received much rancor from some critics for challenging this sacred tenet of black critical thought in our anthology *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Paradigm, 2006). Our claim was straightforward: The master did not actually build his house, and the tools by which it was built were not exclusively his. Enslaved, dominated, oppressed, and subaltern peoples brought their intellectual resources and labor to the task of building the modern world, and any realistic effort to transcend the world of colonization and enslavement requires adjudicating this complicated, and often complicity, past and present. The point seemed obvious, but our critics responded in ways that struck us as, unfortunately, neurotic: They would rephrase our claim as somehow defending mastery and then offer as an alternative claim the very point we made—that among the tools used to build the status quo were resources from enslaved peoples. A difficult task, then, is the decolonizing one of conceptual transformation, where among with new concepts could also be new relationships by which to forge a different future and different forms of life. Such an effort requires some reexamination of the past."

Drawing upon themes from Africana philosophy, which Gordon argues prioritizes problems of philosophical anthropology, theorizing freedom, and metacritical reflections on practices of justification, Gordon argued that a consequence of modern imperialism, with its concomitant cultivation of racism and slavery, is the construction of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "problem people." After offering a discussion of how race, whose conceptual origins are in Christological theological naturalism, he examined some of the misconceptions of empire and migration, among which is the notion that populations can maintain "purity" while being in close proximity with each other: Empires, he argued, forces resources and, because of the demands of labor, people to centers for the sake of their survival. This leads to a compression of space and time, and, as seen in contemporary global practices, employment has shifted to require migration even among middle and upper classes. This flow of people, resources, and institutions leads to an ongoing debate on globalism. Neoconservative globalists think in terms of the sixteenth into the early eighteenth centuries. Neoliberals work from the eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries. Culturalists are still trying to figure out what happened in the twentieth century. But the task at hand is to think through a genuine twenty-first-century globalism. Drawing

upon his work on decadence and teleological suspensions, Gordon argues for a teleological suspension of national boundaries, which, he argues, will take the form of global federalism. Such a consideration would require a transformed conception of citizenship, where local membership depends on contribution/work/revenue or other, more substantial model than contemporary pseudo-religious ones of birth and “naturalization,” which he refers to as “conversion.” Among the benefits of global federalism is the undermining of ways through which capital is able to make labor vulnerable, since, globally, basic needs and restrictions would supervene.

Commentator **Gary Okihiro**, Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, where he was the founding director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Studies Association and the author of over a dozen award-winning books including *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (Columbia University Press, 2001) and his most recent books *Island World: A History of Hawaii and the United States* (2008) and *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (2009). Okihiro eloquently emphasized the need for a conference on interdisciplinary in which philosophers would benefit greatly from understanding their concepts historically.

The second commentator, **Falguni Sheth**, associate professor of philosophy at Hampshire College and author of *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race* (see Central Division announcements), offered a set of very insightful comments and questions for each of the speakers. She noted that Martín Alcoff’s argument that we need “a variegated map of racism” rather than one which located races and the longest single measure is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s claim, “When you’re attacked as a Jew, you must fight as a Jew,” even though at least in the early part of her life she did not identify as Jewish. Sheth questioned whether Martín Alcoff’s recommendation of “identity proliferation” in relation to the term “Latino” blurred important distinctions along the lines of nationality, say with regard to Cuban versus Ecuadorian migrants. Sheth also asked where political anchors such as nationality and citizenship à la Yun and Gordon’s papers fell into Martín Alcoff’s discussion, especially if we accept that *ethnorace* represents the recognition of a population that doesn’t fall so clearly along one axis or another (color, physical appearance, etc.). Part of Sheth’s concern was that, as a former Immigrant Rights Commissioner in San Francisco, she saw that much of the work being done to protect immigrants was often done in the name of one population, and duplicated the efforts of other specific immigrant rights groups: thus, many groups were working for each group in exactly the same way and so it would have been helpful to have a certain kind of cross-group solidarity. The “Dream Act” legislation that would allow the children of undocumented workers to go to college, for example, is a piece of legislation that would be largely of aid to the children of Latino migrant workers but also to children of other groups as well.

With regard to Lewis Gordon’s suggestion to understand work by moving to *contribution* instead of the usual standards of market-based work, product-based work, and domestic work, Sheth noted these standard categories fail to capture the range of activities that people engage in in the name of “work.” Gordon responded that he was arguing for contribution broadly understood to include all kinds of work and other things society has determined it needs. Sheth noted, “One difficulty points to precisely what seems to be the central crux of the problem in both Lewis’ exploration of the troubles that people of color land in when they migrate, as well as in the theological model of citizenship, which is that an institution of authority, to whom one

is in a position of dependence, or need, or vulnerability, is asking for proof or accountability. The trouble here is that one wants proof of citizenship, of good membership, of work—rather than giving the vulnerable, needy, dependent the benefit of the doubt that they are capable and ready of being good members, citizens, workers.”

Global federalism, Gordon replied, means that globally, everyone is a citizen. Locally, other criteria could come into play since people already migrate for work. Federalism is about how power is shared. A global government cannot deal with the contingencies of localities, but it could deal with the large issues of vulnerabilities. As Gordon wrote in his paper, “Without external borders, one could migrate to where one’s skills are needed, and by contributing those skills, earn membership for participation as local citizen. For such a world to exist, a radical transformation of global relations would occur; through which the meaning of ‘migrant,’ ‘emigrant,’ and ‘immigrant’ would be transformed in the set of relations that would make the weight of global exploitation void because of nowhere for that kind of capital, the one that requires vulnerable and hence cheaper labor, to go. The benefits of safety nets in localities on the basis of contributions could be justified from basic contract argument of localities owing those who have contributed to them. At the federal level, that would mean investment in a global infrastructure that would affect the flow of materials and labor in a way that matches the reality of a spatially and temporally compressed world. Although this is an imaginative act, we should bear in mind that humanity is already headed that way in the demands of labor itself. More people live in different places from where they work, and more people are part of a global flow of labor seeking work. Unlike times where primarily vulnerable populations were compelled to migrate or at least work where they do not live, that necessity is increasing among the middle and upper strata of societies across the globe.”

With regard to Yun’s paper, Sheth asked what was at stake in blurring the distinctions between formal slavery and slavery-like connotations involved in indentured servitude. She noted that similar phenomenon in Black Codes passed after abolition, also similar for the indigenous population in the U.S. Yun argued that Althusserian/Gramscian notions of coercion, which include the ideological recruitment of subjects, left something to be desired and Sheth asked for further elaboration of this point.

In conclusion, this panel raised a rich set of ideas for opening up dialogue between Asian American Studies, Philosophy of Race, and Latin American, Africana, and Asian American Philosophy.

#### Endnote

1. Justin Pritchard. “Mexican Worker Death Rates Rise Sharply Even as Overall Job Safety Improves.” *The Associated Press* (March 20, 2004).

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## Report on “Teaching Chinese Philosophy: Challenges and Promises”

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### Introduction

What are the challenges that instructors face in teaching Chinese philosophy to Western students? How are they to be overcome? Five papers devoted to these topics were presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of The American Philosophical Association’s Eastern Division in New York on Monday, December 28, 2009,

at 9:00a.m. The three-hour session, entitled “Teaching Chinese Philosophy: Challenges and Promises,” took place in the main program under the auspices of the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies. **A. Minh Nguyen** (Eastern Kentucky University) organized and chaired the session. The speakers included **Manyul Im** (Fairfield University), creator of Manyul Im’s Chinese Philosophy Blog and author of the forthcoming *Exploring Chinese Philosophy: An Introduction*; **Joel Kupperman** (University of Connecticut), author of *Learning from Asian Philosophy* and *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to the Essential Texts*; **JeeLoo Liu** (California State University at Fullerton), president of the Association of Chinese Philosophers in North America and author of *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism*; **May Sim** (College of the Holy Cross), author of *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* and frequent contributor to the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*; and **Bryan W Van Norden** (Vassar College), author of *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* and co-editor of *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Forty people attended the session, including **Kwame Anthony Appiah** (Princeton University), chair of the APA Board of Officers; **Chung Ying Cheng** (University of Hawai’i at Manoa), editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and honorary president of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy; **Yong Huang** (Kutztown University), general and founding editor of *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*; **Gary Mar** (Stony Brook University), chair of the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies; and **Peter Simpson** (College of Staten Island and Graduate Center of the City University of New York), professor of Philosophy and Classics. Below are extended abstracts of the papers presented.

### Is a Little Bit of Chinese Better or Worse than None? (Manyul Im)

In thinking about the challenges of teaching Chinese philosophy that I’ve faced, I limit myself to an issue about the use of Chinese terms, both in teaching and in scholarship. The issue is this: Is it helpful or harmful to insert classical Chinese terms for important concepts, *untranslated*, into philosophical discussion conducted otherwise completely in another language—in our case, English? Should we, for example, discuss the *dao* of the Confucian *junzi* and its relationship to *li* or, instead, the way of the Confucian gentleman and its relationship to ritual? I want to argue that using the English term we’ve chosen as the translation of a classical Chinese term is *sufficient* for the task of philosophical instruction and discussion. For example, it should be enough to use the term “way” to discuss *dao* and the passages that include that term; or, if one is partial to “guidance” over “way,” then use “guidance” for whatever translation or multi-term gloss one prefers or thinks appropriate for the context.

One reply to this might be that the Chinese term in question is polysemic—that it has a large semantic field, a cluster of possible meanings that vary according to context; so, it is better to leave the term untranslated than bias or narrow the discussion with one’s own preferred meaning. But in doing so there are important opportunities that are passed up, both in the classroom and more generally. Take the pedagogical context; one might think that the student should be allowed some leeway to interpret the various instances of *dao*; this will help them to become better interpreters of the text. But the latter outcome is best served by laying out the interpretive possibilities, using the various translations, and discussing their strengths and weaknesses. Otherwise, the student doesn’t

receive any guidance. Worse, the student may end up with the problematic impression that Chinese philosophical concepts are impenetrable, that they elude not only translation but also understanding.

Similar remarks apply outside of the pedagogical context. *Mere* invocation of a term’s polysemic plenitude and refusal to translate it block any understanding of it and encourage the illusion that once we are textual experts, we know what it means. But the plausibility of any given interpretation requires discussion of the question, “What does that mean, exactly?” But to do that, some level of translation commitment seems required, whether it is term-for-term translation, or conceptual elaboration through a multi-term gloss.

Consider two rejoinders to my overall suggestion. First, the Native Conceptual Grasp Response. One might say, “Well, how did the early Chinese thinkers conceive of these terms? It was without translation; and we don’t see a lot of conceptual analysis or glossing on their part. Shouldn’t we be trying to recreate their understanding in our own understanding of those terms? Isn’t the ultimate goal to hear, read, and think *dao* and have an untranslated, un glossed conceptual grasp of it?”

There are serious obstacles to characterizing competent usage as “native competence.” For one thing, it’s not clear how one could plausibly claim a sort of native linguistic competence, for oneself or for another, unless the language in question was a living language and there were speakers of the language around to judge the matter. A couple of *prima facie* obstacles exist to satisfying those conditions. First, it’s not clear that the literary and stylized written language of the texts we have at our disposal was ever a living language, at least construed as a spoken, natural language. Second, even if the written works could give us clues as to the native linguistic environment within which they were composed, there are still no speakers of the language. There are at present competent composers of classical Chinese poetry and prose, but whether they should be attributed the authority of a native speaker seems contentious. So, recreating native understanding of classical Chinese terms might be misguided. In any case, that goal seems too lofty as a piece of pedagogy.

The second rejoinder to my overall suggestion is the Meta-understanding of Mystical Understanding Response. One might say, “Proper understanding of some of these terms—especially a term like *dao*—requires the meta-understanding that their meanings are not completely penetrable.” Such a term as *dao* refers to something that cannot be completely understood. Important lines of the *Daodejing* (e.g., in chapters 1, 14, 21, and 25) might argue for this view.

There are, however, two levels of “penetrability” at work even in the *Daodejing*. On the one hand, there is an “operating” level at which the term *dao* is understandable through a variety of glosses, albeit poetic or oblique ones. At this level, similar thoughts to the ones above apply regarding translation and interpretation—to the extent that something like “way” or “guidance” is an operating-level gloss that is supposed to help us understand some deeper, more difficult-to-articulate truths about ways or guidance, there is no reason to avoid using it. On the other hand, there is the deeper, rigidly impenetrable level of understanding. But on that level, it doesn’t matter what language we’re using—classical Chinese or English; *ex hypothesi*, there’s no more help from any term we choose to use than from some inarticulate noise. So, it doesn’t seem like this provides a good reason for avoiding translation.

## Chinese Philosophy and Processes of Self-Fashioning (Joel Kupperman)

I do not teach a course (survey or advanced) in Chinese philosophy. But I do offer a survey course on Asian and comparative philosophy, and also both a junior-senior course and a graduate seminar on Asian philosophy. Some of what I have experienced may be transferable to courses in Chinese philosophy alone.

We offer some large survey courses that qualify as introductions to philosophy, and in which graduate students handle discussion sections. Mine is one of these. I lecture (with some discussion) for two hours a week. The group then breaks up into discussion sections for the third hour. The graduate students who handle these discussion sections will have all taken my graduate seminar in Asian philosophy. This enables them to be prepared to help in this course. Most of their dissertations are in areas like philosophy of psychology and philosophy of language. But the training in Asian philosophy would enable them to teach a beginning undergraduate course in this area; this turns out to give them a competitive edge in the job market when they finish their doctorates.

Concerning the challenges that instructors face in teaching Chinese philosophy, a few observations:

- (1) The major challenges include the fact that most undergraduates will be unfamiliar with the intellectual contexts of Asian philosophies, and will be looking for features familiar to them.
- (2) There is no substitute for patient explanation.
- (3) Inevitably some of the undergraduate students will be anti-intellectual. One way to reach some of these will be described below. It does not work with everyone. On the other hand, a number of the brighter students become quite carried away by Chinese philosophy, especially (as my T.A.'s keep reporting) by the *Chuang-Tzu*, difficult though that is.
- (4) Bryan W. Van Norden is right about the difficulties of Confucius. Many of these occur because, in the *Analects*, passages on any given topic can be scattered. The difficulties dwindle considerably if one presents a group of scattered passages as interrelated, so the students get a clear view of a number of related points at once.

Here is one thing that seems to have made the course more rewarding for the brighter students. Rather than merely presenting the Asian readings in terms of their logic and implicit arguments, I also present them as representative of what used to be called "philosophy of life." Students realize that if they accepted any of the major lines of thought in their Indian or Chinese readings, their lives would be transformed. A teacher has to be scrupulous in not taking sides in any such matters. But clearly if one accepted one of the philosophies, it would shape one's life. I quote to them Fung Yu-Lan's observation that many educated Chinese have combined Confucianism and Daoism in their lives. College students are at an age at which transformation of life is an especially live possibility. This kind of presentation of Asian philosophies can really grab them.

## Making Sense of Chinese Philosophy: From Pre-Qin Philosophy to Neo-Confucianism (JeeLoo Liu)

In this talk I focus on some central issues covered in my Chinese philosophy class. My pedagogy begins with the understanding that, as Donald Munro puts it, we have to "present philosophical findings accessible to a broad audience"; we need to "present the human problem." I see the common concerns shared by

Western and Chinese thinkers alike, and this is where I would establish my comparisons.

I also think from the perspective of my students. Most of my students do not have the background understanding of Chinese culture and are not familiar with the philosophical terms commonly used by Chinese people. I aim to make them see the issues as related to their world and to invite them to respond to the views presented by ancient Chinese philosophers. For this purpose, I have found the analytic style to be the most helpful. In my teaching I analyze the philosophical terms to make them less mystifying and lay out the philosophers' argumentation to ask for students' reflection or critique. I often compare Chinese philosophical views to those Western views that my students know about. My students are most interested in the following topics:

- (1) What is the ultimate foundation of values?
- (2) How do we compare the different familial ethics among different cultures? What is the contemporary interpretation of "filial piety"?
- (3) Are humans intrinsically good, bad, or neutral? What would evolutionary ethics tell us?
- (4) On the basis of one's conviction of human nature, what does one take to be the best strategy for governing the people?
- (5) Are material desires obstacles to our moral improvement? Is it morally blameworthy to pursue one's self-interest?

My presentation will cover the following aspects:

- (1) The fundamental worldview.
- (2) The basis for it all: *Yijing*—the penetrating thread in the history of Chinese philosophy.
- (3) Central topics for classical Confucianism: (i) the superior man, (ii) world peace, and (iii) filial piety.
- (4) Central topics for classical Daoism: (i) *Dao*, (ii) virtues and values, (iii) skepticism of language and human conceptions, and (iv) impartiality.
- (5) Merging Confucianism and Daoism—the virtues of *yang* and *yin* in harmony: "Be a Confucian when dealing with the world; be a Daoist when withdrawn from active participation in the world."
- (6) Central issues for Neo-Confucianism: *Metaphysics, Mind and Morality* (my new project).

Both in writing and in teaching I employ the analytic approach to Chinese philosophy. The analytic approach focuses more on the analysis of key philosophical concepts and the examination of the philosophers' basic assumptions. This approach attempts to bring ancient Chinese philosophy into the context of contemporary philosophy and to see how those issues in the Chinese philosophical terminology are actually quite akin to the issues dealt with by Western philosophers. It aims to show that even though Chinese philosophers use different terms, narrative strategies, and analytic modes, their concerns are often similar to those of their Western counterparts. For example: What is the nature of reality? Wherein lays the foundation of our moral values? Is human nature fundamentally good or bad? How do human beings connect to the whole universe? What is the foundation of our knowledge of the world? My goal is to make these issues accessible to Western thinkers by shedding light on their universality through the analytic explication of these texts.

## A Passage to China through the West (May Sim)

I subscribe to four hermeneutical principles of understanding in teaching Chinese philosophy. I borrow these from Hans-Georg

Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2005). They are: (1) understanding is self understanding; (2) when one understands an object, one should be able to define or explain what is distinctive about it; (3) one should be able to apply what one has understood; and (4) one can critically evaluate what one has understood. First, since Aristotle's philosophy is a representative of the Western tradition, and Confucius' philosophy is the root of much of Chinese thought, comparing Aristotle's and Confucius' views of morality enables students to see how a representative of their tradition compares with the Confucian tradition, and better understand themselves. Moreover, finding the functional equivalent concepts in Aristotle's philosophy can either provide us with the appropriate terms for translating Confucius' concepts or, if such terms were lacking, lead us to offer descriptions or explanations for conveying these Chinese concepts. Second, identifying the differences between Confucius' and Aristotle's views (e.g., with respect to their respective conditions for virtue, or their respective ideal political conditions for the cultivation of virtues) allows students to explain what is distinctive about the former, satisfying my second principle about explanation and definition. Third, comparing these two thinkers' positions on the accessibility of moral cultivation is a way for students to think about the applicability of the Confucian way of life to themselves. This illustrates my third principle of understanding. Finally, discoursing about the strengths and weaknesses of Aristotle's and Confucius' accounts of the moral life also encourages students to critically evaluate Confucianism as an instance of Chinese philosophy.

### **Suggestions for How to Avoid both Demonization and Apotheosis of the Other (Bryan W Van Norden)**

I'm going to discuss four assumptions that "we" twenty-first-century Westerners commonly have, and that may interfere with fully appreciating Chinese philosophy. I put "we" in scare-quotes for two reasons. First, not all of my readers will be comfortable identifying themselves as "Westerners" given their origin or ancestry in other parts of the world. Second, even among those who may comfortably describe themselves as "Western," not everyone will share these assumptions. However, the assumptions below are characteristically Western, and I have found that most contemporary college-educated people in the English-speaking world share them. Consequently, these assumptions need to be made explicit because it is hard to understand Chinese philosophy without being aware that there are legitimate alternatives to them.

First, "we" tend to be relativists as opposed to objectivists. A relativist is someone who says that truth and falsity depend upon your viewpoint or the viewpoint of your culture. An objectivist says that a given statement is either true or false, independently of any individual's or culture's point of view. Relativism has become so widely accepted on college campuses today that it is often a dogma. One major ancient Chinese thinker, the Daoist Zhuangzi, might be a relativist. However, the vast majority of Chinese philosophers are objectivists: they think there are objective facts about the way the world is and about right and wrong. Since relativism is the new dogma in the West, I would invite you to be open-minded about the possibility that the Chinese sages might be right in favoring objectivism.

"We" are skeptics, or at least fallibilists, as opposed to having "epistemological optimism." A skeptic is someone who thinks that it is impossible to obtain knowledge. A fallibilist is someone who thinks that it is possible for us to have knowledge, but that we cannot have absolute certainty. Skepticism is a very common philosophical position in the contemporary West. However, most Chinese thinkers have been "epistemological

optimists": they have confidence that we can have knowledge. Again, Zhuangzi is a possible exception.

"We" are pluralists as opposed to ethical monists. Consider the lives of a good kindergarten teacher and a good defense attorney. A pluralist would say that a kindergarten teacher and a defense attorney are *both* very valuable ways of life. If a person thinks that one is not valuable, that is simply due to ignorance or narrow-mindedness. Of course, a pluralist does not say that every way of life is equally valuable. Being an assassin or a thief is not a good way of life, even if someone thinks that it is. "We" tend to believe in pluralism. But most Chinese thinkers are ethical monists. They think there is one way of life that is best. They do admit variety in forms of life. One traditional Chinese list of the social hierarchy is scholar-farmer-craftsman-merchant. Each class is needed for the proper functioning of society. However, the scholars who run the government are the most important and most exalted, while merchants are the least.

Finally, "we" believe in democracy as opposed to paternalism. Remember Lincoln's famous line that American democracy is "of the people, by the people, and for the people"? Almost all Chinese thinkers have agreed that government should be "for the people," in the sense that it is aimed at benefiting them. They have also agreed that government is "of the people," in the sense that those born into aristocratic backgrounds are not always virtuous, and those born in humble circumstances may deserve to rise to the highest levels of government because of their virtues and talents. But no one in ancient China thought that government should be "by the people," in the sense that representatives should be democratically elected. So the traditional Chinese view was paternalistic (government should be made up of the most virtuous people, who will work for the benefit of the people), but not democratic (government is not by popular vote).

So keep in mind that you live in a culture whose background assumptions are relativism, skepticism, pluralism, and democracy. But you are reading texts that largely assume objectivism about right and wrong, an optimistic epistemology, a monistic conception of the good way of life, and political paternalism.

### **Discussion Questions**

The session consisted of two parts with a five-minute intermission. In the first part, Maryul Im, Joel Kupperman, and JeeLoo Liu presented their papers. In the second, May Sim and Bryan W. Van Norden presented theirs. Each spoke for approximately 25 minutes. The session closed with a spirited 50-minute discussion in which all five speakers and many audience members participated. What stood out was the passionate exchange on the meaning and validity of the claim that Confucius is a strict traditionalist. The questions raised during the Q&A included the following:

- (1) Is it a mistake to think that instructors of Chinese philosophy face a unique challenge? Why, for instance, is *Dao* any more difficult to define than *Dasein*?
- (2) Are Chinese philosophical concepts incommensurable with Western philosophical concepts? Or are they different but commensurable?
- (3) Is the history of teaching Chinese philosophy in the West one of obfuscation?
- (4) Do instructors of Chinese philosophy have a fixation on the etymology of certain Chinese characters? Should we be hesitant to draw any philosophical conclusion from such etymology? Should we go beyond that?
- (5) How should one start a course in Chinese philosophy? With a thinker? With a concept? With a worldview?

With a cultural-historical framework? Or should one dive right in, so to speak, and start problematizing things?

- (6) Suppose you teach an introductory course that has a critical thinking component and you take a critical approach to Chinese philosophy. How do you satisfy the needs of those students who wish to explore, say, the mystical aspects of Daoism?
- (7) What is the significance of the socio-historical context of a philosophical work? Does knowledge of the socio-historical context enhance our understanding and appreciation of the work in question? Do such contexts indicate a wide variety of Chinese philosophies and their relevance?
- (8) Is there a genuine distinction between the Baconian conception of knowledge as power and the Confucian conception of knowledge as edification? What is the significance of that distinction?
- (9) Is “barbarians” a derogatory term in the *Analects*? Or does it only refer to members of the neighboring tribes?
- (10) What is meant by the claim that Confucius is a strict traditionalist? Does it hold? What is the role of tradition in his philosophy?

The session ended at noon.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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### Launch Event: Foreigners in Us—Why Love to Hate?

Faculty Seminar Series: Asian American/Asian Research Institute (AAARI)

AAARI (<http://www.aaari.info/10-03-01Faculty.htm>)

**Date:** Monday, March 1, 2010

**Time:** 6-8 p.m.

**Place:** 25 West 43rd Street, 18th Floor, between 5th & 6th Avenues, Manhattan

This public dialogue on xenophobia/philia in the (Asian) American context, energized by some of the critical and creative voices from inside and outside the Ivory Tower, celebrates the beginning of a stimulating series of faculty seminars in Asian American Studies at the Asian American / Asian Research Institute. At this launch event, panelists will explore various embodiments of the “foreigner” question, the theme of the year 2010, focusing on its aesthetic, moral, and political harms, implications, and future: How deep is its everydayness and randomness? Moderated by: **Kyoo Lee** (John Jay College, CUNY, Resident Mellon Fellow at CUNY Graduate Center)

Panelists include:

**Linda Martín Alcoff** (Philosophy, Hunter/The Graduate Center, CUNY)

**Terry Hong** (Media Arts Consultant, the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program)

**David Henry Hwang** (Playwright)

**Gary Mar** (Philosophy, Stony Brook University, SUNY)

**Gary Okihiro** (International and Public Affairs, Columbia University)

**Bruce Robbins** (English, Columbia University)

**Jack Tchen** (Social and Cultural Analysis, NYU)

### Re-Oriente: Reading Orientalism with Gayatri Spivak and Kyoo Lee

March 2nd, Tuesday, 6:30 p.m., Martin E. Segal Theatre

<http://centerforthehumanitiesgc.org/>

This public seminar with **Gayatri Spivak** sets out to explore the heart of Occidentalism from the outside in by using Edward Said's field-defining modern classic as the starting point. Gayatri Spivak is University Professor and Director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Society, Columbia University. **Kyoo Lee** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, John Jay College, and Resident Mellon Fellow at the Center for the Humanities, the Graduate Center.

### Central Division Panels

#### Author Meets Critics: Falguni Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*

Chair: **Kyoo Lee** (John Jay College and the Graduate Center—City University of New York)

Critics: **Charles Mills** (Northwestern University)

**Nanita Goswami** (DePaul University)

Author: **Falguni Sheth** (Hampshire College)

#### Confucius and Dewey on Experiential Education

Chair: **Thomas Jackson** (University of Hawaii at Manoa)

1. Dewey on Students' Interest, **Thomas Jackson**

Commentator: **Yong Huang** (Kutztown University)

2. Confucius on the Paradoxicality of Education, **Yong Huang**

Commentator: **Thomas Jackson**

3. Education and Self-Cultivation in Dewey and Confucius, **Andrew Colvin** (Slippery Rock University)

Commentator: **Jinmei Yuan** (Creighton University)

4. The Role of Wonder in Seeking for Certainty through Uncertainty in Dewey's Experiential Education, **Jinmei Yuan**

Commentator: **Andrew Colvin**

### Pacific Division Panels

#### II-A. Author-Meets-Critics: Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*

Wednesday Early Evening, March 31 Session II — 4:00-6:00 p.m.

Chair: **Marjolein Oele** (University of San Francisco)

Critics: **Lisa Raphals** (University of California—Riverside)

**George Rudebusch** (Northern Arizona University)

**Yang Xiao** (Kenyon College)

Author: **Jiyuan Yu** (University at Buffalo)

#### GV-K. Author-Meets-Critics: Falguni Sheth, *Towards a Political Philosophy of Race*

Sponsored the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP), Wednesday, March 31, 2010, 6:00-9:00 p.m.

Chair: **Christina M Bellon** (California State University—Sacramento)

Author: **Falguni A. Sheth** (Hampshire College)

Critics: **David Kim** (University of San Francisco)

**Eduardo Mendieta** (Stony Brook University of New York)

**Mickaela Perina** (University of Massachusetts—Boston)



## **IV-H California Dreaming: How Race Alerts and Alters the State, Now and Then**

Arranged by the APA Committee on the Status of Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies, Thursday, April 1, 2010, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

Chair: **Kyoo Lee** (John Jay College and the Graduate Center—City University of New York)

Speakers:

**Tommy Lott** (San Jose State University)

**Gary Mar** (Stony Brook University of New York)

**Eduardo Mendieta** (Stony Brook University of New York)

**John Pittman** (City University of New York—John Jay College)

**Helena Soosan** (Stony Brook University of New York)

**Eddie Wong** (Executive Director, Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation)

**Helen Zia** (Independent Scholar)

This “site-specific” and interdisciplinary panel, composed of philosophers and public intellectuals who currently reside or have lived in California, will engage in a cross-sectional conversation on dynamic, and often turbulent, ways in which race plays a role in forming and changing the landscape of “American dreams.”

## **Presidential Proclamation: National Angel Island Day**

January 21, 2010, was proclaimed to be National Angel Island Day by President Barack Obama:

“One hundred years ago, the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay opened for the first time, and an important chapter of the American narrative began. It would be written by those who walked through the station’s doors over the next three decades. From the cities, villages, and farms of their birth, they journeyed across the Pacific, seeking better lives for themselves and their children. Many arrived at Angel Island, weary but hopeful, only to be unjustly confined for months or, in some cases, years. As we remember their struggle, we honor all who have been drawn to America by dreams of limitless opportunity.

“Unlike immigrants who marveled at the Statue of Liberty upon arrival at Ellis Island, those who came to Angel Island were greeted by an intake facility that was sometimes called the ‘Guardian of the Western Gate.’ Racially prejudiced immigration laws of the time subjected many to rigorous exams and interrogations, as well as detention in crowded, unsanitary barracks. Some expressed themselves by carving poetry and inscriptions into the walls in their native language—from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean to Russian, German, and Urdu. These etchings remain on Angel Island today as poignant reminders of the immigrant experience and an unjust time in our history.

“If there is any vindication for the Angel Island immigrants who endured so many hardships, it is the success achieved by those who were allowed entry, and the many who, at long last, gained citizenship. They have contributed immeasurably to our Nation as leaders in every sector of American life. The children of Angel Island have seized the opportunities their ancestors saw from across an ocean. By demonstrating that all things are possible in America, this vibrant community has created a beacon of hope for future generations of immigrants.”

## **Angel Island Reflections: New Media Projects 2000-2010**

This DVD contains new media projects created by generations of Stony Brook University students from 2000-2010 concerning Angel Island and Asian American History. These projects were inspired by the work of documentary filmmaker **Loni Ding** and were created in collaboration with many others, including producer and editor **Dini Diskin-Zimmerman**, graphic artists and DVD designers **Takafumi Ide** and **Han Na Lee**, and composer **Julie Chi-wei Li**. The distribution of the DVD at the centenary celebrations through the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation in July 2010 will be made possible by a grant from the APA award to the Committee on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies for diversifying the profession.

Angel Island Reflections, an engaging body of new media projects completed by students at Stony Brook University from 1999-2009, address the inaccurate reflections of Asian Americans in the mirror of history. The first project is a docu-memoir, titled “*I Saw Myself*,” in which students reclaimed the history of the immigrants interned on Angel Island as their own by reading the Chinese poems carved in protest on the barrack walls. They also gave voice to the oral history of women detainees and created a newscast to educate Americans about Angel Island, which was, at that time, one of the eleven most endangered historic sites in America. The fifth and last project is also a docu-memoir, “*We See Ourselves*”: *International Immigrant Stories from Angel Island, America’s Pacific Gateway*,” in which Stony Brook students take the stories from the research to be published by **Erika Lee**, Professor of History and Asian American Studies at the University of Minnesota, and **Judy Yung**, Professor Emerita of American Studies at U. C. Santa Cruz, in *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (OUP, 2010) commissioned for the 2010 centenary of the Angel Island Immigration Station.

The late historian Ronald Takaki predicted the increasing importance of such intellectual projects: “[W]e can be certain that much of our society’s future will be influenced by which ‘mirror’ we choose to see ourselves. America does not belong to one race or one group, the people in this study remind us, and Americans have been constantly redefining their national identity. ...By sharing their stories, they invite us to see ourselves in a different mirror.” We invite you to see yourselves in these five mirrors as well. For more information, email: Gary.Mar@stonybrook.edu.

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

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### ***The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba***

Lisa Yun (Temple University Press, 2008).

**Helen Ngo**

*Stony Brook University*

Lisa Yun’s *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba* (Temple University Press, Outstanding Academic Title, Choice, 2008) is an ambitious but impressive study of a relatively neglected history in nineteenth-century Cuba. In this book, Yun sets out to examine and re-present the lives of Chinese coolies in Cuba using the tools of historical, literary, and philosophical inquiry. This is by no means a modest

undertaking but with its insightful and textured analyses, *The Coolie Speaks* is a book that easily rises to the challenge.

Yun's entry point into this study is the 1874 commission investigation in Cuba instigated by China, and the testimonies of those coolies who dared to speak out about their experiences. What transpires is a rich tapestry of testimonies, diverse in their message and mode, and from which we can glean something of the harsh reality of life as indentured laborers, but also the resilience and resourcefulness of the coolies in responding to it.

Yun's careful and creative examination of the testimonies reveals a much more complex picture of the coolies than we might otherwise come to expect. These are not just accounts of the unbearable heaviness that life had come to represent for them (though such accounts are, as Yun reminds us, still transgressive in their naming and recording of unspeakable brutalities); they are also fierce yet sophisticated critiques of a system of indentured labor. As some coolies observed, this "contract" labor was little more than slavery by another name, veiled with the promise and pretense of freedom. These testimonies interrogate some of liberalism's most basic notions of contract, voluntarism, and freedom, and in doing so, also undermine narratives of indentured labor as a necessary and logical next step in the transition from slavery to waged labor.

Alongside this critical examination of the "transition" narrative is an exploration of how the system of indentured labor was indeed a deeply racialized one. Racially based constructions of Chinese coolies as hardworking and submissive rendered their bodies and labor exploitable. However, as Yun argues, one need not look far to see evidence of the coolies' disruptive resistance against this; from on-site riots to strategic methods of suicide, coolies resisted on many levels and in many ways. A further dimension explored in *The Coolie Speaks* is, as the subtitle foreshadows, the interplay of power between Chinese coolies and African slaves in Cuba. At times sympathetic, and at other times volatile, these relations mark the complex and multifaceted workings of a racialized economy, complicating the notion of a racial hierarchy within which Asians are posited as "mediators" between black and white.

These and other arguments are advanced compellingly throughout the book, supported by an impressive body of research. Yun pays great attention to detail when piecing together an historical context against which the testimonies can be more meaningfully read. Coolies' claims of slavery-like conditions are, for example, supplemented with evidence of the overlap in the cast of actors powering both industries, from owners to traffickers and financiers. Yun also makes astute connections across a range of boundaries, noting the similarities between Chinese and Indian indentured labor, as well as the resonance of coolie experiences in contemporary examples of bonded labor in the case of "illegal" immigrants and the new global underclass. Comparison does not, however, amount to conflation, and Yun's observations remain always attuned to the specificities of local economies, differently racialized bodies, and histories of colonization.

What is also commendable about *The Coolie Speaks* is Yun's attention to the forms and contours of the material under examination. Her creative reading allows Yun to locate moments of transgression within the testimonies, as well as subversive movements in historical texts such as that authored by second generation Afro-Chinese writer Antonio Chuffat Latour. If, as Yun suggests, their writings exemplify a kind of resistance, then these are voices to which we should listen, and listen carefully. To this end, *The Coolie Speaks* is something of an exemplar. Through her treatment of the texts, Yun demonstrates the important lessons we can learn by listening attentively, actively, and respectfully to the many voices of the subaltern.

Despite the occasional disjoint in focus toward the end of the book (for example, Yun's explanation of methodological problems encountered, while important, somewhat awkwardly rounds out the book's conclusion), it is nonetheless an engaging read and a formidable endeavour. A testament to the power and potential of interdisciplinary work, *The Coolie Speaks* is a remarkable study in its own right, while offering important contribution and inspiration for scholarship to come.