

Chapter 2

Meritocracy and Individualism: Negotiating Cross-Cultural Humanities Values in a Politicised Hong Kong Context

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The humanities may have as many faces as there are nationalities (Shumway 1998). However, in recent years an educational debate has emerged in Hong Kong, one that has travelled to China and Taiwan, that is committed to speaking for, and elaborating, what one contributor in this collection calls an Asian humanities (Lee 2010). This is not a new discipline by any means but the fact that there has been a new call for an Asian humanities at the Chinese University of Hong Kong suggests that what is being imagined is something quite different from such “Asian Humanities” courses that presently take place in such universities as Columbia University (De Bary 2015, 51). However, this new call for an Asian humanities has emerged in the Hong Kong academic context, a region whose world-class universities embody its cross-cultural humanities history. This chapter explores some of the key values that are negotiated on a daily basis in this academic community. The aim for such cross-cultural educational practices has always been to sustain and nurture what Wm. Theodore de Bary calls a “great civilized conversation” between multifaceted traditions, an aim that might seem difficult to maintain today when barbarism is so virulent and academic freedoms are being eroded (O'Sullivan 2016; Williams 2016). The chapter will begin by examining how different notions of meritocracy and individualism inform educational debates in contemporary Chinese contexts and it will then look at the politicisation of humanities courses in Hong Kong and examine student responses to an undergraduate course entitled “Literature and Politics” that I taught in Hong Kong in 2016.

Writers such as Wm. Theodore de Bary, Longzi Zhang, and Leo Ou-Fan Lee, to name only a distinguished few, have long sought to bring what is often set up as ‘two traditions’ of humanistic enquiry closer together. However, it is worth recalling Edward Said’s eloquent reminder on the necessity to debunk any binary

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approach to cross-cultural humanities: “neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance-much of it having to do with Islam and Arabs on one side, ‘we’ Westerners on the other-are very large-scale enterprises” (2003). More recently, Jana S. Rošker (2016) has argued that intercultural research that includes Chinese philosophy must also involve the “intercultural relativization of the contents based on methodologies that correspond to the specific requirements of research in the Chinese philosophical tradition.” Rošker does admit, however, that this does not mean denying or excluding what she calls an “intellectual confrontation with Western (and global) philosophical systems” (6) because such a confrontation offers an important “comparative tool for better understanding one’s own tradition” (7). However, a ‘two traditions’ approach still holds water today and has appeared in new guises in recent publications on cross-cultural education (Li 2012; Nussbaum 2010). A cross-cultural approach to the humanities is perhaps more necessary than ever today considering the recent attacks on the old European order that, for many, still grounds the humanities, the fading of the “American dream,” what for Gerald Harpham is integral to our modern notion of the humanities (2011), and also considering challenges to what is recently describing itself as the “Chinese dream” (State Council Information Office of the PRC 2014). It is precisely in those regions where there are spaces of contact between the different humanities traditions, spaces marked by boundaries, borders and political debates around such borders, that the importance of cross-cultural humanities is really felt. Hong Kong is such a region. The crisis in the humanities is in full swing in regions that traditionally have been well-placed to define the range and place of the humanities in society, namely the US and UK educational ‘powerhouses’. Therefore, it is in such border regions, very often perceived as outcrops to traditional Western humanities debates, regions scarred by colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism,¹ that a heightened regard for what humanities subjects can still offer in terms of conflict resolution, trans-disciplinary education and even a revamped allegiance to identity politics can emerge.

However, the debate on the role of the humanities in Hong Kong is taking place in a highly charged site of political and cultural enquiry and there are two important factors to be considered in this regard. Firstly, humanities scholars, and perhaps more importantly today, students who sign up for humanities courses in universities in regions such as Hong Kong, are still a key check on political and academic reform when academic freedoms are being challenged. One must also remember that any students out of the 9.4 million Chinese secondary school students who sit

¹In my earlier book, *The humanities and the Irish university: anomalies and opportunities*, I have also argued that Ireland is another ‘border’ region marked by colonialism and its aftermath that has also nurtured and developed a cross-cultural approach to the humanities that borrows from British, American and European liberal arts and humanities traditions.

their *gaokao* (高考) exams this year and who are fortunate enough to go on to study the social science subjects in universities in China and Hong Kong must all have scored well on the political dogma of the Communist.² This is therefore a key resource and influence for Chinese students embarking on traditional humanities subjects in university for the first time. The second factor, however, speaks more for the trans-cultural nature of the humanities in a region like Hong Kong. These Chinese contexts have, to varying degrees, adopted many of the discourses and rubrics of the ‘Western’ humanities while also never being wholly in possession of, or embracing, the kind of liberal democratic practices and liberal ideologies that students and scholars from traditional ‘Western’ humanities regions either attack or drew from in staking a claim for the humanities. The humanities in such regions as Hong Kong therefore contend on a daily basis with both the institutional and epistemological challenges facing intercultural humanities thinking. It has been argued by scholars of the liberal tradition that the absence of universal suffrage and the notion of individualism that universal suffrage embodies—to name but one aspect of this much flaunted liberal humanities tradition—may deny communities in these regions a viable democratic forum for voicing opinions, engaging in debates, and venting frustrations in regard to the possible curtailment of freedoms and rights often associated with such individualism (Nussbaum 2010). Such arguments often suggest that this lack is anathema to the proper practice of the liberal arts, however it can also be regarded as channeling the collective energies traditionally associated with such liberal individualism into a range of practices, forms of exchange, and streams of dialogue and communication that are shaping the humanities subjects in new and exciting ways in these regions. Jana S. Rošker (2016) has also recently argued that the relation between modernity and individualism is not “inevitable” but is “little more than an outcome of Western historical paradigms.” Hong Kong is reshaping the Asian humanities and thus the humanities in general in such fields as creative writing and literary studies, gender studies, and East-West philosophy.

Many readings of the humanities presume a direct link between the liberal arts, humanities subjects and the democratic process (Harpham 2011; Nussbaum 2010; Rorty 1999). However, as G. Postiglione reminds us, “American higher education makes a direct link between liberal-arts education and the democratic process” but “[f]or China, liberal-arts education is a means to strengthen international competitiveness and domestic social harmony” (2013). Despite the oversights in such readings, the practices implicit to a liberal education are traditionally regarded as bound up with the political system of the community in which they are practiced. In other words, as Richard Rorty puts it, when people on the “political right” in the U. S. talk about education they appear to be saying that “[d]eep within our souls there is a spark that the right sort of education can fan into flame. Once the soul is afire with love of truth, freedom will follow—for freedom consists in realizing one’s *true* self; that is, in the actualization of one’s capacity to be rational” (114). However,

²“Be fearless, this is the start of your bright future”: Stephen Hawking to China’s 9 million students taking entrance exams” *South China Morning Post*, Tuesday, June 7, 2016.

this “right sort of education” has not produced the “love of truth” and the “freedom” that the American dream always promised; instead the “right sort of education” has become progressively more expensive and more removed from the majority in the U.S. and elsewhere thereby laying bare the nature of the privilege that accompanies such notions as “truth” and “freedom” in the American educational system (Guinier 2015; Mettler 2014). However, the unquestioned allegiance to these traditional liberal notions of self, truth and the importance of the “rational,” notions passed down to us through a rich American educational heritage that includes Emerson and Dewey, are not only being challenged in the U.S. but also in Asia. Educationalists working on the Asian humanities in Hong Kong and elsewhere note that it is a tradition where notions of “self,” individualism and the “rational” mind have not been so central to the educational tradition. They have offered new foundational notions for education in the Asian humanities. These different values also leave universities in such regions as Hong Kong with competing views on how to manage education for a fair meritocracy. It is traditionally the humanities subjects that have examined the values and virtues that societies have grounded their meritocratic systems on.

Different interpretations of meritocracy and individualism ground these different humanities traditions and raise a number of questions for cross-cultural humanities programs: How does a resilient and seemingly impregnable system of unfair meritocracy (O'Sullivan and Tsang 2015) survive in such regions as Hong Kong where there is also a vibrant and socially conscious humanities tradition? What does this tell us about the evolution of a liberal-arts agenda in the humanities in third level education in such societies and its relevance for the greater community outside the walls of the universities? Does the practice of the humanities in such regions demonstrate more clearly that the humanities has to give up some of its illustrious claims for community when it is aligned with notions of exclusivity and elitism in deeply unequal societies? As an educator in Hong Kong teaching literatures in English, I often feel unsure about the relevance in this Chinese context of claims made on behalf of the ‘Western’ humanities over the last number of decades by American academics (Harpham 2011; Nussbaum 2010; Rorty 1999). The common view among the general public here in the meritocratic system that exists in Hong Kong is that the medical sciences, in patenting drugs that alleviate pain, or the technology sectors in making commuting more comfortable, are most likely contributing more to the community than the humanities? Isn't this ever more the case in regions where the humanities model, in being imported to a certain extent, does not reflect the reality of an external top-down political reality? Finally, what kind of individualism is being presumed among the student body in the humanities subjects in these regions especially in light of recent works in education that highlight key differences between how Chinese students and U.S. and European students conceive of learning and individualism? These questions need to be explored by returning to distinguished voices on cross-cultural work in the humanities and to the opinions of students themselves.

2.1 Meritocracy

The sense of meritocracy that underpins a society directly influences the shape of its humanities programs. For example, Hong Kong, in being a former colony of the U. K., still values English as a *lingua franca* essential to economic success and as an important element of cultural capital in education. English literary studies is thus widely taught in the universities even though less than 5 % of schools teach the subject. Meritocracy, however, may come in as many shapes and sizes as the humanities. With China aiming to have 40 % of 18–22 year olds in colleges by 2020 it would appear to have aspirations towards fair meritocratic practices at least in terms of access to third-level education, a consideration that has seemingly fallen on deaf ears in the more “Western” third-level system in Hong Kong where the number of young people on degree courses is languishing around 20 %. Sor-hoon Tan’s study of different notions of elitism, democratic elitism and functional differentiation in Confucian and liberal democratic systems of government reveals that meritocracy has worked through distinctly different practices. Tan tries to imagine how the two systems of meritocracy might be brought together, a thought experiment that is important for imagining what a cross-cultural humanities might prioritise. Tan’s study is relevant to Hong Kong despite the fact that Hong Kong does not practice the *gaokao* examinations. Hong Kong does, however, practice a somewhat ruthless streaming system whereby students at age 12 are given a grade based on exam performance that then decides the ‘banding’ they take with them into secondary school. The school they enter largely decides how well they will do at the HKDSE exams and in particular in the English and Chinese exams which are compulsory exams for university admission. 50 % of students fail these English and Chinese exams and thus cannot enter the public universities. Competitive examination systems such as the *gaokao* and the Hong Kong government exams have long played a central role in Chinese and Hong Kong society and have been integral to the political systems in these regions while the “right sort of education” and democratic elections have been central to political life in the U.S.

Tan argues, however, that the combination model Daniel A. Bell has put forward for these two meritocratic systems in *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (2006), in claiming to bring together “elitist Confucian rule of virtue” and “accountable democratic government,” would not necessarily produce a fairer meritocratic system (537). Bringing together liberal democratic elections and Confucian competitive examinations would not, Tan suggests, get at the roots of elitism and subjects such as English literary studies have always been associated with elitism in Hong Kong. Bell argues, on the other hand, that a combination model would work precisely because there is “compatibility” between Confucian values and democratic values, these values being, for Bell, “popular participation, accountability, and transparency.” However, Tan does not see these as the principal values of democracies but rather as “features of democratic institutions that reflect or aim at the values of community, equality, and liberty” (544). However, the disagreement appears then to be about whether it is

institutions or broader groups such as local communities that are the primary influence in the inculcation of values. Bell and Tan both focus on values and the humanities subjects are key here for both meritocratic systems. Bell's combination model argues that decision makers in any society should be "intelligent, adaptable, long-term minded, and public spirited" (545) and these are values other educationalists have suggested must be prioritized in education (Li 2012; Guinier 2015).

Tan believes, rightly, that a focus on "competitive examinations" in the Confucian system—and a "competitive examinations" system is still strictly practiced in government schools in Hong Kong—is also anachronistic and that "other appropriate means of assessing the abilities or qualities of the candidates" for leadership is required (548). A "differentiated" approach to evaluation and assessment will properly counter the "inadequacy of elected representatives" and it also "takes better account of the diversity of decision-making abilities needed in different policy areas as well as of the limitations of individuals, where no one person could possibly make good decisions on every policy issue" (548). This is an argument that has been echoed by Lana Guinier in her book *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy*. In using Amartya Sen's definition of merit as an incentive system that rewards the actions a society values, Guinier argues for a shift from "honoring testocratic merit toward democratic merit" (122). She says it is collaboration skills rather than competition skills that future leaders must possess. However, one must even question this ends-oriented approach to learning put forward by Guinier that takes leaders as the ultimate goal. Wm. Theodore de Bary reminds us in reading Confucius that "Confucius himself was in no position to rule" (73) and that "[p]ublic service is not performed only by those in office; anyone who practices and promotes such civic virtues [as filiality] is rendering a public service" (72). Surely it is contented and willing members of our communities that we should have in mind rather than leaders. Guinier does acknowledge that it is "personal qualities that citizens need to productively collaborate and deliberate with their neighbors," (129) and these are values students in my classes have also privileged in discussing how political impasses might be overcome.

One of the main problems, then, with these attempts to deduce fairer cross-cultural meritocratic systems, where meritocracy is understood along Sen's lines as an incentive system that rewards the actions a society values, is that they take us right back to the question of what values the Chinese educational system and the liberal-arts system have traditionally privileged. The humanities are generally concerned with questions relating to what education is and what it should be and they can therefore assist us with the exploration of how to balance such different values. However, some recent approaches to traditions of education focus too much on differences between the traditions (Li 2012; Nussbaum 2010). As an educator of diverse student groups in Hong Kong on courses such as "Literature and Politics" and "Literature and Religion," I have discovered that students, on the contrary, are always eager to discover connections between the different traditions. I will return to this later in the chapter.

2.2 Challenging a Strict ‘Two Cultures’ Approach

There have been many important interventions over the last number of decades in philosophy and hermeneutics that have sought to demonstrate how recent developments in Western philosophy have distinct parallels with ideas in Chinese philosophy. Longxi Zhang (1996) argues that many of the key claims of deconstruction are already evident in Chinese thought and Leo Ou-Fan Lee argues that new approaches to Western modernity in literature can also be compared to late Qing literature in Chinese culture. However, in an age where internationalisation and globalisation are key to the structuring of knowledge transmission as a global enterprise it is no surprise that works have appeared that have sought to contrast not only the philosophies but also the educational practices and traditions that these philosophies have helped foster in either tradition.

Li Jin’s *Cultural Foundations of Learning East and West* (2012) is one such work and it is relevant to Hong Kong where the two traditions she focuses on are integrated throughout the curriculum and in the teaching practice. Li sets up a deeply problematic ‘two cultures’ reading of learning. The book demonstrates clearly how cross-cultural approaches to education and learning in terms of a reassessment of meritocracy must not be too quick to apportion culture-specific values to educational practices. Li argues that the Chinese and “European-American” models of learning have distinctly different traditions, objectives, and purposes for learning and she sets out to demonstrate this by aligning students’ responses to questionnaires on learning with the educational ideas of key thinkers in the ‘Western’ tradition and in the Chinese tradition. However, it is noteworthy that her exploration of key Chinese thinkers is almost exclusively limited to Confucius. Li argues that the three main purposes for learning in the Chinese model are “(1) perfect oneself morally/socially, (2) acquire knowledge/skills for self, and (3) contribute to society” (90). Li argues that the first purpose here, “the most significant one,” is described as a “need to perfect oneself in the moral and social realm” (90). Even though Li admits that “some European-American respondents also mentioned self-fulfillment and self-actualization as their ideal-learner’s purposes,” Li argues that there is an important distinction here because these European-American respondents “emphasized being one’s best through learning academic subjects rather than cultivating themselves morally as defined in Confucian terms” (90). Li spends a great deal of time analysing questionnaire responses from primary and secondary school students who are taken to be young students who embody various customs, accepted truths, and beliefs of the respective educational traditions they are seen to belong to. Li does remind us that the term “learning was left open for respondents to construe” and that whereas “European-Americans interpreted it as understanding the world, their Chinese peers took it to connote moral and social self-perfection in addition to academic learning” (90). Regardless of the methods taken and the size of the population samples chosen in each category and for each question, there is a distinct circularity at work in Li’s argument. She sets up distinctions between Chinese and European-American educators and students that she traces back to traditional

philosophies of education that are clearly evident, for Li, in the work of such thinkers as Plato, Socrates and Descartes in the Western tradition and in the work of Confucius for the principally Confucian model she extracts from the Chinese tradition. It is therefore not surprising that her European-American respondents who did accept, like their Chinese peers, that the chief purpose of learning is to enable one to be "one's best," did not understand moral and self-improvement in terms of "cultivating themselves morally as defined in Confucian terms."

One of the dangers of Li's approach is that she takes cultural presuppositions and cultural values in regard to morality and self-cultivation that are well established in the respective traditions and then claims that it is noteworthy that these same values are found in the respective styles of learning. However, it is relatively easy to claim that the principle ideas and the founding philosophies of education of a people are then evident in the learning styles that people adopts in its schools. It is more difficult to seek out and explore the elements of these respective philosophies of education that elicit similarities in regard to the human condition and in regard to learning and the process of conceiving of moral and social values. It is the humanities subjects that enable the different traditions to sustain the deep-thinking required among students to enable them to explore the shared values and shared appreciation for human enquiry at the heart of these different traditions.

2.3 Individualism in Cross-Cultural Humanities

Li's reading of the different educational traditions in terms of different cultural models of learning also asks us to revisit different approaches to individualism for the different meritocratic principles at work in the Chinese contexts and in the "European-American" contexts. Li assumes that the two approaches are very different. Once again, Hong Kong in being an educational hub whose universities work at the intersection of the two traditions is a space of dialogue for the two value systems. At one point Li writes: "Chinese children are beneficiaries of their social world's love, care, and teaching, but they gradually become benefactors as they gain knowledge, skill, and moral maturity. Individual learning is not divorced from contributing to community as an ultimate purpose" (90). The implication would appear to be that Western models of education may lead to "individual learning" becoming divorced from contributing to community "as an ultimate purpose." This obviously begs the question in terms of what sense of "community" both her Chinese respondents and her Western respondents have internalized. Jana S. Rošker has recently argued, in this regard, that Modern Confucians have viewed modernization primarily as a "rationalization of the world" and they have explored their own tradition for authentic concepts comparable to the "two Western paradigms essential for modernization, i.e. the concepts of subjectivity, and of reason and rationality" (7). For Li, filial piety is regarded as an important influence on Chinese students' sense of individualism and community. Married students may feel a sense of responsibility to both family and parents who are depending on them to gain a

good job having spent years in third-level education. This tendency to think beyond the self either for parents who have invested in their education or for husbands, wives, and children who are depending on them to find suitable employment must be regarded as universally shared characteristics. Li does not define the sense of community she is speaking for here. Many of the mainland Chinese students I have taught over the years in Hong Kong feel that their secondary school education has taught them little, if anything, about political theories that can inform their understanding of such notions as community. If we are to regard a student's understanding of "community" as anything more than filial piety, family responsibility, or feelings of belonging to a hometown, notions that are shared universally, then we need to know whether the student has some understanding of how different theories of society play out in their own lives.

Another notion that Li puts forward in describing the "third virtue" of her Chinese model of learning, a notion that is hugely important for theories and practices of meritocracy, is "poverty." For Li, "poverty" is the most common reason her Chinese respondents give for why they feel they embody this important third virtue—*keku* or 'endurance of hardship'. The embodiment of this central virtue is, for Li, integral to why they are then seen as displaying what Li describes as a greater understanding of how learning is connected to a sense of community. The embodiment of this kind of endurance is regarded by Li as a sign that the student possesses a kind of selfless regard for community. She does not read such endurance as principally expressive of the student's desire to rise out of, or to ensure that he or she does not end up in, desperate poverty. Li does not dwell on this aspect of poverty beyond saying that it "has been an unavoidable living condition throughout Chinese history" (92). However, the fact that the fear of poverty is regarded as the main motivation for students who see themselves as embodying this key virtue—*keku* 'endurance of hardship'—is surely an acknowledgement by these students that their community has, in a sense, let them down instead of imbuing them, above all else, with an almost sacrosanct notion of community. They may very well want to ultimately contribute to society in some way, like all young students, but the fact that they feel they have to endure so much to be able to be in a position to do so may be a sign of their greater sense of desperation in a society where poverty is common and where social welfare is minimal. I would argue, therefore, that these students' admissions that their learning must embody the "endurance of hardship" does not necessarily imply that they have a greater awareness than "European-American" students of how the individual's learning is connected to the community. It indirectly points to a deep-seated realisation that their own personal endeavours must come first, for without this individual struggle any contribution they might wish to make to whatever sense of community they possess will remain little more than a consoling myth.

Li also describes what she describes as "two sets of achievement standards" for Chinese learners that convey "very different meanings" (93). She argues that "Chinese learning is centered around one's moral self-perfection" (91) and that "self-perfection" is the "ultimate goal" of "mastery" and "breadth/depth" of knowledge. Once again, this begs the question in terms of what sense of self-perfection is

presumed. Xinzhong Yao, regards *li* (propriety or moral codes) and *jen* (benevolence) as the key concepts for the Chinese Confucian tradition—Confucius advises that ‘to control oneself and return to *li* is the way to *jen*’ (in Yao 1997, 141)—as opposed to any privileging of the Western notion of self. Buddhist thinking and Daoist teaching also frequently advise practitioners to renounce all attachments including what might amount to Western notions of ego and self. Chuang Tzu advises that “the Tao of Heaven and the Tao of humanity are poles apart/Do not fail to reflect upon this” (90). There is then also in the Chinese tradition an admission that there is a separate, spiritual realm that lies beyond the Tao of humanity with its emphasis on being “active” (90). Therefore, Li’s finding that Chinese students privilege “self-perfection” more than their Western peers raises more questions than it answers.

The sense of spirituality and the sense of what Li regularly refers to as the “ancient spirit” in the responses of her Chinese respondents also points to another important oversight in Li’s reading of the Western cultural model of learning. In privileging this sense of ancient spirituality that the Confucian tradition lends to her Chinese learners, Li often describes an overly mechanistic and individualistic Western account of learning partially because she disconnects the Western tradition from its influential spiritual roots often found in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic beliefs and practices. It is also ironic that she repeatedly refers to the “European-American” model of learning as individualistic without noting that this sense of individualism emerged from these spiritual roots. Larry Siedentop’s (2014) recent magisterial study of Western liberalism, entitled *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, consistently argues that Christianity, canon law, and monastic culture in Europe was largely responsible for a move away from a governing system based on Roman private law. Europe therefore moved from a system where traditional social inequalities were “deemed natural” to a new account of justice that “stipulated that all ‘persons’ should be considered as ‘individuals’, in that they share an underlying equality of status as the children of God” (217). An underlying “moral equality was now deemed natural” (217). Justice, Siedentop argues, was no longer understood in terms of natural inequality, but rather in terms of natural equality (205). This was a huge shift in thinking that of course was influential for pre-secular Europe and its conception of meritocracy. If a society believes in and values a notion of moral equality for all individuals then one would imagine that it would be less likely to place so much emphasis on state-wide competitive examinations as a means for justifying an individual’s place in society. However, it seems that “moral equality” is today too vague a concept for policy makers, university boards and education departments that forget the individual in favour of indices and targets in justifying funding allocation.

Therefore, a close reading of Li’s study can still be used rewardingly to focus on shared cross-cultural values that both traditions of learning share. Li consistently argues that the Chinese tradition, through its devotion to Confucian values, is privileging of the “unity of knowledge and moral character,” the “acquisition of knowledge for self, and contribution to society,” and the “unity of the

cognitive/intellectual with the social/moral” (93). She also focuses on such notions as *lizhi* or ‘commitment’ or ‘establishing one’s will’ in the Confucian tradition. *Lizhi* describes a process where the student starts “pondering his or her life’s purposes in order to come to a clear personal vision” (94) as a “spiritually very uplifting” process. However, this is a capacity that students in general have claimed becomes more important for them through the study of the humanities subjects. Evelyn Chan argues in this volume that humanities students in Hong Kong reveal that taking humanities subjects enables them to reflect on the meaning and value of their studies. Li also reminds us that “learning in the Confucian persuasion is not limited to academic learning but also includes social and moral learning” (94) a feature of student responses on humanities subjects also given by students in Hong Kong who are asked to comment on why they would like to study humanities subjects.

2.4 Hong Kong and the Politicisation of the Humanities

Li’s approach to the cultural foundations of learning obviously points to oversights that can often emerge in any over-arching descriptions of such notions as moral and social value, self-enhancement, and self-actualization for the purposes of differentiating a “Western model of learning” from a “Chinese model.” As Asian universities appear more regularly in the international university rankings and begin to displace more familiar American and British universities from the higher positions³ it is important to recognize that it is greater uniformity, as opposed to difference, that is being promoted by rankings bodies and university research networks. The humanities, if they are to survive, must work to negotiate theoretically and practically how the kinds of criteria these ranking bodies are applying across the board to world universities impinge on and influence what must become shared educational strategies despite the necessity to take note of the cultural differences Li perceives. Hong Kong, with 4 universities in the world top 100 (QS Ranking 2016), is one of the strongest academic regions in Asia. Hong Kong is also an educational environment that is uniquely positioned to explore how cross-cultural models of learning can integrate elements of any ‘two cultures’ approach to Chinese and “American-European” models of learning. Hong Kong is a post-colonial region that has changed its undergraduate program quite dramatically in recent years in moving away from a British university model and towards a model that is closer to that

³See New York Times, Nov. 19, 2009, ‘A Crown Jewel of Education Struggles With Cuts’ where it is reported that the University of California, Berkeley dropped from a position as high as number two in the rankings in 2000 to a position of 39 in the 2009 Times Higher Education rankings. Meanwhile many Asian universities have appeared in the top 50 for the first time.

employed in the Mainland and that also shares much with the American university model. In the last number of years, universities in Hong Kong have changed the titles of their teaching staff, the length of the undergraduate degree, and academic structures.

Hong Kong's university system was established when the region was under British rule. It cannot be argued that education policy in Hong Kong was simply the result of cultural imperialism where a colonial power imposed a colonialist agenda on the teaching of such subjects as history and literature. Scholars have argued that the colonial education system was established with a great degree of co-operation from the Hong Kong community (Vickers et al. 2003, 107). What resulted was an "invented tradition" of "depoliticised, ethno-cultural nationalism whose colonial parentage was obscured or quickly forgotten" (107). Vickers, Kan & Morris make the interesting argument that the "subject community [the Hong Kong community] assumed a collaborative role vis-a-vis the colonial government." The Hong Kong community were allowed to assume the role of "guardians of Chinese culture in exchange for producing a depoliticised and decontextualised curriculum" (103). In other words, the education in Chinese culture and heritage was left up to the local community and it led to "the neglect of the local context" and the identification with a "monolithic, homogenous vision of China." This might also explain the rebirth of localism in Hong Kong in recent years. Wm. Theodore de Bary has noted, however, that even New Asia College in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, set up by Qian Mu and Tang Junyi, Chinese Confucian scholars who fled the Mao regime, struggled to "sustain the reading of Chinese classics in the original" in the face of demands for greater "internationalization" in universities in Hong Kong (41). Therefore, core aspects of the Asian humanities have also suffered in Hong Kong.

However, Hong Kong is not stuck in the past. It is carefully balancing an allegiance to Chinese classics in its Chinese Studies programs and to neo-Confucianist scholarship in its philosophy departments with progressive and groundbreaking work in both the traditional and 'new' humanities. Leo Lee Ou-fan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has recently urged scholars in the humanities in Asia to contemplate how to make a new beginning in the humanities to challenge Western philosophical thought from an Asian humanistic point of view. He argues that this is a task made more urgent by the ubiquitous effects of globalization.⁴ For Lee, 'the task of reexamining and redefining Western philosophical theory should be undertaken by Asian humanistic scholars', however, the term "Asian humanistic scholar," he argues, should not be taken to mean "scholars of Asian descent, but rather all humanistic scholars interested in Asia."⁵ Lee notes

⁴Professor Lee was delivering the keynote speech for the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Asian New Humanities Net (ANHN) held on 15th and 16th October, 2010 at CUHK.

⁵See <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/features/professor-leo-lee.html>.

that subaltern studies, a school of thought that focuses on the ‘postcolonial societies of South Asia and the developing world’ can be thought to be a ‘challenge to traditional Western narratives’ and he asks: ‘could there be Chinese ways of subverting these narratives?’

However, in recognizing the shared practices and values of the different learning traditions and in determining how we might pursue cross-cultural values in the humanities in relation to meritocracy and individualism, we must rework the distinct elements of each tradition in readings with our students. Roger T. Ames (2011) argues in such works as *Confucian Role Ethics* that there are important differences between Confucian and Western philosophy that have underpinned values and practices that are integral to education in each tradition. Ames argues that Western philosophy has inherited the notion of the being or essence of a human being as a “self-sufficient soul” whereas Confucianism is all about asking about “in what way a person becomes consummately human?” (87). He argues that there has been “insufficient attention” paid to this “fundamental difference” between the Western notion of constituted human “beings” and the Confucian project of “becoming” (88). However, this book seeks to begin attending to this lack of attention by exploring in dialogue how these differences can be reimagined or thought through by students in a contemporary cross-cultural humanities class. We also do not always need to begin our discussions with such seemingly unwieldy cultural descriptors. This book favours a bottom-up approach whereby educators working in contemporary Chinese contexts strive to begin our enquiries into a cross-cultural humanities by listening to students’ own responses and reactions to texts from both traditions. Much work has already been done on this by writers, editors and translators in Hong Kong who work across languages and traditions to make Hong Kong one of the world’s leading melting-pots for cross-cultural exchange in the humanities and liberal-arts. Online literary magazines such as *Asian Cha*,⁶ edited by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming and Jeff Zroback, serve as essential points of contact between academia and the local community who have some proficiency in English. *Cha* brings writers, translators and artists together to focus on Asian-themed creative concerns and cultural and political issues. *Cha* has run Hong Kong-wide and international poetry competitions on such events as the Umbrella Movement⁷ and the Beijing White Paper of 2014. In one of the winning poems from the “Whither Hong Kong” poetry competition run by *Cha* in the wake of the Umbrella Revolution, Mary Jean Chan describes the sentiment of Hong Kongers living abroad and looking on as events unfold:

⁶<http://www.asiancha.com/>.

⁷<http://www.asiancha.com/content/blogcategory/258/473/>.

From A Distance

Some things are not clearer
 from a distance. What grief
 moves you to sit-ins, marches,
 words that reverberate across
 generations, and tears for a city
 that was never ours to keep?
 Perhaps my faith in democracy
 never took root in the city
 that has been steered through
 the years by the firm hand of
 financiers and the edicts
 of the English; now quivering
 between two possible futures.

Many slumber while
 others shout into the void.
 What of the poet whose
 multiple selves struggle
 to echo a singular voice?
 Perhaps she might say:
 it was a beautiful mess,
 the days when the young
 and old were moved to
 sit-ins, marches, words
 that reverberate across
 generations, and tears
 for a city that was never
 theirs to keep.

Poetry performance events such as “Peel Street Poetry,”⁸ “Outloud,”⁹ “Ragged Claws” and the recent series of books published by Chameleon Press¹⁰ are also, despite their sometimes exclusive expat focus (Tsang 2016), creating the beginnings of a cross-cultural arts community that draws from, and contributes to, the life of the different humanities programs in English literary studies, cultural studies, communications and creative writing in Hong Kong universities and colleges.

However, the Hong Kong humanities are also experiencing a period of politicization given that the recent protests on universal suffrage, academic freedom, and even the structure of the University in Hong Kong are very often led by students taking humanities courses. Given the recent political protests, it would be remiss not to comment on how a highly charged political climate in Hong Kong, one that existed long before the Umbrella Revolution (UM) of 2014, also shapes the range and practice of the humanities in Hong Kong. One must also recall that Mainland Chinese students also have a long history of protest around issues related to the

⁸<https://peelstreetpoetry.com/>.

⁹<https://www.facebook.com/PoetryOutLoudHK/>.

¹⁰<http://www.chameleonpress.com/>.

humanities. The Tiananmen protests were preceded by the protests of 1966 when Tsinghua University students initially protested because of the reaction to a play “Hai Rui dismissed from Office” which tells the story from the Ming Dynasty of one Hai Rui who is charged with bringing the people’s complaints to the Emperor. However, he is dismissed from office. The play was read as an allegory of Peng Dehuai’s criticism of Mao from the Lushan Conference of 1959. The students were originally protesting against Peking University’s and Tsinghua University’s “intellectual elitism” and their “bourgeois tendencies.” They were called “radicals” by the University, but Mao supported them. Ultimately, however, the original aims of these “Red Guards” were thwarted.

Stephen Chan describes the Umbrella Movement as “the unexpected, massive collective action of civil disobedience against the status quo (read: authority and “reality”) that, by rough estimation, a million people have taken part in”; it was “a 79-day occupy action in three main urban areas of Hong Kong [that] shocked the world, the Beijing and Hong Kong authorities, and last but not least the people of Hong Kong themselves” (2015, 328). Chan explains how the political climate in Hong Kong shapes the institutions of education and thus the practice of the humanities: “So, the status quo is to stay, and reinforcement would only be made to scrutinise and restrict the subordinate or the powerless, while down-playing such issues as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, cultural rights, and social inequality in higher education. In any case, the move to de-colonise any of these core components of the ‘institution’ governing the education sector is envisaged to be upcoming. And the institutional apparatuses are not supposed to change either, or expected to self-correct themselves substantially, lest this might allow the “system” to automatically re-boot itself by ‘normalising’ its capacity to defend the nation-state oriented status-quo and its proliferated interests amidst transnational conspiracy plots of “foreign intervention,” “separatist localism,” or the like” (341–2). It is clear then that leading academics in Hong Kong are eager to connect the recent protest movement with the theory and practice of civil rights movements elsewhere while also acknowledging that the failure of the UM to achieve many of its key aims has resulted in a heightened state of self-surveillance, self-scrutiny and institutional paralysis.

Amidst this deep-seated political anguish there is only so much scope for the cross-cultural humanities to expand and develop. While there is sometimes a knee-jerk rejection of traditional Chinese mores, there is also a suspicion of Western political theory’s relevance for the unfolding Hong Kong context. The young generation of committed student activists who have taken part in street protests and have created new political parties and publications (Hong Kong National Party,¹¹ *Demosisto*¹²) are more intent on learning through praxis than by

¹¹“Hong Kong National Party is born: will push for independence, will not recognise the Basic Law.” *South China Morning Post*, Monday, 28 March, 2016. <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/1931384/hong-kong-national-party-born-will-push-independence-will>.

¹²<https://www.demosisto.hk/>.

attending cross-cultural humanities courses. However, students in the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong have displayed a great willingness to engage in humanities courses that are willing to address the new political climate by offering readings and seminars that allow them to reference their own political work and political writings and publications alongside works by such writers as Orwell, Arendt, Foucault, and Chomsky. In the "Literature and Politics" course I offered in 2016 to third and fourth year students in Hong Kong, students gave 45-minute group presentations at the end of the course on such issues as the Hong Kong dock strike of 2013 and on the new "localism" movement in Hong Kong. They read these events through the theories of such writers and theorists as Foucault, Dickens and Marx. Students displayed a willingness to employ the "liberal" ideas they have imbibed in classes so as to enact what seemed like their own practice of civic responsibility in their college work. They allowed me to view the classroom as an extension of the streets they had been occupying where they had been attending talks and giving talks in some cases on topics related to what we were reading in class. They discussed how they believed this sense of civic responsibility should also impact on how they are taught. One student wrote in her "reflections" on the course: "In a university where liberal ideas are cherished, it is reasonable for students to have some rights to decide their education policy and system [...]. Given that students have serious attitudes towards learning, they can be helpful for the improvement of the university policy. Unfortunately, I have to admit that many students nowadays no longer share the interest of learning with the older generation college students. Yet, society still holds some responsibility to that phenomenon." I believe that such responses demonstrate how students are clearly working to balance the more "liberal" ideas of their educational context with ideas that have been passed down to them through their early schooling and through their family lives, ideas possibly more related to the Confucian influence of their environment. However, the important point for me was that courses that remain sensitive to the local context in a meaningful way by responding to important local issues while being mindful of the strong liberal tradition in Hong Kong can enable students to lead the way in imagining and then performing a cross-cultural humanities ethos.

The class also clearly demonstrated that when it comes to analyzing and assessing the impact and influence of street protests and civil rights issues in Hong Kong, it is chiefly Western writers and theorists that students turn to help them understand the broader ramifications of these local events. However, I often felt that our discussions and our seminars became living embodiments of what one might call a cross-cultural humanities event. When students discussed whether violence was a viable solution for what they felt were attacks to their personal freedoms and civic aspirations by the authorities in Hong Kong, they often used words such as "tradition," "Chinese values," and even "filial piety" in their responses as well as relying on the legality of The Basic Law. There was a sense that many of the local students were struggling there and then in the classroom to understand how Western liberal notions of individualism tied to the civil rights movements were to be

experienced by them as Hong Kongers of Chinese ethnicity in a humanities course in one Chinese context.

However, such moments also raise questions about the role of the cross-cultural humanities in society. Educators can often claim too much for the humanities. John Guillory reminds us, for the U.S. context, that it is both ‘egregious and desperate’ for educationalists to ground ‘exalted claims’ for their courses and about how they educate ‘citizens for participation in democracy’ on ‘clumsy ideological moves’ that read ‘the tradition of Western culture’ only through the lenses of ‘American democracy’ (2006, 36). For example, Martha Nussbaun takes “soul,” as a privileged term for understanding the humanities that describes “the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation” (6). Of course, such statements seem to completely forget the Asian humanities. One of the central concepts in ancient Chinese philosophy *te* (what is used interchangeably with *jen* in Confucius 1979) is described by Xinzhong Yao as ‘both the power of humanity and the seed that can grow into full humanity’ (Yao 1997, 140). *Li* (propriety or moral codes) and *jen* (benevolence) are important concepts for the Chinese tradition. Confucius advises that ‘to control oneself and return to *li* is the way to *jen*’ (in Yao, 141). Placed beside these virtues or naturalistic moral guides, ‘soul’ may seem a far too abstract notion on which to base a program of education. At any rate, this is the reaction I get to such Western philosophical notions as ‘self’ and ‘soul’ in my classes in Hong Kong.

2.5 Acknowledging Tradition While Reading Confucius Liberally

However, we can also look to the finest readings of the classics from these humanities traditions to supplement our students’ embodied practice of this cross-cultural humanities ethos. Tu Weiming is a key contributor to this great “civilized conversation.” Weiming’s work can help students in my classes understand how Confucius and Confucian thought can respond to the questions they had about violence and civic responsibility. Weiming reminds us that Confucius was the transmitter of an ancient culture that preceded him by something like 60 generations: “Confucius was not the founder of a scholarly tradition, identified in East Asian languages as *ru*, which means “weak,” “soft,” “gentle,” and “enduring.” He was, however, instrumental in keeping alive the “theory and practice of *ru* as the longest continuous scholarly tradition in human history” (1999, 293). Xinzhong Yao reminds us that the practice of *ru* and the scholarly and spiritual tradition aligned with this practice is also associated with a distinct practice of education and learning. “*Ru*” can also mean “to shape” and “to educate.” This tradition is therefore unique in combining an interest in education as an embodied practice that privileges both the weakness, gentleness and pliability of the learner and teacher but

that also regards these as qualities to be privileged in the learner's daily life. Xinzhong Yao reminds us that Confucianism is in fact a misnomer for the tradition that is normally referred to as *ru jia*, *ru jiao*, *ru xue* or simply as *ru* in China and other East Asian countries. Yao argues that, for Liu Xin, the Han Dynasty scholar, *ru*, as a school and a social group, emphasized the "virtues of humaneness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), followed the ancient sage-kings, and took Confucius as their master" (2000, 17). However, *ru*, for Xin, was to be traced to a "government office" whose function was to "assist the ruler to follow the way of yinyang and to enlighten [the people] by education." There was no debate about the meaning of *ru* prior to the twentieth century, argues Yao, and therefore Xin's description was generally accepted up until the twentieth century. We see, therefore, that the meaning of *ru* as a practice, combines Tu Weiming's notion of "weak" and "gentle" with Xin's concentration on a practice of education that is aligned with a government office. Hu Shi (1891–1962) disagreed with Xin. He argues that *ru* refers to the adherents of the Shang Dynasty who because of their expertise in religious rituals were employed as priests by the Zhou Dynasty (Yao 2000, 19). However, Yao also returns to Tu Weiming's description of the practice of *ru* in terms of what is "weak" and "gentle." Yao reminds us that the character *ru* shares the same root as those for "weaklings" and "cowards" indicating that the "members of *ru* were characterized by their softness, suppleness and flexibility" (20). The first Chinese philologist, Xu Shen (58?- 147?) defined *ru* as such: "*Ru* means 'soft.' It is the title for [Confucian] scholars (*shu shi*) who educated the people with the six arts" (in Yao, 20). Yao therefore argues that a "*ru* was gentle and yielding rather than competitive and commanding, in contrast to a warrior who was known for his vigour in war and competition" (20). Yao reminds us that the "first Chinese philologist, Xu Shen, defined '*ru*' as 'soft' arguing that it is the 'title for [Confucian] scholars (*shu shi*) who educated the people with the six arts [history, poetry, music, astrology, archery, and mathematics, all 'closely related to rituals in ancient times']".

The question then for any cross-cultural humanities practice that strives to speak for key aspects of what emerges from the *ru* tradition and for the traditions that feed into our humanities or liberal arts traditions is how are such notions of gentleness and weakness to be incorporated into a humanities teaching model and taken up by students. The educator in the *ru* tradition was expected to be "gentle and yielding" as opposed to "competitive and commanding." The problem is that today's corporate university embodies an educational philosophy that sees ranking criteria as an end in itself thereby making competition the key motivator for academic performance. Competition has been incorporated so unproblematically into teaching practice and educational philosophy that educators and administrators are unable even to imagine how the education system might function differently in a manner that nurtures an educational ethos that is yielding and compassionate rather than competitive.

It is also noteworthy that one of the leading Confucian scholars writing today, Tu Weiming, sees competition and what he describes as "excessive individualism" (*Confucianism and human rights* 1998, 305) as two hallmarks of the Western

humanistic tradition. He argues that a comparative cultural perspective that incorporates aspects of Western and Confucian values must work to “creatively transform” this tradition that has led to our style of life being corrupted by excessive individualism, pernicious competitiveness, and vicious litigiousness” (305). One only has to look at recent publications in the Western humanities on the crisis in the humanities (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Guinier 2015) and recent remarks by university Presidents in both traditional Western institutions and Asian institutions to see how such a philosophy has taken root. This also has obvious psychological and emotional repercussions for educators and students.

Writing in the late nineties, Tu Weiming argues that a commingling of Western and Asian traditions “through intercultural dialogue, face-to-face communications, and mutually beneficial exchange” can produce a “truly ecumenical conceptualization of human rights [that] can overcome the narrowly defined instrumental rationality, intellectual naivete, and self-imposed parochialism characteristic of the current state of affairs in North America” (1998, 300). Of course, one must question whether the most populous Confucian state still fosters any wholehearted embrace of the Confucian values Weiming privileges. One cannot also discount the reach and influence of Communist Party dogma that for millions of Chinese students is examined in state examinations each year. Recent state publications such as *Interpretation of New Philosophy of Chinese Diplomacy* (2014) make very little, if any, mention of Confucius. When they do mention Confucius to further the aims of a “Chinese dream” for a “new people-oriented global vision” he sounds very different to the Confucius of De Bary and Tu Weiming: “Confucius took ‘benefitting all people’ as the way to rule a country with wisdom...Confucianism advocated that those who had won over the people, would be the winner” (112).

2.6 Reading Confucius Liberally

In coming to the end of this cross-cultural examination of the humanities in terms of individualism and meritocracy from a Hong Kong perspective, I now want to finish with a look at how one contemporary Hong Kong scholar in the Asian humanities in one of our Chinese contexts is merging Confucian thought and liberalist philosophy. Joseph Chan’s *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (2013) examines how different traditions of education have contributed to different political philosophies. Chan argues that in order to bring the Confucian and liberal political philosophies closer together for what he describes as a Confucian moderate perfectionism that educators need to re-examine many of the preconceptions they make in regard to models of education. Chan argues that traditional liberal participatory democracies tend to privilege civic virtue, “civic-mindedness,” and civic education (95) at the expense of human virtue and moral education. Chan stresses the need for a return to a form of moral education that prioritises “role modeling” and the concentration on moral education in schools through stories and precepts, manners and rituals, and through a concentration on

the personal example of teachers (99). However, he stresses that the important point for his moderate perfectionist approach to education is that it must appeal to individual judgments about human goods and experiences in a “piecemeal” way whenever these are relevant to a policy issue or a practical concern; it does not then attempt to pursue a “comprehensive doctrine” of the good life through political action, what he argues has been evident in many liberal and Confucian models of society. This then bears some resemblance to the moral pragmatism of thinkers such as Richard Rorty and William James in the American tradition. However, the second aspect of the Confucian model for education that Chan regards as a potential weakness is its inability to bring the ideal and the nonideal together. This is because, for Chan, Confucianism has always faced the problem of the “serious gap between its social and political ideal and reality” (17). He argues that the main consideration for a political philosophy and for a program of moral education is “how to develop a nonideal approach to society and politics that keeps alive the ideal as an aspiration while effectively dealing with problems that arise in nonideal conditions” (14). Chan leans towards a rejuvenated version of pragmatism, one grounded in the Asian humanities, in constructing his moderate perfectionism. In once again grounding his reading of education in the Western liberal tradition on the work of “Western theorists” and philosophy (20), Chan argues that Confucian moral education, which is “humanity-based rather than citizen-based, provides a stronger incentive for citizens to cultivate civility than liberal civic education, as well as a more comprehensive foundation of virtues” (20). Chan argues that the Western liberal model of education is a “knowledge-based approach to civic education” whereas the Confucian model of education is humanity-based. Chan explains how the Asian humanities—namely Confucian ideas—must have a strong interest in ‘benevolent rule’ (zheng ren), sufficiency for all, and creating the “fair” (ping) social conditions that are necessary so that all citizens can live the “good life.” He argues that Mencius “understands benevolent rule as a set of social and economic policies that all legitimate rulers must implement...one aspect central to the ideal of benevolent rule is the proper distribution of economic resources” (161). Ultimately, Chan wishes to construct an “interplay of liberal democratic institutions and Confucian ideals” that decouples “liberal democratic institutions from those popular liberal philosophical packages that place the right prior to the good and base liberal democratic institutions on fundamental moral rights” (192). Chan, as a Hong Kong scholar, is therefore helping us reimagine what a cross-cultural humanities might look like. It is the same visionary response to the different traditions that I see each year in the work of my students here in Hong Kong. Of course, the knowledge-based ideal of the modern university that rankings bodies sustain as some ultimate paradigm of internationalization must, we are told, be a global university that unproblematically navigates and seamlessly incorporates any different models of education we might want to assign to the respective Western and Asian traditions. However, even if all universities do ultimately conform to the knowledge industry model of university excellence, the cultural work that Chan, De Bary, and Li offer is muddying the waters and allowing us to re-evaluate the values we have tended to fence off and protect. This project contributes to such a process

by examining the important philosophical and cultural differences these writers have discovered in the different models of education that urge us to inspire our students to take up where these researchers have left off.

2.7 Concluding Comments

In concluding it is clear that a cross-cultural humanities dialogue has long existed in humanities programs in Hong Kong and that Hong Kong provides a unique educational hub for allowing this work to continue. At a time when humanities courses are under renewed pressure in terms of producing calculables, it is such dialogues than in themselves provide points of contact and collaboration between Asian and non-Asian universities that can develop cross-cultural understanding while also broadening awareness of what should merit calculable support. In fact, these issues are far too important to leave to the approval and sanction of rankings bodies and funding authorities. Hong Kong's highly charged political climate offers new room for imagining how the liberal-arts traditions associated with civil rights movements and with freedom of speech and academic freedom can be sustained and even nurtured in a Chinese context that also respects its Confucian heritage.

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