

A Journey to the Way of Gongfu: An Intellectual Autobiography

PEIMIN NI

Grand Valley State University, USA (nip@gvsu.edu)

Growing out of traumatic life experiences in youth, the author started his lifelong journey in studying and practicing philosophy during the turbulent Cultural Revolution in China. The path took him from a “secret library” in the Worker’s Union Office of a steel plant to universities in China and the US; from seeking personal healing to becoming a public intellectual; from pursuing enlightenment in western philosophies to re-discovering his own Chinese cultural heritage; and from learning to think for oneself to becoming an active scholar and formulator of a unique philosophical theory—the philosophy of the way of gongfu, or the art of life.

Key words: Chinese philosophy; *gongfu*; Confucianism; comparative philosophy; the *Analects*

1 Enlightened to Think

What intrigued me into philosophy was nothing theoretical, but events in real life, particularly the “Great Cultural Revolution”¹ that turned my childhood world upside down, and an accident that almost took my life.

I was born in Shanghai, China, in 1954, only five years after the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government had replaced the old Nationalist Party government. Both my parents were CCP members, working in the government. They were devoted idealistic Marxists, believing in a cause that would eventually liberate everyone from all forms of oppression, exploitation, and deprivation, and that is what the CCP meant to them. They were also in their heart Confucians, deeply committed to the values of compassion, integrity, and responsibility for their family as well as their country.

The “Great Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976) started when I was in fifth grade in primary school. To me at the time, this nation-wide political movement had to be right simply because it was launched by Chairman Mao, the supreme leader of the CCP. He had been portrayed as always right. How could you create a new world without smashing the old, as Mao said? But soon the sweeping movement started to impact my own family. Both my parents were criticized, detained, and even tortured by the revolutionaries, and numerous accusations, such as “traitor,” “anti-revolution agent,” and “capitalist-roader,” were forced upon them. Our apartment was searched repeatedly to look for evidence of my parents’ “crimes.” Along with this, I found myself turned from an admired model student at school to a son of “Black Seven-kinds”² that anyone could humiliate.

The subsequent years were a dark period of my life. While my parents were still detained indefinitely in places concealed from us, two of my elder brothers were sent far away to receive “re-education” from farmers, leaving me with another brother and a grandmother at home, and both of them soon fell seriously ill. I, still a teenager, became the major caretaker in the family, managing life

with only a fraction of my parents' income, as the rest was "frozen up" by the revolutionary government.

Without the luxury to release my frustration through a teenage rebellion, I could only find comfort through reading ancient Chinese literature that I was lucky enough to get access to (thanks to a neighbor). As my middle school years went by, I did not realize that I had practically taught myself classic literature roughly equivalent to a four-year college major.

Life experience and my autodidactic literary training prepared me for my first encounter with philosophy. After middle school, I was assigned to work at Shanghai #1 Steel Plant as an electrician. A coworker introduced me to a friend of his, Mr. Liu Tongfu, a philosophy postgraduate from Fudan University. In a time when everyone was supposed to believe in only the official version of Marxism, Liu was courageous enough to come up with his creative interpretations of Marxism and his own unique philosophical ideas—a particle-wave ontology and methodology that to this day still makes great sense to me. I read his unpublished manuscripts with enthusiasm. From there, I came to the realization for the first time what it meant to be able to think for oneself. I was so fascinated by his ideas that I hand-copied all the manuscripts he let me borrow, totaling about one million words.

2 Near-Death Experience

My job as an electrician at the steel plant involved climbing poles and building power lines. It ended abruptly by an accident when I was still an apprentice. On a nice day in May 1974, I was sent to work on a pole with a partner to fix a minor imperfection on a newly constructed power line. Unknown to us, however, these wires were already connected to a 6,600-voltage power source! The head of the crew was informed, but he simply forgot it when he assigned us the job!

Up there on the pole, I positioned myself with a safety belt and reached out to a wire with my pliers. Suddenly, like an explosion, I felt as if my whole body was torn into pieces. I could not see anything but bloody flashes in my eyes. I heard a voice shouting, "Drop your pliers!" But I did not know where my arms and legs were. There was only a highly concentrated awareness, "That's it! I am going to die!" Strangely enough, there was no sadness. Only a strong regret, as if I had left something undone...

Fortunately, the partner who went up with me saved my life. Seeing smoke coming out of my hands, he realized what had happened. After he had shouted "Drop your pliers!" a couple of times and gotten no response from me, he immediately took out his own pliers and brushed them against my pants with a quick stroke. The motion exerted enough force to disconnect me from the wire.

"I thought you were dead already!" he told me later. "Who can survive such a high voltage electric shock? Your life-fortune is incredible!"

"If you thought I was dead already, why did you still risk your own life to save me?" I asked. The pliers he used were exactly the same as the ones in my hand that were burnt through. Their plastic handle wrap was supposed to resist only 500 volts or less. His response was simple: "I just couldn't bear to watch you being burnt like that!"

I was rushed to a nearby hospital. Both of my hands were burnt badly. What was worse, the doctors said, the signs of burning on my wrists and arms indicated that the insides were badly burnt as well. To be safe, they proposed to amputate both of my hands from the wrists, if not more.

My mother was informed and allowed to leave the place where she was confined in suburban Shanghai to visit me in the hospital. I can never forget her pale but solemn look when she appeared in the room. She firmly refused to accept the doctors' plan and managed to transfer me to a better

hospital which was known for treating burn injuries. It was due to this critical decision of hers that I was able to keep both of my hands, with just a minimum loss of three and a half fingers.

When things quieted down, I could not help pondering over the deep regret I felt during the moment of the electric shock. "What was that, the thing I felt as if I had left undone? Let me do it before it is too late. I don't want to have the same feeling when I face death again in the future!" That question was exactly the philosophical question about the meaning of life: What makes a life fulfilled, a life not lived in vain?

After months of recovery, I was reassigned a job working in the plant's Office of the Workers' Union. To my pleasant surprise, they had a secret chamber—a small library hidden inside, full of books "for critiques only" (a label used to legitimize the value of keeping them). Many of them were philosophy books. I was like a mouse dropped into a rice chamber.

Nietzsche says, "What does not kill me makes me stronger." In my case, what did not kill me made me a philosopher. When the Cultural Revolution was over and colleges reopened to the general public, I went to take the entrance exam. In the application form, I was given three choices for my future major. I filled the first line with "philosophy," the second line, "philosophy" again, and the third line, still "philosophy."

3 To Be Among a Special Batch of Students

The years I attended college were special. During the Cultural Revolution, colleges in China selected their students only from workers, farmers, and soldiers according to their political backgrounds, and these students were not able to learn much because they were expected to put "revolution" above everything else. When the country resumed its nation-wide college entrance exam after the Cultural Revolution, a huge crowd of eligible young men and women accumulated from the past ten years applied, like an army of thousands rushing to cross a single log bridge. The admission rates for the first two batches (the classes of '77 and '78) were between 4.8% and 6.6%, and only a fraction among the admitted were able to get into top universities, like Fudan, the one I was lucky enough to get into. I was lucky, indeed, because my exam score was on the borderline. The teacher in charge of admission from Fudan was about to toss my file aside when he had a second thought, "Well, this student's handwriting is nice. Maybe I can let him write our bulletin boards." He told me this later, saying, "I am glad that I picked your file back."

It was a blessing to be among this batch of special students. Our ages varied from 16 to 30, almost across a generation, and so did our diverse backgrounds. Many of us had treacherous life experiences. No one needed to be reminded how precious the opportunity to study in a college was. Seats in the library were always full, and people jogging in track fields would hold flash cards for memorizing vocabularies. We read far beyond the required texts and wrote much more than what was assigned for the courses.

We could not even wait to finish our study before serving the country. 1978 was the beginning of a "thought liberating movement" in China, marked first by an article published in a newspaper titled "Practice is the Sole Criterion of Truth." The impact of this article was more political than academic. It implied that Chairman Mao could be wrong, and Marxism, which was held as universal truth and the theoretical foundation of the communist government, had to be placed under the test of real life also. We quickly became participants of the movement. The curriculum of the philosophy department at the time was heavily loaded with Marxism, but ironically, knowledge learnt from it enabled us to challenge the dogmatic "Marxist" ideology. We found with excitement that there was a

young Marx who was much more a humanist than the Marx portrayed by the standard textbooks, and we learned that Marx had once even said, “If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist.”

Of the articles I published during my undergraduate years, one that I co-authored with my classmate Geling Shang argued against a Party authority’s view that the spirit of Marx’s theory was class struggle instead of humanism; another, also co-authored with Shang, challenged the received doctrine of a rigid dichotomy between materialism and idealism; and still another, published in an internal proceedings (with restricted circulation), argued that only by improving the leadership of the Party can the Party’s leadership be sustainable.

These bold articles made the department head worried. “Be careful with what you publish,” he said to me privately. I said, “Don’t worry. Everything I said was backed up by quotes from Marx and Engels.” I continued to do the same and would often go to Shanghai Library with Shang to offer free public lectures on philosophy, sharing our new ideas to many young people who did not have the fortune to get into college.

I was, of course, too young and too simple. If it were just a couple of years earlier, no quotes from Marx and Engels could save me from trouble.

4 Graduate Study at Fudan

Before I was about to graduate, an article on Greek philosophy I submitted to a journal in Beijing caught the attention of a prominent scholar, Wang Zisong. With his recommendation, Professor Chen Jingxuan at Fudan approached me and encouraged me to become her graduate student (contingent on passing a qualifying exam) in modern western philosophy.

Like numerous other important turning points in my life, the focus on modern western philosophy was not my own choice. I have no regret, though, because I soon realized that modern western philosophy was a key for understanding the contemporary world.

Among the courses I took during my graduate study at Fudan, the ones taught by Professor Henry Rosemont Jr. impressed me the most. Rosemont was the first western philosopher who came to teach in China after the Cultural Revolution. From him I heard for the first time the names of many contemporary western philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, Quine, and Chomsky. I was amazed that through his lectures, even the absurd ideas of George Berkeley started to make sense. In my eyes, Rosemont was a living demonstration of the greatness of western philosophy—an image that he probably did not expect to generate in our minds. It was puzzling to me, however, that he had great admiration for the Chinese philosophical traditions. At that time, I thought it was just a friendly gesture of a guest who says nice words about his host. In my mind, traditional Chinese philosophy was a “lost scholarship,” which had no practical value except for understanding the past.

That mentality was shared by many in my generation. In early 1985, we Fudan philosophy graduate students offered a lecture series to the general public. Of the fifteen lectures, only one was on eastern philosophy (Buddhism). The rest were all about western philosophy. These lectures were such a hit that the lecture room was always packed, leaving many people standing outside the room for the entire lecture time. It hit the national headline news, and we were invited to give these lectures at many other institutions.

5 Coming to America to Turn toward Chinese Philosophy

Upon my graduation, Rosemont recommended me to continue my study in the US. What I did not know was that I was put in the hands of another leading advocator of east-west philosophical dialogue—Professor Joel Kupperman at the University of Connecticut.

The six years at UConn were the period of laying a more solid foundation on western philosophy for me, especially the rigorous training in analytical thinking. My very first publication in English, “Changing the Past,” was published in a top analytical journal, *Noûs*, after countless rejections and revisions. It explores senses in which one can or cannot “change the past.” My PhD thesis, “Hume and the Definition of Cause,” was also highly analytical. It starts from an analysis of Hume’s definitions of cause and the conflicting principles behind them, and moves on to the ontological status of causal relata, the spatiotemporal relation between cause and effect, the direction of causation, and causal necessity. Although it was a finalist in the 1991 philosophy PhD dissertation essay contest conducted by *The Review of Metaphysics*, I was too eager to move on to other projects that I left the thesis aside, not knowing that I would probably never have a chance to update it for publication. The only practical use of the thesis was that later, using it as a basis, I taught a whole metaphysics course at Trinity College on the topic of “philosophy of causation.” Of course, the training I got from writing the thesis stayed with me and benefited me for a lifetime.

When I was still working on my PhD thesis, another life-changing event happened—I was assigned to teach an undergraduate course on Chinese philosophy at UConn. It was a big challenge for me, because I had only taken some undergraduate level courses on Chinese philosophy, and I never taught any course in English before. I was forced to revisit the Chinese classics, reading and pondering every word carefully, deciding how to explain them in English. This made a huge difference from my previous study of the texts. Meanwhile, my increased knowledge in western philosophy also contributed to a better understanding of the respective merits and limitations of both Chinese and western traditions. Indeed, from this point on, the deeper I dived into the Chinese philosophical tradition, the more I appreciated the insights in it. Eventually, the focus of my study shifted toward Chinese and comparative philosophy. Interestingly, the majority of my fellow Chinese who came to the west to study philosophy had similar experiences and ended up making the same turn.

6 Encountering *Qigong*

When I started to apply for teaching position in the US, on my CV modern western philosophy was still listed as AOS (area of specialty) and Chinese philosophy as AOC (area of competence). That actually worked to my advantage, because although some schools in the US were open to the idea of offering a course on eastern philosophy (that includes the entirety of East Asia and India), few would recognize Chinese philosophy seriously enough to designate a special faculty position to it. In the eyes of most mainstream western philosophers, the east had thoughts but no philosophy, just as they had chopsticks but no forks. This situation has not improved much even thirty years later.

This AOS and AOC combination worked well for getting me a one-year sabbatical replacement position at Montana State University right after I got my PhD. It also worked perfectly for the subsequent tenure track position I got from Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Due to my teaching assignments as well as inertia, my first published philosophy book was on the philosophy of Thomas Reid,³ a modern Scottish philosopher whose importance was largely eclipsed by Kant’s unfair critique of him. In the book, I tried to reveal how Reid was like a Scottish Kant and Kant a German

Reid. They had profound similarities, although they differed from each other with their respective national characteristics. This book allowed me to summarize my responses to both Hume and Kant, and indirectly, to the entire history of the early modern period that I studied for years.

On the other hand, my interest in traditional Chinese philosophy kept growing. It coincided with my encounters with a popular movement known as *qigong re* (upsurge of the cultivation of vital energy). The movement was ignited by some reports about paranormal abilities found in a few children in China in the 1980s, and soon became a widespread craze not only in China but also in overseas Chinese communities. It triggered my keen interest when some people around me started to show paranormal abilities through their practice. Cautioned by the Humean skeptical attitude, I resisted the temptation to accept what I was apparently witnessing, but the same philosophy also allowed me to keep an open mind, as nothing (except for “relations of ideas”) is absolutely impossible, no matter how peculiar it seems to our common sense and how absurd it looks to the modern sciences.

What intrigued me more was a *qigong* master’s workshops. To my surprise, the master did not ostensibly demonstrate his *qigong*. Instead, he spent most of the time lecturing on how to be a good person. According to him, to be moral is the ultimate way of gaining *qigong* power, and ancient thinkers such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius were all *qigong* masters. This was an exhilarating wakeup call. Indeed, for too long the academic circle has been trying to make the Chinese masters look like western-style “philosophers,” whereas they are philosophers of a different orientation—their concerns are far more about the art of life than about obtaining theoretical knowledge.

7 Philosophy of Gongfu

It took me a while to find a perfect term for this orientation. The word “*qigong*” is too closely associated with paranormal phenomena and too foreign for non-Chinese speakers. I considered words such as “pragmatic,” “praxiology,” “phronesis,” and “capacity.” While these words and the philosophical trends associated with them have affinity with the Chinese traditions, they all, however, fall short of bringing out the emphasis on the transformation of the person.

Why not just call it “*gongfu* (kung fu)”?

The idea came to my mind when I was reading Wang Yangming (1472–1529), a Ming Dynasty Confucian scholar who frequently used the term to refer to the Confucian learning. The term carries less burden to reconcile with modern sciences and common sense, yet it retains the sense of a cultivated ability to live well, a characteristic concern for traditional Chinese philosophies, whether it be Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism. Furthermore, the term is already well known around the world through *gongfu* movies. All I need to do is to tell people that it is broader than the martial arts—it refers to the art of life in general.

Like a light turned on in a cave, everything looked different under this *gongfu* perspective. What seemed to be rigid, unsupported assertions in classic Chinese texts were revealed as speech-acts intended to affect people; what seemed to be fragmented or contradictory statements were actually different *gongfu* instructions targeted toward people in different circumstances; what seemed to be conflicting theories were different but complementary ways of living. Reading classic Chinese philosophies in this way rectifies the overly intellectualist interpretation of them, and enables us to appreciate the wisdom different from their logocentric western counterparts.

I could hardly wait to share my discovery with others. Hence there was my presentation at the 2005 East-West Philosophers Conference titled “Learning to Be Human” (which coincides with the theme of the World Congress of Philosophy in 2018 in Beijing), a graduate course on Confucianism structured around the theme of *gongfu*, offered at the University of Hawaii at Manoa when I served as

a substitute for Roger Ames (Fall 2006), an advanced-level metaphysics course from the *gongfu* perspective I offered at the University of Hong Kong when I served as a substitute for Chad Hansen (Spring 2007), a paper titled “*Gongfu—A Vital Dimension of Confucian Teaching*” in an anthology, *Confucius Now, Contemporary Encounters with the Analects* (ed. D. Jones, La Salle: Open Court, 2008), a short article titled “Kung Fu for Philosophers” in the *New York Times* forum “The Stone” (Dec. 8, 2010), and an article more engaged in comparing it with western philosophy, “Introducing *Gongfu* into Philosophy” (in the *Journal of Nanjing University*, 2011).

Among these, the *New York Times* article reached far broader audiences and triggered far more resonances than any other. Many readers responded enthusiastically about the *gongfu* perspective, both on how it complements what was lacking in the western philosophical tradition and how it helped reveal the value of Chinese philosophies. To respond to those who questioned my *gongfu* approach as advocating irrationalism, I put in the same *New York Times* forum a follow-up article titled “Philosophers for Kung Fu,” explaining that instead of rejecting the value of philosophy and rational thinking, I was trying to open up space in our philosophical (i.e., rational) thinking about the cultivation of *gongfu*. Furthermore, I emphasized, we have all the reason to take philosophers’ ideas seriously because they don’t just *inform* but inevitably *affect* human life.

There is a long distance between having a general principal approach and systematic application and articulation of it. I spent two decades working around two interwoven lines of development—interpreting Confucianism from the *gongfu* perspective, and exploring the philosophy of *gongfu* through Confucianism. The fruits of this work ranged from publications on special topics such as the Confucian approach to freedom, dignity, religious faith, human nature, and science, to constructive works on *gongfu* ethics, *gongfu* epistemology, and *gongfu* metaphysics.

These works served as the basis for a lecture series I delivered at Peking University (sixteen 2-hour lectures) in 2017, and finally synthesized in a monograph titled *Rujia Gongfu Zhexue* [*Philosophizing Gongfu Through Confucianism*] (forthcoming in Shanghai: Commercial Press).

8 Focus on Confucianism and the *Analects*

Out of the Chinese philosophical traditions, I feel a natural affinity with Confucianism. That is probably due to many factors, such as my natural temperament, family tradition, influence from the nanny who took care of me like mother when I was little, and more. But the fact that my academic career eventually developed around it was due to its inherent convincing power. Confucianism has an enigmatic nature—on the surface, it seems to be a set of old-fashioned, common sensical moral sermons, but the deeper you dive into it, the more profound it reveals itself to be.

That was what I tried to convey to my students and more people through my lectures and introductory books. *On Confucius* (Wadsworth, 2002) was more theoretical and fit for being a textbook for college students. *Confucius, Making the Way Great* (Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2010) was for general readers, as it portrays Confucius as a multifaceted person: a historical figure, a spiritual leader, a philosopher, a political reformer, an educator, and a person. In these books I tried to introduce Confucius’ thoughts in a way that is understandable and relevant to contemporary readers without losing theoretical depth. The latter book manifested in an updated form under a slightly different title, *Confucius, The Man and the Way of Gongfu* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), and in two Chinese versions (Shanghai: People’s Press, 2012 and Beijing: World Publishing Corporation, 2021).

Since my project on *gongfu* involved reinterpreting Confucianism, I decided to put some real effort in re-reading Confucius’ *Analects* closely. Known as *Lunyu* in Chinese, the *Analects* is considered

the most reliable source for Confucius' teachings and a primary source for key ideas of Confucianism. I chose to do my close reading through re-translating and annotating the text myself. In that way, I could force myself to scrutinize every word in it when determining how to render it in English, thereby gaining a better understanding of the text, and at the same time hopefully offering readers a new and better English version of the Chinese classic.

It took me over five years to finish this 500+ page book, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius—A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (SUNY Press, 2017), which unexpectedly brought me an MLA Scaglione Book Prize award. The citation of the award selection committee says, "This monumental work features a detailed and informative introduction as well as a presentation of the key terms in the *Analects* that have led to conflicting interpretations or additions of words to clarify the context. Ni has produced a scholarly yet surprisingly readable text for a nonspecialized audience." In his endorsement, Stephen C. Angle states precisely what I was trying to accomplish: "Ni has chosen to present the text as a living document, embedded in two thousand years of commentarial conversation over its meaning, with today's readers very much part of that ongoing conversation." "By imbedding a spare rendition of the text between extensive annotations and other supporting materials, it accomplishes apparently conflicting goals—to be more faithful to the text and to make the *Analects* more accessible and engaging to a contemporary audience."

9 Calligraphy—Where Art Merged with Philosophy

The realms in which I traversed are all intersections—between the east and the west, the past and the present, teaching and research, local and international, theory and practice, and art and philosophy. I had an interest in the art of Chinese calligraphy from childhood, when it was still taught as a part of primary school education. It was believed that every educated person should have a decent handwriting, no less than he/she should obtain the ability to talk and act in a decent civilized manner. After my hands were badly incapacitated by the electric shock, I took up the practice of calligraphy again as an exercise for recovering the function of my hands. The path merged with my quest for philosophy when I discovered that strokes of the brush can have "characters," and, at its uttermost, the realm of calligraphy could be one with spirituality. Coincidentally, a model calligraphy I was recommended to imitate was a Tang dynasty scholar-official, Yan Zhenqing, whose style is an excellent demonstration of Confucian virtues, such as moderation, broad-mindedness, and nobility.

I continued the practice and tried on different styles over the years as a personal hobby and cultivation, until my colleague Stephen Rowe saw some of my works and took interest in them. He was intrigued by the expressiveness of the images. Without letting me tell him the literal meaning of what I wrote, he would read the images and respond to them with philosophical verses in English. Interesting enough, there were often resonances in between, which would then in turn stimulate further thoughts from me and motivate me to try more different styles. Over time, such exchanges accumulated enough volume that we held a joint exhibition at Grand Valley's art gallery, with my calligraphy and his verses side by side, and subsequently we published a book with the title *Wandering—Brush and Pen in Philosophical Reflection* (Shanghai: Oriental Publication Center and Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2002). In his introductory statement to the book, Harvard University Professor Tu Weiming says: "While a genuine possibility of developing a universally acceptable ethical norm for the global community is encouraging, it falls short of the ideal of human flourishing. [...] We depend on the concrete manifestations of general principles to live a meaningful life in the world." "Rowe and Ni,

by inviting us to take part in their joint venture and mutual practice, have helped to move the dialogue to a celebratory act: reaching the universal through the full distinctiveness of cultural forms.”⁴

I take pride in the fact that my calligraphy is featured as the title of philosophy journals, such as *Dao* and *Philosophical Analysis*, and numerous books.



Cover calligraphy for *Dao—A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*.
Collection of the GVSU philosophy department

10 Teaching and Service to the University

No sooner had I started teaching than I realized that teaching is an art in itself. Mere possession of relevant knowledge does not mean you can teach it well. To me, an extra challenge was that I did not get to learn English until 25, an age too late to twist my tongue. Problems that were manageable during my own study, such as foreign accent, lack of vocabulary, and imperfect grammar, turned into major obstacles when I started teaching American students. As a remedy, I had to literally prepare every sentence of my lectures in the early days. In the case of teaching traditional Chinese philosophy, the foreignness of the content was another huge barrier. Saving the parts that have lost their relevance to the modern context, leaving aside the concepts that are close to be untranslatable, and avoiding the contents that look embarrassingly fragmented, ambiguous, and unintelligible when placed against the conceptual framework of western philosophy, there would be little left worth teaching.

However, I quickly realized that the very foreignness could also be an advantage—my unusual life experience and my Chinese cultural background were resources that I could turn to intrigue and inspire students. That was the case even when I was teaching western philosophy. Like a mirror helps one see oneself better, when I present traditional Chinese philosophy in the *gongfu* perspective, it not only enables my American students to understand it in its own terms, appreciating its unique value, but also allows them to understand their own western culture better.

After one year teaching full-time at Trinity College in Connecticut and one year at Montana State University, I stepped into Grand Valley State University as a tenure track faculty, with already a teaching award as part of my qualification.

At GVSU, my “foreignness” was allowed to manifest its value fully. Especially in the early years, the support from different levels of school administration, from the department chair all the way to the President, was unwavering. It allowed me to work with other colleagues in creating GVSU’s

first eastern philosophy course, its first study abroad program in China, its East Asian Studies minor program, and finally a Chinese Studies major. These in turn brought more guest speakers, visiting scholars, and tenure track lines in Chinese studies to GVSU. With the addition of another regular faculty in Chinese philosophy in the early 2000s (which was incidentally filled by my college classmate, Daoist scholar Geling Shang), GVSU's philosophy department became one of the rare strongholds in studying Chinese philosophy in America.

Among these developments, the study abroad program in China was my most cherished one. The program would take students to China during the summer for six to twelve weeks, with a Chinese philosophy course as its core and one or more culture or language courses as supplement. Much of the learning took place "on site"—such as having a class in a Buddhist temple, with a young Buddhist monk as a guest speaker, or a picnic lunch class on the Great Wall, discussing philosophical implications of the wall. The program reached its peak when Professor Shang joined me as a co-director. Students loved the learning experience, and to many, it was truly life-changing. Some students even joined the program twice just to learn more. Many participants of the program returned to east Asia after graduation to either pursue graduate study or to develop their careers there.

All these implementations developed along with China's opening up to the world and reform, but they waned when US-China relations became tense.

11 As a Public Intellectual

There is a Confucian saying, "Benefit the world, if you can; perfect yourself, if not." It would be a self-contradiction for a "Confucian" to not be willing to serve the public. Although I respect those professional philosophers who wish to simply contemplate eternal questions, I tried to practice my philosophy and put it into service. To me this is no less a way to fulfill and actualize myself than it is an obligation or contribution. I only regret that I was not fortunate and gifted enough to always be successful in this regard.

In the early 1990s, those of us who came from China after the Cultural Revolution to study abroad started to emerge as a new generation of Chinese scholars in the west. To facilitate our mutual support and to promote philosophical dialogue between China and America, I worked with my UConn classmate Chenyang Li (who later became a prominent scholar and served as the President of the International Association of Chinese Philosophy) and several others in creating the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America (ACPA) in late 1995. Chenyang served as its first President. I served as its Vice President (1995–97) and President (1997–99) in the first two terms, and its Secretary (1999–2001) in the third term. We organized many panels on Chinese and comparative philosophy in major conventions like the annual meetings of American Philosophical Association (APA), and made Chinese philosophy more active and visible in the world. We established a journal, *Dao*, and a book series on Chinese and Comparative Philosophy. While the journal was a great success, due to the hard work and talented handling of its editor Yong Huang (who was also ACPA's third President), the book series never got out of its initial dilemma: that is, on the one hand it had to maintain a high standard for acceptance in order to build its reputation, and on the other hand it would not receive many high-quality submissions because it had not built up its reputation yet. As the editor of the book series, I regret that I was not able to make the series thrive, but I am still proud of the limited number of quality books we published. Among them, the most personally significant one to me was *Polishing the Chinese Mirror* (2008, edited by Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn), a festschrift in honor of Henry Rosemont Jr.

Another association I was deeply involved in was the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (SACP). This association has a long history, dating back to 1967, and had a large membership base, with hundreds of scholars on its mailing list, including scholars on Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean philosophies. I served on its board, and as its Vice President (2008–10) and President (2010–12). During the term of my Presidency, I initiated a move which was well-intended, though the results were not entirely positive—we started to rotate our annual meetings in different locations of the world in order to draw broader participation, but we ended up losing some regular participants when we no longer held every year’s meeting at the beautiful Asilomar Conference Grounds by the California beach. Another change I tried to implement was to organize panels around philosophical issues and not according to national traditions. To me, it would be an irony for a society devoted to comparative philosophy to isolate each tradition in different panels.

My involvement in cross-cultural philosophical dialogue brought me invitations to numerous platforms. One of them was a high-profile international platform called World Public Forum: Dialogue of Civilizations. My first engagement in it was to give a plenary speech at its meeting on human rights in the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (2007). Seeing the significance of its mission and its disproportional lack of voice from Chinese civilization, I decided to make myself available to it as much as I could. For quite a while I was a regular participant of its annual meetings, known as the Rhodes Forum, held in the Rhodes Island, Greece.

In these international platforms, I was always seen as a Chinese, although my institutional affiliation indicated that I was from the US. In China, however, I have been treated more as a scholar from the US. Sometimes this misplaced identity would lead to frustrations, but I took that as a price for serving as a bridge in between. Over the past two decades, I served on numerous journals’ editorial boards and PhD thesis committees, reviewed manuscripts for publishers, and traveled frequently for conferences and scholarly exchanges, offering lectures and presentations at places such as Nishan Forum, Songshan Forum, Shanghai Academy of Confucian Studies, Confucian Academy in Guizhou, Yuelu Academy, Wuhan University, Fudan University, Peking University, and Universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. From 2016–17, I served as the Executive Vice Director to the Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University. Established by eminent scholar Tu Weiming after his retirement from Harvard, the IAHS serves multiple functions, including research, education, and scholarly exchange, at an advanced level and a global scale. I also taught at Beijing Normal University as a “Distinguished Professor” for a full year (2017–18), where they facilitated a small conference on the philosophy of *gongfu* for me.

12 Conclusion

Looking back at the question I had when I was struck by the accident that almost took my life, have I had a fulfilling life now? Yes, indeed. If I were to face death again today, I would not have the same regret “as if I left something undone,” at least not that strong. This does not mean I have no more meaningful things to do; to the contrary, the path I traveled through has opened up an infinite space in front of me to explore. The reason I feel it is not too early for me to write this intellectual biography is exactly that, having traveled on the path for almost five decades, I discovered this space through the *gongfu* approach. I offer it enthusiastically, not so much as a theory or a truth but more as a discourse that awaits further development, and as a recommendation for an approach to life.

Peimin Ni was born in Shanghai in 1954. He received his BA (1982) and MA (1985) from Fudan University, and PhD from the University of Connecticut (1991). He has taught, for the most of his career, at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, but also as a visiting professor at several other institutions such as the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the University of Hong Kong, Peking University, and Beijing Normal University. In addition to some 80 academic journal papers and book chapters, Ni has authored numerous books, including *Wandering—Brush and Pen in Philosophical Reflection, Confucius—the Man and the Way of Gongfu*, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius—A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (MLA Scaglione book prize winner), and a forthcoming signature work, *Philosophizing Gongfu through Confucianism*. Ni served as president for the Association of Chinese Philosophers in America and the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, Executive Vice Director of the Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University, and editor-in-chief of the ACPA book series on Chinese and Comparative Philosophy. Ni is also an accomplished Chinese calligraphy artist.

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- ¹ The “Great Cultural Revolution” was a sociopolitical movement in China launched by the Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong to purge elements that were not fully aligned with Mao’s ideas. During the ten years (1966–1976), China fell into huge chaos. Countless lives were lost, the economy suffered, and traditional culture were damaged.
 - ² “Black Seven-kinds” was a label used during the Cultural Revolution to identify the seven kinds of people who were considered threats to the cause of the Revolution, including landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, bad-influencers, rightists, capitalists, and gangsters.
 - ³ *Thomas Reid*, in Chinese (Taiwan: Shan-Min Press, 1996), which was later re-written in a more condensed form in English, titled *On Reid* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002).
 - ⁴ Peimin Ni and Stephen Rowe, *Wandering—Brush and Pen in Philosophical Reflection* (Shanghai: Oriental Publication Center and Chicago: Art Media Resources, 2002), 3 and 5.