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Master's Thesis

***Zhi* and Knowing Harding as a Feminist.**

Confucian – Daoist Engagements with Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

Inga Paul Triebel

Abstract

This thesis engages with the responses of Chinese philosophy to feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE). More specifically, it asks on what grounds Confucian and Daoist accounts of knowing deal with the Western feminist implications that being part of a social struggle is what constitutes a standpoint. Through the analysis of two Confucian and one Daoist perspective on Sandra Harding's account of FSE, I argue that the three perspectives distinguish their account for situatedness of knowledge from a commitment to achieving a standpoint through social struggle. This reveals the possibility for a reconsideration of the notion of "feminist" when engaging FSE.

I propose that a shared open ground to reflect on feminist achievements for standpoints is possible without moulding Chinese philosophical considerations into a struggle that reduces their concepts into a Western account of gender. I aim to present that in reflecting on Harding's efforts as a feminist, the connection between Chinese accounts of how knowing (*zhi*) is present in the effort of action (*wei*) or non-action (*wu-wei*). For this, I draw on Michael Beaney's concept of 'knowing-as' as an appropriate concept for Chinese philosophical engagement with epistemology, leading to deeper conversations in intercultural engagements.

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Introduction

“We cannot understand women and their lives by adding facts about them to bodies of knowledge which take men, their lives, and their beliefs as the human norm.”

(Harding and Hintikka 1983: ix)

A central issue for feminist epistemologies is androcentrism. Androcentrism means that the male perspective is assumed when talking about human norms that ground knowledge. With this, feminists do not argue that a male perspective cannot contribute to knowledge, but that *the* male perspective cannot be assumed as the universal knower. Notably, ‘the male perspective’ is open towards more disabling structures than gendered social privilege. Intersecting characteristics are thus involved, such as race, class, disability, neurodivergence, and so forth. One central aim for feminist epistemologists is to rethink the clear distinction between who knows and what they know. This leads to thinking of knowers who can learn from different marginalized perspectives and challenge their biases. One important contribution is feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE), forwarded by philosopher Sandra Harding. Her account builds on earlier discussions of situated knowledge, suggesting that standpoints can be defined because social struggles for better conditions, for example, for better conditions for women, exist (Harding 1986: 26). Standpoints are situated in social struggles and different standpoints are possible. This builds her subsequent commitment to epistemic privilege in that “some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects” (Harding 1993: 61). Marginalization enables better knowledge to fight back against an oppressive system.

In Chinese philosophy, feminist standpoints are engaged with ancient Chinese texts such as the Confucian Analects, the Mencius and Daoist texts such as the Zhuangzi (Jiang 2014; DeLapp 2016; Lai 2016). Here, Chinese philosophical texts are consulted to provide better solutions to recurring problems of relativism between standpoints or the hidden requirement to essentially rely on a stable group feature of identity. In addition to that, the lacks of FSE result in the presentation of Confucian and Daoist accounts of situatedness. However, FSE and Chinese accounts differ in that they do not explicitly imply engaging with social struggles. Being part of a social struggle is what builds feminist standpoints in Western theory. Therefore, I ask the following research question: On what grounds do Confucian and Daoist accounts of knowing deal with the Western feminist implications that being part of a social struggle is what constitutes a standpoint?

In this thesis, I argue that Karyn Lai, Kevin DeLapp and Xinyan Jiang propose Chinese philosophical solutions to the situatedness of knowledge without a commitment to achieving a

standpoint through social struggle. Harding's situatedness of knowledge is put forward more specifically on the grounds of the similarity between situatedness of knowledge and practical perspectivist accounts. This reveals the possibility to reconsider what 'feminist' primarily means when engaging FSE.

Although this alone might lead to the assumption that this field of engagement shows to be lacking fruitful conversations, throughout this thesis I propose that quite the opposite can be the case: multiple tensions within the notion of 'feminist,' feminist theory and its global implications set up a difficult terrain for general solutions. Still, the engagements are quite a fruitful starting point for new conversations on a deeper understanding of social situations and epistemology. The reference to classical texts in Chinese philosophy might have similar implications for the Chinese texts to ask about the specific fundamental reference, as the reference to a social struggle has for FSE. As a final result of this thesis, I aim to present that in reflecting on Harding's efforts as a feminist, the connection between Chinese accounts of how knowing (*zhi*) is present in the effort of action (*wei*) or non-action (*wu-wei*). For this, I draw on Michael Beaney's concept of 'knowing-as' (Beaney 2021, 2023, 2025) as an appropriate concept for Chinese philosophical engagement with epistemology, leading to deeper conversations in intercultural engagements.

To achieve this, chapter 1 sets up the framework of (1) FSE, (2) Chinese philosophical tensions regarding the concept *zhi* (translated either nominally as wisdom, knowledge, or verbally as knowing) and (3) Beaney's proposal of knowing-as as an interpretation that different ideas in frameworks of epistemology lead us to reject any idea but leads "to know both ideas better" (Beaney 2023: 73). Chapter 2 engages in detail with the Lai, DeLapp and Jiang who bring Harding and Chinese philosophy in conversation with Western FSE and suggest Confucian or Daoist twists to Harding's problems. This builds the ground to point out their different weights on social struggles to identify a standpoint. Chapter 3 then focuses on bringing Harding's feminist struggle back into consideration, based on the epistemic structure to know Harding as a feminist. Here I offer three tentative suggestions. First, she can be known as a feminist because she can be adequately identified within her debate. Second, she can be known as a feminist because her epistemic agency as a feminist does not imply epistemic privilege in Chinese philosophy or movements. Rather, the consideration of different notions of the effort in action invites both a broader inquiry into knowing and action. Third, she can be known as a feminist because this opens the question of perspective in how Chinese and Western feminists possibly relate to each other. Overall, this thesis suggests that her feminist standpoint can raise new questions for Chinese thinking, as Chinese thinking can raise for feminist standpoints. Taken together, both rely on an intercultural openness.

Chapter 1: Research Framework

There are three situations that relate to this research framework, engaging with epistemology. First, FSE that presents a general critique of the relation between science and objectivity as value-neutral. Second, ancient Chinese different accounts of *zhi*, a concept of ‘knowing’ that is tied to the ethical and linguistic practice of acting appropriately. Third, the hermeneutical space in which different conceptions of knowledge with different historical contexts enter into conversation with each other. I set up these different situations as frames of each thread that enters into theoretical conversation when it comes to establishing this research. At the end of this chapter, I propose to think about the research situation as embedded in the difference of FSE and some possible Chinese accounts of *zhi*,¹ having three threads pulled: (1) the feminist tensions in the Western debate on FSE, an account presented by Harding, (2) the different entanglements of knowledge about the natural and social world in classical Chinese philosophy of the pre-Qin and Warring States Period and (3) the question of parallelism between Western and Chinese theories to address epistemological structures.

1.1 Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

FSE is a theory proposed in a series of American feminist critiques of modern science and classical Western ideas of objectivity. Feminist standpoint theorists defend two guiding principles. First, that all knowledge is situated. Second, that different standpoints have access to knowledge. These two principles require some specification. What does situated knowledge mean? What are standpoints and how do standpoints differ? And: How is knowledge accessed or situated when we state a basic feminist knowledge claim as ‘women are discriminated by sexism’? In what follows, I present the line of thought that forms the early trajectory (cf. Grasswick 2018: section 2.1) and, with this, what I take Harding’s account of FSE and situated knowledge to be.

The early accounts of FSE were developed based on feminist critiques of science in the 1970s, especially accounts of situated knowledges in sociology (Smith 1974), psychology – especially psychoanalysis (Flax 1983) and Marxist feminist theory (Hartsock 1983). Early positions that develop FSE in philosophy that engage with these situated knowledge theories is Sandra Harding (Harding 1986). Engaging theories with Harding include conversations in history of science and technology (Haraway 1988, Rose 1994), for a sociologist version of a Black feminist standpoint, Patricia Hill Collins (Collins 1990).² In her first introductory volume, which recalls the early

¹ Providing a full picture of references to *zhi* would require a deeper approach through language.

² An overview of the early trajectory of FSE, including first critiques, can be found in Harding 2004.

literature, Harding writes around the point that a feminist standpoint is defined by the fact that no precise definition is sought. Rather, it is a collection of projects in different disciplines that strive against a uniform objectification of the knower, “to create a different kind of *decentered subject* of knowledge and of history” (Harding 2004: 8). One thing they have in common is that leading theorists are part of various, sometimes interrelating social movements. And that a feminist standpoint is different from a sociologist’s standpoint of women’s experiences. Therefore, it can be helpful, according to Harding, to think of “standpoint theories, plural” (ibid.: 12). In a shared position, I take feminist standpoint theorists to reject objectivism about knowledge, but argue for a new version of objectivity. Harding defines objectivism as linked to empiricism; objectivism is regarded as the position that all knowledge is accessible through empirical methods that do not require individual perception:

“The conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate only those social values and interests that differ among researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgements.” (ibid.: 136)

What she criticizes is a form of empiric objectivity. Objectivity as a scientific quality entails the complete elimination of personal biases and prejudices in one’s scientific inquiry. According to objectivism, science is value-neutral, i.e., scientific questions are measured as relevant through advancing our understanding of the world and its guiding principles. In other words, the methods of science ensure that the known can be reproduced through different knowers, or: the known (content of knowledge) is fully independent from the knower.

This separation of knower and content of knowledge is criticized by feminists as they raise awareness about implicit androcentrism. A guiding male perspective was taken as the standard of scientific inquiry; the situation of women and other oppressed groups could not inform such scientific inquiry (Harding and Hintikka 1983: ix). This argument appears in various forms and disciplines (Smith 1974; Flax 1983). All of these versions have in common that they argue for the inclusion of bodily experiences of women to inform scientific research. We can summarize the first concept of situated knowledge as follows:

Version 1) *Situated knowledge* is a feminist proposal to address sexist structures (such as androcentrism) in scientific research as a whole.

Scientific structures are sexist, because

1.1 Women learn to alienate their experiences from scientific inquiry when they are trained (Marxist-feminist version; cf. Smith 1974: 10)

- 1.2 Women become women through male authority, thus learning to relate to objects that are defined as important by men (psychoanalytic-feminist version; cf. Flax 1983: 251)

Their answer is to take situatedness in society seriously and reconstruct the knower-know relation through feminist values, i.e., a reflection of hegemonic power that is the starting point for feminist struggles in society and thus in institutions and concepts of knowledge production as well. This is formulated as the first principle for an FSE: all knowledge is situated because empirical objectivism about knowledge cannot be true. I take that Harding's contribution of situated knowledge for philosophy of science is built on this early feminist reflection and thus take the history of feminist thought into account. Building on that, a feminist notion of standpoints is based on human activity: how we organize material conditions in the world affects the scientific facts that then produce divisions of labour, or further material imbalances (Hartsock 1983: 286).

Building on this, Sandra Harding takes a step toward getting modern philosophy of science on an emancipatory track. In *The Science Question in Feminism*, she presents her project as theorizing in the "feminist successor science" discourse (Harding 1986: 146) that asks what can come next after modern science and how it ought to be transformed in a sexist society. Harding addresses androcentrism in a critique that feminist or women's perspectives in life are inconsistent with the problems that science deems suitable for generating objective knowledge about the world. The ways women build society need to be considered implausible from an androcentric perspective. To gain power in science motivates a sort of feminist standpoint theory: "The adoption of this standpoint is fundamentally a moral and political act of commitment to understanding the world from the perspective of the socially subjugated" (ibid.: 149). Harding develops her account of FSE by laying out three possible directions, a feminist lens to philosophy of science and thus the field of knowledge production can take: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism. She identifies three possible stances:

- 1) *Feminist empiricism*: Social biases (sexism and androcentrism) shape research questions, its design, collection and interpretation of data. Women's movement and letting women's experiences inform their scientific inquiry helps to notice sexist and androcentric biases. (cf. ibid.: 25; 161)
- 2) *Feminist standpoint theory*: Social biases show the relation of dominating and subjugated positions. A standpoint of a subjugated group possesses "a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations and explanations of nature and social life." (cf. ibid.: 26)

- 3) *Feminist postmodernism*: Because social biases are part of modern science, there should be an attitude of skepticism about modern Enlightenment claims about the universal existence of reason, progress, science, language and a subject/self. (cf. *ibid.*: 28)

Harding rejects 1), defends 2), and is open towards 3) because of the skepticism towards all modern scientific hegemonic structures. She rejects 1) because of the liberal feminist undertone, meaning that it takes for granted scientific structures as a system (*ibid.*: 162). Feminist standpoint theory, on the other hand, is designed to question the way of how scientific questions are produced through hegemonic vision and thus aims to de- and reconstruct the roots of science. With this openness to critique the root of modern science, Harding is open to feminist postmodernism as it enables critical thinking to put all fundamental categories into the tension of how they are enabling hegemonic structures. However, Harding does not end in pure skepticism but puts forward a proposal for the reconstruction of science through feminist values, such as a recast of the notion of objectivity. Harding proposes to think of “strong objectivity,” that rests on a critical self-reflection of the scientist in light of existing and intertwined power structures, or, in her words, “that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge” (Harding 1993: 69). In this sense, knower and known are related as they are constituted by a repeated action; and the situatedness in the world informs the scientific subject, i.e., knower, who investigates and proposes sets of knowledge. Consequently, the standpoint in FSE is not built on a concept of individual experience, but a collective action against hegemonic power structures and because there are multiple groups who share different experiences in the spectrum of marginalization, multiple standpoints are possible. With this explanation, the fundamental assumption of FSE commits to a pluralist, historicist conception of the world that science possibly relates to and is open towards a postmodern, skeptic attitude.

There are various critiques that have been raised against Harding. Given that Harding talks about women and women’s standpoints from a perspective of gender and not of sex, she argues against a biological categorization of bodies. The biological category of women as other in respect to men is not her foundation to make sense of social differences. Rather, specific forms of labor, emotions, or experiences inform an action shared across a community placed into shared conditions because of hegemonic power structures. However, it is unclear if group experiences that are based on, for example, gender subjection are free of any kind of essence. An underlying question is whose voices from which struggles count “as women’s voices,” to cite Lugones and Spelman’s critique of there being equality between acknowledging all struggles and thus all experiences (Lugones & Spelman 1983: 575).

The second criticism is that Harding does not provide a full theory of knowledge for FSE, because she casts away truth as a modern universal. As Collins remarks, FSE was never set as a theory concerning truth but as a method to put the science back into its own moral reflection inside a socio-political context (Collins 2017: 120). There are various philosophical and interdisciplinary non-Western engagements with Harding's FSE. From the situation of U.S Black women, Collins strengthened the emancipatory power of standpoints, i.e., the fact that Black women's experiences in community are a standpoint "to create self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists" (Collins 1990: 202). In line with Harding, she defines a Black women's standpoint as a lens on society that is created through Black feminist thought and thus social movement (ibid.: 153). In her version, Anglo-American Black women's experiences are built on the intersectionality of powers of androcentrism. This provides a possible second version of situated knowledge:

Version 2) *Situated knowledge* is a feminist proposal to address eurocentric and androcentric structures in scientific research as a whole.

Scientific structures show eurocentrism and androcentrism, because

2.1 Black women's knowledge is facing the authority of an intersecting oppression, that of sexism and racism, to become trained in science. (Intersectionality argument, cf. ibid.: 154)

2.2 Racist and sexist sciences as universal knowledge allow no space for engaging with Black women's experiences, methods or knowledge. Thus they cannot challenge science into a paradigm shift. (Kuhnian argument, cf. ibid.: 153)

For Collins, a Black woman's standpoint is intertwined with a re-evaluation of scientific methods. She highlights methods such as first-person testimonies and communal wisdom as methodologically adequate and proposes a Black women's epistemology (ibid.: 206-203). This is possible because Harding herself highlights the awareness of multiple cultural oppressive factors, "other cultural hierarchies as classism and racism" (Harding 1986: 159). During her career, Harding continuously contributed to engaging FSE with feminist struggles situated in an African perspective or decolonial perspective from Abya Yala³ (cf. Harding and Mendoza 2021) and thus aiming towards a concept of self-awareness in knowledge that reflects on global hegemonies in modern knowledge production.

³ Abya Yala is the indigenous name of the land that has been named as Latin America, given by the Guna people, who live autonomously in lands between Panama and Colombia.

1.2 *Zhi*: Confucianist, Mohist and Daoist differences in modes of knowing

Both the authorship of various classical texts of Chinese philosophy and the arrangement of the texts are ambiguous, as different versions of the texts exist.⁴ Despite these questions, it is widely agreed that the primary point of thinking can be located in the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), a historical period of political turmoil and battle over dominance. The political and moral order, justified through the authority of Heaven, i.e., a moral and political lineage that is the lineage to exemplary sage kings, breaks down. Ancient Chinese philosophical thinking is thus guided by asking where things went wrong and how the relation to ancient exemplary sagely comportment in rulership and personal life can be conducted. This is expressed in the idea to re-establish the moral and political authority, regarded as the Mandate of Heaven (*T'ien-ming*), to re-establish the connection to the moral path to walk, the Dao. Knowledge (*zhi*, 智 or 知) is related to how to live a life located with the Dao appearing in a “practical” (Graham 1989: 3) or “concrete” (Hall and Ames 1998: 107) relation to a lived socio-political context.⁵ There are three schools that engage and criticize each other’s modes of knowing in relation to human morality in the Warring States period: Confucianists, Mohists, and Daoists.⁶ By modes of knowing, I mean a focus on the relation between all important concepts that are aligned to make a knowledge proposal.

A Confucian focus on sagely moral behaviour is set in exemplifying the desired behaviours and values of the *jūnzǐ* (君子), translated as gentleman or exemplary person. A central question is how the values need to interact in being a *jūnzǐ* in different societal roles, for example, a sage ruler. Becoming a *jūnzǐ* is linked to having knowledge about the previous texts, the Classics, which lay out all the necessary terms for how *they* can establish a link to heaven. I highlight speaking of the exemplary person in terms of ‘they’ because everyone in society has the potential to become an exemplary person (cf. Analects 4.6). This potential for sageness, regardless of gendered identity, creates an important tension, given that Confucius himself only had male students and the situation of women was portrayed in a derogatory manner in passages in the Analects and later Confucian ideologies.⁷

In the Analects, knowledge does not only appear as knowledge of the Classics. As wisdom, knowledge is regarded as one of the five Confucian virtues: trustworthiness (*xin* 信), benevolence

⁴ Prominent examples (but not the only ones) are the *Lunyu* (Analects) by Confucius, or the Dao De Jing by Laozi.

⁵ Or, as Allen remarks, knowledge is “not about essence or conditions of possibility, but about point and value. What makes knowledge wise and worth pursuing?”, Allen 2015: 4.

⁶ The focus on these three schools can be found in sinologist and philosophical studies, such as Graham 1989: 107-234, Raphals 1992: 26-100, or in a recent introduction Creller 2021.

⁷ This started a feminist reconsideration of the audience of the texts, i.e., if Confucian texts, such as the Analects, were written for men; cf. Pang-White 2018, 7-8.

(*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 义), ritual propriety (*li* 礼), and wisdom (*zhi* 智).⁸ Starting from its etymology, the earliest accounts in the *Er ya* and *Shou wen* dictionary refer to knowledge as *zhi* in two different characters, 智 and 知, which are used interchangeably by thinkers in the Chinese classical tradition, here especially referring to Warring States texts: the nominal form *zhi* (智) as knowledge, wisdom, understanding and the verbal form *zhi* (知) as to know, or knowing (Raphals 1992: 16). Therefore, both the verbal and nominal form that appear in the texts refer to *zhi* and thus highlight the strong connection that knowing has with interaction in society, as proper behaviour. Let us take one exemplary account of *zhi* as proper behaviour in relation. Analects 12.22 states:

12.22 Fan Chi asked about Goodness [*ren*].

The Master replied, ‘Care for others.’

He then asked about wisdom [*zhi*].

The Master replied, ‘Know others.’

Fan Chi still did not understand, so the Master elaborated: ‘Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the crooked will be made straight.’

Fan Chi retired from the Master’s presence. Seeing Zixia, he said, ‘Just before I asked the Master about wisdom, and he replied, ‘Raise up the straight and apply them to the crooked, and the crooked will be made straight.’ What did he mean by that?’

Zixia answered, ‘What a wealth of instruction you have received! When Shun ruled the world, he selected from amongst the multitude, raising up Gao Yao, and those who were not Good then kept their distance. When Tang ruled the world, he selected from amongst the multitude, raising up Yi Yin, and those who were not Good then kept their distance.’ (Analects 12.22, trans. Slingerland 2003a: 136)

In this passage, the virtues *ren* and *zhi* are related to Shun and Tang, two legendary virtuous rulers of Ancient China; here praised for their virtues in knowing to choose Gao Yao and Yi Yin as ministers who both acted as exemplary ministers. The ‘press-frame’ metaphor of applying the straight to the crooked appears in various passages of the Analects to highlight that exemplary behaviour affects all people (cf. Analects 2.19). This passage reveals another important way, namely that to make sense of Confucius’ teaching, it is advice that already needs to be processed by its listener. Even Confucius himself states that he is “not born with knowledge” (Analects 7.20) and thus seeks innovatory answers through returning to the ancient and learning from them: “I listen widely, and then pick out that which is excellent in order to follow it; I see many things, and remember them. This constitutes a second-best sort of knowledge” (Analects 7.28, Slingerland 2003a: 75). There is a hierarchical distinction made between learning from the ancient Classics and

⁸ Further semantic clusters of knowledge can be found in Lai 2016: 108, or Raphals 1992: 26-49.

teachings of the sages and listening widely to all people. Furthermore, *zhi* is linked to a distinction of people being born with knowledge, acquiring knowledge through learning, persisting in learning although having difficulties and not learning at all (Analects 16.9), where “only the very wise [*zhi* 知] and the very stupid do not change” (Analects 17.3, trans. Slingerland 2003a: 200), it marks the final stage of learning, namely being able to teach others who “do not understand [*bu zhi* 不知]” (Analects 1.1, trans. Slingerland 2003a: 1). If even Confucius is stated to be doubting of being born with knowledge, then we can see how extremely rare or even almost impossible such a person is. And how important the concept of change is in Confucian philosophy. Or it is a remark for the sages to stay humble.

That controlled inquiry is an important theme for Confucian thought, which also relates to the five virtues, only becoming good in balance. As Analects 14.4 states: “Those who are Good will necessarily display courage, but those who display courage are not necessarily Good” (Analects 14.4, Slingerland 2003a: 155). If not balanced, courage, for example, can result in egoism. In the same spirit, wisdom is not necessarily good, because it can result in cunning speech. As Raphals highlights, *zhi* has a lot of power, as it entails the power to mischief, “the self-interest use of intelligence and language to disguise real feelings and ulterior motives” (Raphals 1992: 30). Thus, a common theme for Confucian moral cultivation of *zhi* is found in the normative regulation of language, also known as “rectifying names” (*zhengming* 正名) by highlighting the importance that speech accords with reality. Otherwise, as stated in Analects 13.3, “things are not successfully accomplished” (Analects 13.3, Slingerland 2003a: 139), meaning that things cannot be put into action if there is no proper way to name virtuous behaviour. Mencius further develops this notion of *zhi* as the sense to distinguish right and wrong (cf. Mencius 6A.6). This is related to his theory of human nature as innate good, because all people possess innate senses of commiseration, shame, respect as well as right and wrong.⁹ To distinguish right and wrong is thus not a general intellectual but a moral capacity. Mencius also recognizes the primacy of *ren* over *zhi*, as for example in his comparison that *zhi* can be compared with a skill and sagehood an overall strength, as an arrow that reaches his goal with strength, but the bullseye through practice (Mencius 5B.1). In conclusion, a Confucian view on *zhi* entails knowing to speak correctly without hidden intentions and being able to name things correctly because of one’s decision to walk the path of virtue, a process of cultivation through learning from adequate sources or choosing adequate conversation partners and advisers. Confucians rely on their self-awareness of the idea that the ancient texts equally refer

⁹ These he considered the four seeds for human virtues humanity (or heart-mind, *xin*), righteousness (*ren*), ritual (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*).

to the ancient reality of legendary moral cultivation, resulting in a one-word-one-reality model of the world.

In contrast to Confucian emphasis on learning the right and appropriate behaviour to enhance moral action, the Mohists argued for a more rationalist account of morality. Mohists are characterized as craftsmen, thinking not from the ranks of people advising kings, but people working and thus offering insights in political and cultural issues from asking if it is practically “beneficial to the people” (Graham 1989: 34). The Confucian attitude to *zhi* as a concept that lead the *junzi* to rediscover the Classics without room for innovation is the basis for their firm critique:

“They [Confucians] say too: “The gentleman [*junzi*] follows, and does not originate.” We answer: “In ancient times, Yi originated the bow, Zhu armor, Xi Zhong the carriage, and Wiao Chui invented the boat. Does it follow that the armorers and wheelwrights of today are all gentlemen, and the four originators all vulgar [*xiao ren*]? Moreover, whatever they now follow, someone must have originated, so everything they follow is the Way of the vulgar man.” (Mo 39.181, Raphals 1992: 53-4, emphasis in original, taken from Graham 1989: 39)

With the Mohists there is a clear emphasis on knowledge as praxis and craft that originates from somewhere and grows through invention to improve the living situation of all people. Neo-Mohists around 300 BCE added an explanation of the nature of language. Language was not primary regarded as normative, stating right action through the rectification of names, but through human abilities to find the root of it (name, *ming*), find knowledge corresponding to the evidence in the object (*shi*), to relate (*be*) names and distinctions to the objects, and knowing how to act (*wei*) with the knowledge obtained (Raphals 1992: 58). In this sense, *zhi* has a practical focus on making the criteria for naming and language intelligible and using them to help to improve society.

As the most radical turn against Confucianist moral ideals of *zhi*, Daoists discard any possibility for true knowledge to be grasped or expressed in language. Their understanding of *zhi* is embedded in a contrary view on its relation to ancient morality and in the dynamics of learning in general. The beginning of Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* (DDJ), for example, starts with an opposition to the Confucian ideal to rectify the names in the Classics:

“The path that can be walked is not the path that lasts; the name that can be spoken is not the name that endures.

Nothingness, the origin of heaven and earth; presence, the mother of all creation.”

(DDJ chapter 1, trans. Liu 2024: 3)

This is a poetic translation, as the translator himself also remarks (*ibid.*: 5). In a literal translation project, such as the ctext database, “nothingness” (*wu ming*, 無名) and “presence” (*you ming*, 有名) are translated as “having no name” and “having a name” (ctext online, DDJ 1). Both transfer a core difference between names and speech. For Confucians, the Classics as ancient texts and its

language reflect a society of legendary moral components that identify the path to return to a stable exemplary society. In contrast, Daoists highlight that names and creation are on a porous ground. Here, I do not aim to enter the discussion but use creation in the sense of an argument for a different state of moral action that is not based on language but on natural dynamics. In this sense, it is not human language but natural order that provides access to knowledge. Raphals also understands this passage as an argument against the Confucian distinctions of names for morality and therefore abandoning the “destructive distinctions” (Raphals 1992: 73). This line of argument is repeated in later chapters, where the DDJ precisely asks to abandon Confucian hierarchical understandings and thus orders of morality:

“Eliminate sagehood [*sheng*], discard wisdom [*zhi*]; the people will profit [*li*] one hundred times over.

Eliminate benevolence [*ren*], discard rectitude [*y*]; the people will return to tender filiality.

Eliminate artfulness [*qiao*], discard profit [*li*], and there will not be thieves and robbers.”

(DDJ 19, trans. Raphals 1992: 76, emphasis in original)

In short, Daoism is set off as a project against Confucian *zhi* as moral action of exemplary people. As Confucians warned against cunning speech to be decisive, Daoists warn against Confucian values as deceiving the true meaning of the Dao: “When cleverness and wisdom emerge, so does deceit” (DDJ 18, trans. Liu 2024: 57). As Mohists also criticized the Confucian notion of *zhi* for not acting (*wei*) in benefit for the people, Daoists are understood to suggest a complete alternative, namely *wu-wei* as effortless action:

“[The rulership of the sage will] empty their minds, fill their stomachs, waken their interpretations, strengthen their bones. Constantly he makes sure that the people are without knowledge [*wu zhi*], without desire, and constantly makes sure that those who know [*zhi*] never dare to act [*wei*]. Act by doing nothing [*wu wei*], and nothing will be unregulated.” (DDJ 3, trans. Raphals 1992: 75, emphasis in original).

“Dao aware govern by emptying minds, filling bellies, weakening ambitions, strengthening bones, sustaining all in the freedom from knowing, from desiring, so that even the crafty dare not to act. Do by not doing, and there is nothing that cannot be done.” (DDJ 3, trans. Lui 2024: 19)

As I continue to argue throughout this thesis, this dynamic between *zhi* and *wu-wei* in classical Chinese texts¹⁰ opens a point for engaging with senses of knowledge/knowing, change and the role of self-awareness in epistemologies in Ancient Chinese philosophy. For a last framework component, we will now look at a possible intercultural point of engagement between Chinese and Western concepts that builds on similarity without reducing the former to fit the latter.

¹⁰ In her explanation of *zhi* in Confucian, Mohist and Daoist accounts, Raphals also continuously refers to notions of *wu-wei* throughout the three traditions; cf. Raphals 1992: xix; 47; 55; 60; 75; 79; 81; 84; 85; 100.

1.3 Knowing-as as an intercultural perspective against reduction

So far, FSE and Chinese philosophical accounts of *zhi* suggest two frameworks to think about different perspectives on knowledge. In FSE, knowledge is contested because objectivism as a standard is not as all-encompassing as it is taken to be. On the contrary, the embedded material and social situation of people point towards social problems that need to be resolved. Furthermore, a feminist standpoint encompasses the feminist aim (or commits to the value) to end social oppression. Daoist, Mohist, and Confucian accounts of *zhi*, on the other hand, do not begin with questioning objectivism. In all schools of thought, *zhi* as knowledge, wisdom, or knowing is related to reestablishing a closer relation to the Dao. What follows, then, is a discussion about the appropriate standards in which a sagely person should act and thus show *zhi*. Therefore, although both FSE and accounts of *zhi* are not committing to objectivism, they do so from different contexts. Bringing two different philosophical contexts into conversation subsequently requires defining their point of engagement.

In the three Chinese philosophical perspectives that will be presented in Chapter 2, their engagement is defined through perspectives that appear to be alike. Karyn Lai, for example, talks about “interrelated angles” (Lai 2016: 101) to which a Confucian account can enhance the debate. Kevin DeLapp defends what he calls Confucian “role epistemology” (DeLapp 2016: 127) as a solution for problems raised against feminist standpoint theory. From a Daoist perspective, Xinyan Jiang highlights the “striking similarities” (Jiang 2014: 147) between the Zhuangzi and Harding’s FSE. Before turning to their specific conceptual engagements in their projects, I pause for a reflection on a shared intercultural ground. On this ground, the conceptual similarities allow both contexts an engagement, without having to mould one tradition into fixed categories of the other tradition. A reflection on such open ground is necessary, because proposing identical aims for two traditions of thought that share different cultural heritage creates dynamics of assimilation of thought or appropriation (cf. Berger & Kramer 2019: 135-6). In this section, I present Michael Beaney’s considerations of knowing-as as “*integrating interpretation*” (Beaney 2023: 83, emphasis in original). I take that his reflection allows for a deeper understanding of the similarity between FSE and Chinese philosophical accounts and sets the tone for further considerations in this thesis.

Knowing-as suggests an epistemological framework in which Mohist and Daoist accounts of *zhi* appear (cf. Beaney 2021: 365; Beaney 2023: 71-3; Beaney 2025: 127-30).¹¹ It is an epistemic state that appears different from the Western epistemological debate on knowing that and knowing how. Both of these accounts, he notes, are encapsulating two meaningful but not all occasions we use

¹¹ Further references to Beaney’s epistemological account of knowing-as appear in section 3.1.

for knowledge. His argument is that there exist more linguistic accounts of prepositions that align with knowledge, such as 'know when,' 'know if,' etc.: "Perhaps some of the forms of knowing expressed by these constructions can be explained in terms of knowing-that and/or knowing-how, but each has its own character and function" (Beaney 2023: 66). Because knowing-that and knowing-how are important concepts in Western ways of knowing, but different concepts are more appropriate for modes of thinking in a different thought tradition, he draws attention to the purpose of letting the different prepositional forms speaking to each other. Following linguistic concepts of translation, he rejects a domesticating interpretation that would reduce Chinese characters of knowing to a knowing-that or knowing-how translation (ibid.: 83). Another suggestion is a foreignizing interpretation, which leaves the key terms phonetically untranslated to highlight that the concepts are embedded in a different context. What he offers is a third option that suggests new ways of conceptualizing a foreign concept into a new conceptual word in the translating language. With this, he suggests that we "are contributing to a deeper understanding both of ancient Chinese thinking and of our own knowing practices" (ibid.: 83). As the new conceptual space is still to be filled with meaning, both traditions are given the theoretical space to inform and agree on an adequate meaning. Together with the initial reflection for intercultural philosophy to reflect on the interpretative dynamics of comparison, Beaney's suggestion gives room to pose questions of bias and premature arrived similarity between meanings.

In contemporary Chinese intercultural studies, Harding's account of FSE is discussed as an "epistemology of cultural diversity" (Lin 2022: 97) that provides insightful resources for cross-cultural communication studies. At the same time, there is no clear equivalent of a Chinese women's standpoint in Chinese women's or gender studies. Emphasis in its formation is laid on similar but not identical concepts such as "women's autonomous consciousness" (Xiaojiang 2021: 71). These engagements with Western feminist theories, while also emphasising fundamental differences in understanding Chinese women autonomously in a Chinese context, opens up the possibility to think of the philosophical engagements with Harding as a conversation partner for further projects in revaluing self-reflective critiques in feminist philosophy. That is at least an optimistic starting point. Because of the openness of FSE to intercultural reflection and the deep connection of knowing with moral action, I have shown in this chapter that this optimism is not built on merely wishful thinking. Defining the gaps in the existing scholarship on Harding and Chinese philosophy will be the next step.

Chapter 2: FSE and Chinese philosophical engagement

Up to this point, there is no fully fleshed out account for an explicit Chinese feminist epistemology, but Chinese philosophical engagements with feminist standpoint theory. Although DeLapp is hinting towards the possibility of “a sub-culture of feminist knowers” (DeLapp 2016: 142) in Confucianism, these ideas are presented as possible future accounts. Two things are taken into consideration from the previous chapter. First, both FSE and Chinese considerations of knowing are not embedded in a Western analytic tradition. FSE emerged as a way of bringing the knowledge of social movements into academic reflection. Knowing in the Chinese philosophical tradition engages with the activity of knowing, i.e., a moral consideration of the adequate action. Secondly, a consideration between two thinking traditions requires a stance that is aware of power dynamics. As ancient Chinese is not the language in which both theories engage, a possible interpretation towards English, already established concepts can assimilate the meaning of both theories too easily. Therefore, a careful consideration of what one wants the engaging concepts to shed light on might establish a situation for a deeper understanding of human ways of knowing in both thinking traditions. In this chapter, the three Confucian and Daoist accounts are mapped out in their engagement with feminist epistemology. By the end of this chapter, the fundamental distinctiveness between concepts in FSE and Confucian or Daoist responses is linked to the perspective of FSE and its social struggles against hegemony.

2.1 Lai: Confucian reliability engaging procedural objectivity

In her engagement with feminist epistemology as a cross-cultural project, Lai defines three angles of Anglo-feminist epistemology that deal with the epistemic subject as knower: “conceptions of knowledge, the production of knowledge, and [the relation between] knowers and epistemic agency” (Lai 2016: 101). Her first angle, conceptions of knowledge (1), addresses feminist responses to analytic conceptions of knowledge, taken as knowing-that/knowing-how distinction. Another prominent presentation of propositional is the form of S-knows-that-p. These concepts are criticized through targeting the ideals of the subject being value-neutral and capable of knowing about the world without subjectivity, assuming a “view from nowhere” (in the sense of Nagel 1986 and Code 1993).¹² Moving to the production of knowledge (2), Lai refers to the feminist accounts of situated knowledge. Because knowledge in feminist situatedness is presented as dependent on the social and political location of the epistemic subject and its relation to a broader community,

¹² An illustrative feminist critique of these two values is Lorraine Code’s argument that privileged epistemic subjects are in the position to imagine a view from nowhere and everywhere without consequences, because the privileged relate to an ideal of autonomy of reason. Thus, through imagination they are able to detach from their position in the world and detach from their subjectivity; cf. Code 1993: 21-3.

the norms through which this agent practices her assertions about the world become central in any feminist epistemological project. Both of these feminist contributions in epistemology emphasise a commitment to locate a knower in their lived situations so that it becomes possible to shed light on the relation between interests, emotions, and power as authority in knowledge claims. Lai postulates a link between both aspects and a Confucian notion of knowledge that needs to be realized and considered in relation to society:

“As we will see later, the Confucian model I propose upholds the view that knowledge must be realised in action. Given that this is the case, epistemological issues in Confucian philosophy centre on the processes of cultivation in order to ensure that individuals are equipped to realise their knowledge optimally in their actions.” (ibid.: 103)

In the third point on knowers and epistemic agency (3), she formulates the contribution from FSE. Here, women’s experiences can contribute to science and epistemology and put into question the fundamental idea that knowledge that derives from different experiences aims to fill one coherent picture about the world. Here, Lai builds on Harding’s account of epistemic agents as “multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory” (Harding 1993: 65) and her idea of strong objectivity to highlight that standpoint epistemology is setting up an ambitious project of marginalized perspectives being stronger than empiricist objectivism. This proposal changes the fundamental directions in epistemology. In her referential points to engage Confucian philosophy with feminist epistemology, she engages with Anglo feminist epistemology in a broad sense, meaning that she refers to feminist-analytic epistemology and FSE, while both proposals concern different emphases in what a feminist concern should deal with. This is illustrated in the different aims for feminist objectivity (cf. subchapter 1.1). Lai links this conundrum to the debate on “procedural objectivity” or “metaphysically-based objectivity” (Lai 2016: 206), the former taking objectivity either as an objective in a method that makes sure that the process of inquiry is not biased, or the latter as an ideal in which a statement corresponds with the way the world is. Lai sets out the important point of engagement, namely that in a focus on procedural objectivity, there is an emphasis on the epistemic agent’s reliability: “agents are deemed reliable when they consistently demonstrate that their actions and behaviours are procedurally appropriate” (ibid.: 206-7). Here, she argues that a reflection on Confucian values can enrich the discussion.

Confucian philosophy discusses the notions of situatedness, epistemic practices and knowledge production to the extent that reliability plays an important role “as a characteristic feature of the exemplary person (*jūnzǐ*)” (ibid.: 207). While highlighting that *zhi* is used in a procedural sense of interacting with society. Here, *zhi* is a defining element of a continuing judgment that someone has become an exemplary person in the community by following a normative-based learning path referred to as the development of behavioural propriety (*li*):

“When we say that Confucius knows *li* (Analects 3.15), we do not simply mean that he knows *how* to act according to propriety. We mean that he knew that to ask questions was to act according to propriety *and*, at that moment, that was *what he did*. Each successful concrete action *is* a case of what it means to know, not just an expression of knowledge-that.” (ibid.: 110-11, emphasis in original)

Her argument is set up from a reading of the Analects to state that by focusing on *zhi* as a principle that is combined with an action in the community and not concerned with justifying facts in the world. In her last section, Lai presents that the dynamic relation between the individual actor in and aligned with the community’s role constitutes epistemic reliability on the person. Since an individual acts in moments that are defined in the community’s norms while maintaining the possibility to express dissent with assertions about truths in the community, Lai stresses the “interdependence of learning [*xue*] and reflection [*si*]” (ibid.: 114, emphasis in original). In this sense, dissent can be enacted by an epistemic agent, if the moment in which he shows his knowledge shows an account that is enacted through a respected process in the community. Thus, the epistemic agent shows reliability to continuously enact the fundamental principles. Further, reliability becomes a key concept to solve the problem of epistemic solipsism. Epistemic solipsism suggests that if the moment of action with its subjectivity is taken into account, an epistemic agent can never reach certainty in knowing that there are more epistemic agents in the world that know what she (the individual) does, or they (the community) do. If an exemplary person is acting in commitment to wider community values, and these actions are consistent over time, her epistemic agency can assert epistemic authority in knowing things while being dependent on the community to know with her that she is acting in regard to knowledge. Change of assertions through learning and reflection, thus could be stated by an individual, but the community changes with her. Reliability can further be distinguished into “episodic reliability” and “longitudinal reliability” (ibid.: 116). This summarizes her view of epistemic agency:

“A reliable agent is so, not simply because she possesses various attributes, nor just because she occasionally demonstrates that her words and deeds are aligned. Rather, she is so because she demonstrates that her communities (word) and actions are integrated, she consistently does so over time, and others have come to rely on her. Reliability therefore focuses on the nexus of situations and agency, *as well as* the place of the agent within her community.” (ibid.: 120, emphasis in original)

In short, Lai offers a solution to the problem of objectivity that can be raised in feminist and further standpoint epistemology. Through considering a Confucian notion of epistemic agency as independent between individual and community, reliability according to the rules for the sage ensures objective quality in the whole process of the sage’s knowing. Procedural objectivity, which already focuses on overcoming the biases in the process of knowing, is thus ensured because it is a community that continuously changes in reflection of a whole past situation. In summary, during her paper, Lai proposes a Confucian version of situated knowledge:

Version 3) *Situated knowledge* is Confucian because any agent needs a concrete situation to show that *his* action is adequate.

Knowledge structures are situated, because

- 3.1 It is the process in which knowledge is realized that is considered in virtuous terms.
- 3.2 It is a practical learning, and put into practice (*xing*)
- 3.3 It sets out the perspective for communities on how to act (e.g. rulers, *junzi*, etc.)

In contrast to the earlier two versions, this version differs fundamentally from definitions in feminist standpoint epistemologies. We do not have a knowledge-that account in the sense of “Feminists know that science is sexist,” and Lai’s whole point is to state that the Confucian understanding takes a “very different route” (ibid.: 111). However, one part of this different route is not addressing the core notion of FSE, namely that it is feminist, informed through the political issues against oppressive structures. Although Confucian political thought is aimed at proposing the most adequate moral action for acquiring principles of harmony, we encounter the discrepancy in the possibility for everyone to act morally and Confucius’ direct scholars were all male. This consideration does not aim to make the quick point that Confucian philosophy is anti-women, as considerable scholarship has already contributed to the complex picture that Confucian values are not a one-to-one translation into Han-Confucian political institutions or imperial realities of women.¹³ Besides the argument that it was feminists who demanded a clear re-evaluation of knowledge assumptions by taking into account marginalized perspectives, and thus that it makes pragmatic sense for Confucianism to engage with feminist theory, because they could be the possibility to listen, to put it bluntly, the feminist possibility in Confucianism is not evaluated through the relation between power and knowledge. By the end of the article, Lai states that “a contribution of Confucian philosophy to contemporary debates is its emphasis on the importance of an environment – epistemic context” (ibid.: 123). Given that Lai starts the Confucian engagement through the question of practicable objectivity, a most feminist favourable reading could suggest that the Confucian importance of an environment. This sets out the basis for epistemic agents to confront themselves with their environment and thus the biases that are stated. Therefore, the connection between Confucian philosophy and a feminist lens for contemporary Chinese philosophy leaves room for speculation. Furthermore, epistemic agency in Confucian philosophy is equated with a commentary on the Analects. This raises the question of whether all Confucian accounts commit to the same epistemic basis as in the Analects. As a contemporary

¹³ See for an engagement with this issue the contributions of Raphals 1998, Rosenlee 2006, Pang-White 2018, to only name a few.

community comes to know about Confucian philosophy through the four Classics, the (Neo)Confucian commentaries and the past of Confucian ideology that shaped classical politics in East Asia, the question of how a Confucian perspective deals with its historicity or historically established biases is added to the theorizing. These considerations will form the basis for further considerations in subchapter 2.4.

2.2 DeLapp: Toward Confucian role epistemology

In his engagement of Confucianism with feminist standpoint theory, DeLapp argues that Confucian philosophy can contribute to solving the problems of hidden essentialism and relativism raised against feminist standpoint theory. Hidden essentialism, or false universalism, is that in a marginalized collectivity, all members share an experience of marginalization as women, thus presuming a shared identity category “irrespective of the interstices with other identities” (DeLapp 2026: 132). Relativism in feminist standpoint theory means that the practice of assuming a shared identity assumes a socially constructed authority of standpoints to justify their knowledge based on their own authority. He proposes Confucian epistemological strategies of justification as a helpful ally to solve both problems.

His notion of Confucian epistemology starts from considering the formation of Confucian ethical agents through expressing knowledge in adequate social behaviour, i.e., one’s role in society. Inasmuch as virtue epistemology focuses on how to assure fairness or open-mindedness in knowledge inquiry, role epistemology focuses on how the role is justified to constitute the knower based on social rules. Or, in his words, “role ethics and role epistemology focus on the features that define the proper occupancy of shared social relationships” (ibid.: 135). Thus, in role ethics, the role that a person has in society comes with a set of moral norms that the person then acts upon repeatedly. He uses the example of friendship and sympathetically listening. Whereas one might classify Sarah as her conversational partner’s virtue as being a sympathetic listener, a conversation with her friend Sarah would already entail a judgment of her virtuous character. Confucius advises to keep virtuous people close and petty people at a distance (cf. Analects 11.21). Confucian philosophy can be viewed as role epistemology because the person’s role itself is regarded as “being *coextensive* with her moral status” (ibid.: 134, emphasis in original).

He finds evidence in the relationship between role and epistemology in Confucianist texts, such as the Analects’ passages on the different roles that Confucius occupied in his life; he is a teacher, a son, a husband, a father, and so forth. In order to be morally exemplary in all these roles, one needs to have a proper balance, like the five Confucian virtues need to be balanced out with each other.

And since *zhi* is one of the virtues of a *junzi*, and being a *junzi* is justified in terms of its practical and real enactment in society, *zhi* is connected to knowing how to fulfil one's role in society without personal benefit: "occupying the role of a good child is the root of coming to know benevolence more broadly (1.2)" (ibid.: 136). In his argument, he refers to both characters of *zhi*, 'knowledge/wisdom' and 'knowing' that appear interchangeably in meaning in classical texts and in which "knowing" is also related to the practice of naming correctly following the study of Classical texts (cf. chapter 1.2). In this sense, a role is primarily defined by naming a relation that holds moral relevance in society correctly and thus justifying one's action as acting according to its moral significance. Or, as DeLapp cites Lai, roles as social names can "ensure that persons have to change to live up to the name they carry" (Lai 1995: 25). With this example of role epistemology, he continues to offer a solution to both problems in feminist standpoint theory. Starting off from gendered roles, they do not entail a hidden essentialism, because the gendered element is related to the role as a relation and not the person. Being a mother then refers to the role as a mother and not being gendered first. Against relativism, he proposes a consideration of roles in light of the Confucian idea of moral authority deriving from a set of balanced values that justify specific roles for a community.

With this, epistemic pluralism as a suggestion for objectivity is located in different justification strategies that are considered for people's experiences occupying a common societal role in different moments, or roles changing in life (ibid.: 138). These change in roles in Analects 2.4 is marked by epistemic markers, as DeLapp highlights: "At fifteen I set my mind upon *learning* ... at forty I became free from *doubts*; at fifty I *understood* Heaven's Mandate" (DeLapp 2016: 141, emphasis in original). Confucian role epistemology thus presents a justification of a group of people in society that act knowingly according to the shared norms that are established in this moral community. He ends with speculating about the possibility of a feminist role epistemology. If a feminist *junzi* is possible (in his reference to the argument raised by Sor-hoon Tan, cf. ibid.: 142), a feminist moral community could be established, which seems to open the possibility of introducing a Confucian concept of gender:

"[p]erhaps so too could an epistemic *junzi* establish a sort of remonstrating sub-culture of feminist knowers. We might even view gender itself as a social role which can change as remonstrance and rectification open up new possible relationships and relata." (ibid.: 142, emphasis in original)

He builds on a distinction between Confucian philosophy and Confucian ideology. His example is the later establishment of the gendered *nei-wai* relation¹⁴ in Confucian society, through which

¹⁴ In this dynamic between changing narratives in the establishment of Confucian ideological state rule in Han dynasty, it is noted that distinctive concepts such as *ying-yang* and *nei-wai* are only fundamentally linked to gender through later commentary on the classical texts. As Rosenlee suggests: "*Nei-wai* as a boundary

women and their roles were tied to heaven-over-men-over-women authority. Still, it is not clear how his account of feminist standpoint theory and Confucian role epistemology differ in their notion of authority in justification. Feminist standpoint theory begins from a critique of predominant notions of androcentric biases defining the authority of which questions to ask in science. Confucian role epistemology does offer a possible solution to hidden essentialism and relativism, since roles are occupied in multiple ways and their key consideration refers back to moral norms, Confucian roles are based on a hierarchical and conservative understanding to learn from the past. How is a 'feminist' notion of Confucianism set up as a sub-culture of knowers, if we take the Confucian notion of rectifying names serious? According to the issue of only naming what is real and committing to the one-world-one-name account of language, it seems that DeLapps possibility for a sub-culture of feminist knowers needs to be present in the Classics. This would imply a rectification of gender as a virtuous name that appears in the Classics.

2.3 Jiang: Zhuangzi and Harding

Following the alignment of a Daoist account with standpoint epistemology, Xinyan Jiang highlights their similarity in the critique of pseudo-universalism in epistemology. She focuses on FSE that commits to the situatedness of knowledge, the epistemic privilege of a marginalized community,. Here, she acknowledges the underlying feminist struggle for women's liberation that is a necessary condition for abandoning the androcentric view. Comparing Harding with Zhuangzi, she highlights the importance of androcentrism for Western culture but not necessarily in Chinese patriarchy (ibid.: 149). She emphasizes the similarity between both in the partial view of reality and the notion of situatedness in both accounts (Jiang 2014: 149). Instead of the a male-centric point of view, she suggests to compare the predominance of a human-centric point of view. In this sense, what enables universalist knowledge claims about society is not associated with or caused by masculinity, but human focus on knowledge as one whole that hinders the acknowledgement of continuous and dynamic change between perspectives. This is linked to Zhuangzi's argument that a thing is 'this' and 'that' at the same time, whereas a perspective on the object can only be 'this' or 'that.'

The Daoist knower is not only aware of her situatedness in society but also of the situatedness of society in the natural universe; "How a knower perceives things is dependent not only on his location in society but also his location in the cosmos" (ibid.: 150). In this sense, not only societal claims appear to be perspectival, but also claims about the world, since Zhuangzi does not rely on

marking between Han and barbarians, or between civility and bestiality, is indeed intertwined with the idea of the differentiation between man and woman (*nannu-zhibie*)" Rosenlee 2006: 76.

an ultimate entity, simplicity or unity in which human knowers lack perfection. Assuming partiality of human knowledge in all senses, then offer a solution to the problem that a standpoint that is formed through the experience of a group who faces injustice and oppression has a vantage point in making knowledge claims about their identity. These identity claims however are not based on the shared technical framework that group members have formed after critical and political conscious engagement with their partiality (cf. *ibid.*: 157). To have a standpoint thus means to be politically conscious about the inequalities that women, the working class, etc. face. Following Jiang, the crux of standpoint theory lies in the reliance on a transcendental truth about standpoints that can be assessed from any knower. Once a standpoint has been established in a world, its truths can be accessed without changing one's location into critical engagement. Thus, the truth of the standpoint becomes without requiring the knower to engage with political consciousness. For Zhuangzi, "shifting one's perspective or standpoint (they are the same [...]) without changing one's actual epistemic location is impossible" (*ibid.*: 158). This, for Zhuangzi, involves breaking with epistemic authority as such and dissolving the very notion of an epistemic agent: "an epistemic agent seeks the proper distinction between things. However, a Daoist sage does not distinguish things nor even describe them" (*ibid.*: 160). Although the criticism towards Harding seems valid, Jiang also criticises that Zhuangzi's complete perspectivity is reliant on the ultimate truths, such as that everything is partial or that non-distinction is the best way for understanding life. In the end, she defends a position of epistemic agency that is able to reflect on false universal truths:

"The fact that people can communicate across genders, races, and cultures and reach many mutual understandings suggests that there are universal human concerns and needs. Such common ground makes perspectival and nonperspectival knowledge claims united in many cases and justifies the existence of universal truths and values. To be critical of one's own society and to improve societal conditions requires admitting the existence of both perspectival knowledge and universal truth. To admit the former will enable us to see that many prevailing norms in our society are not universal truths, but mere ideologies to serve the ruling class." (*ibid.*: 163-4)

This reveals a critical stance towards fundamental scepticism about everything man-made. Complete scepticism would not be consistent with the fact that people engage in dialogue and communicate with each other from the most incommensurable perspectives. In this sense, the incomprehensible has the potential to become a comprehensible shared truth. Such a unifying perspective shows promise in light of the addressed relativism that Harding engages with. But she does not address how the action (or non-action) relates to Daoist sages changing the epistemic location. Furthermore, Xiang addresses that Harding is not completely leaving aside all Enlightenment commitment to universal truths. Harding writes in awareness of the marginalization of African and Latin American knowledge systems. And her rejection of 'all Enlightenment' does not go that far as to reject 'all culture' or 'all history,' for there she still makes a distinction between the postmodern tensions that motivate her thinking and FSE that seeks some common ground to

build pluralist frameworks for science. Does Harding's reestablishment of feminist objectivity as strong objectivity thus fail because FSE is situated in Western discourse? To this, Harding acknowledges that feminist self-critique has to be done in careful consideration of postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

It is therefore still an open point if Western and Ancient Chinese philosophy share a critical objectivity on knowledge and if that can be brought together with a notion of "feminist" inquiry. On the other hand, there is the question of how the feminist perspectives have informed the view of the texts used and their interpretation. What has not yet been explored in depth, for example, is whether this discussion of epistemic agency and (feminist?) epistemologies is also hinting towards the discussion of different focuses on the relationship between knowing and gender. Feminist discussions between Confucianism and Daoism are happening.¹⁵ This raises the question for this thesis of whether and how changes in interpretations of gender provide an indication of different epistemological positions in Chinese philosophy, and if it is an adequate idea to think of these changes in terms of a possible Chinese feminist epistemology, or epistemologies in the plural.

2.4 On Comparing Confucian-Daoist theories with feminist science

By focusing on Harding and FSE, the three authors chose a conversation partner that is both compatible and incompatible. She is compatible because of her openness to engagement and critique. Her view demands that knowers learn to reflect on their situation in society and how these situations of marginalization can inform struggles, which inform standpoints that can be learned about. She is incompatible because her position is situated within a different patriarchal framework. She is, after all, operating in a Western feminist framework that addresses sciences. As Xiang rightfully reminded us, androcentrism and the focus of science as certainty over nature has fundamental different roots in Western philosophy and epistemology. This builds the fundamental difference between the two traditions, namely, Chinese philosophy and a feminist branch of philosophy of science. For such a comparative study, the starting point of forming the comparative grounds and directions of inquiry is the first point of reflection. Rošker puts it like this:

"First, we have to have a good understanding of both philosophical discourses that we wish to compare, including all of their developmental connotations as well as all contextual, conceptual, and historical settings in which both of them are placed. Secondly, we are faced with the problem of objectivity, which is hard to achieve since every comparison stems from one of the comparands (subjects of comparison), which serves as a norm, while the other is perceived as a kind of co-speaker or mirror image that serves as a measurement of similarities and differences. The first comparand is

¹⁵ See, for example, Dai 2022 or Lee Tan 2024.

therefore the one that places criteria for the evaluation of these similarities and differences, while the other is merely an object of this evaluation.” (Rošker 2021: 159)

As this thesis engages with scholarship on two sets of theory from different traditional backgrounds and takes the third feminist notion as a possible link between both studies, there is a need to highlight one’s prioritization of the criteria on which norms the texts speak to each other. As Rošker continues: “The results of such a comparison will be completely different if we place Zhuangzi's or Plato's philosophy as the main criteria” (ibid.: 159).

All three texts addressed flaws in Anglo feminist accounts of standpoint epistemology. All take fundamental texts of Chinese philosophy as conversational partners to rethink certain issues in FSE. Lai enhances reliability as a Confucian notion of trust that exemplifies the deeper epistemological connotations FSE states to build on when Harding promotes strong objectivity. DeLapp counters relativism and the possible hidden essentialism of standpoints being built on different identity categories, and promotes Confucian roles to enhance a sense of an interrelated standpoint in society. Jiang takes Zhuangzi’s perspectivist account to counter that it is necessary to address androcentrism to reject universality. In order to respond to the conversations, I take Harding’s central reliance on a feminist perspective and identify possible tensions in the three answers with Harding:

- 1) Lai: To what extent (if anything) is reliability related to a “feminist” norm?
- 2) DeLapp: How can a feminist role as a Confucian subculture in society be established following the norm of rectification of names?
- 3) Jiang: If a feminist commitment is not central for criticizing universalism without androcentrism, why does Zhuangzi end by saying to Harding that we can end androcentrism to build a shared moral norm afterwards?

Answering each of these questions already provides enough material for an entire paper. In what follows, I focus on why it is appropriate in the Chinese philosophical context to get back to thinking of Harding’s account as precisely a feminist account. I take these three different missing connotations with the importance for Harding to have a conversation that is concerned with establishing different “feminist” notions. With this, we are able to address Rošker’s second notion of comparison: the problem of objectivity. If we consider the ‘feminist’ notions to be twofold, (a) as challenge of implicit biases epistemic inquiry and (b) as an active participation to enable change in society, I argue that revising Chinese philosophical accounts does not provide us with answers to Western feminist questions but enables us to have a deeper understanding of why Harding as a feminist is an adequate conversation partner for Chinese philosophy.

Chapter 3: Knowing Harding as a Feminist

With the growing discourse on Western feminist theory, the idea of feminism translated into “principles of women’s rights (女權主義)” but was not used for classifying all women’s struggles against oppression in China (Dai 2024: 67). Together with contextual Chinese dynamics regarding the change of the situation for women, e.g. through the cease of imperial patriarchal structures, or the relations of women’s liberational approaches in the socialist political system, the ‘women’s question’ that Harding raises towards Western science as interrelated to feminist inquiry, the Chinese context reveals a further distinction that I propose as ‘women’s question’ and the ‘feminist question.’ The first deals with the appropriate concepts to talk about women’s experiences, the latter with the different feminist theories and practices that appear in the Chinese context. With this, Chinese women’s studies emerged as a complex project to both make sense of the meaning of the perspectives and situations of women in past and present moments (such as Yu-Ning 1992) and the critical engagement with Western feminist theories and concepts as guiding, enhancing, or differing experiences. Li Xiaojiang’s critical reflection of the concept “gender equality (*nannüpingdeng* 男女平等)” is an example of the latter (Xiaojiang 2021). In this chapter, I build on the aforementioned possibility for a mutual enrichment of different engaging conceptual frameworks. Specifically, I argue that asking about the question of how Harding is known as a feminist enables a deeper reflection of both knowing traditions. I will do this by offering three suggestions. First, she can be known as a feminist because she can be adequately identified within her debate without having the other part committing to a feminist standpoint. Second, she can be known as a feminist because her epistemic agency as a feminist does not imply epistemic privilege in Chinese philosophy or movements. Rather, the consideration of different notions of the effort in action invites both a broader inquiry into knowing and action. Third, she can be known as a feminist because this opens the question of perspective in how Chinese and Western feminists possibly relate to each other.

3.1 Knowing-as and feminist perspectives

For Harding, the multiple experiences that feminist perspectives focus on offer a reconceptualization of sciences as continuous, open and renewable fields:

“Neither scientific nor philosophical positions should claim complete closure. Every claim and every position should be left open to further discussion as new conditions and perspectives emerge.”
(Harding 2015: 121)

Harding takes science as the institution and contemporary paradigm through which we advance knowledge about the world and our relation to it. Because feminist, Afro-feminist, or Marxist

struggles have shaped the condition in which questions have been raised, she suggests that her idea of science as situated in contextual struggles and the goal to provide one true story about the world do not align. In Chinese philosophical discussions, the texts that are analysed suggest the necessity to be open to rebuilding the contexts in which knowledge has been thought of. Such a hermeneutic process of understanding the text relies on taking language as partly constructing the world. In a very recent paper, Beaney and Lai suggest an awareness of the situatedness of language, its variations, and contexts in knowing about knowledge through different thinking traditions as “deep epistemology” (Beaney & Lai 2025: 1357). With an openness to varying foci that communities have for knowing, FSE as knowing through social struggle can be recognized. In this section, I propose a first consideration of how Chinese philosophy knows Harding as a feminist without having to commit to its own feminist philosophical perspective.

For this, we draw back on Michael Beaney’s account of knowing-as as knowledge that is grasped under a certain integrated standard. He argues that *zhi* in Chinese philosophy works as connecting something appropriately to a model (Beaney 2021: 365). For Beaney, knowing-as is an epistemic state to describe Mohist and Daoist accounts of thinking. He builds his argument, among other reasons (for more reasons, cf. Beaney 2023: 68-73), on the dialogue between Zhuangzi (Daoist) and Huizi (Mohist) on happy fish:

Zhuangzi 莊子 and Huizi 惠子 were wandering atop a bridge over the River Hao 濠. Zhuangzi said: ‘The minnows have come out and are swimming around freely and leisurely, this is fish being happy.’ Huizi replied: ‘You are not a fish, whence do you know the happiness of fish?’ Zhuangzi said: ‘You are not me, whence do you know that I do not know the happiness of fish?’ Huizi replied: ‘I am not you, therefore I do not know you. You are not a fish, so [my point about] you not knowing the happiness of fish holds.’ Zhuangzi said: ‘Let’s go back to your original question. When you said, ‘Whence do you know the happiness of fish?’, you asked me the question already knowing that I knew it. I know it here, over the River Hao.’ (Zhuangzi 17, trans. Guo 2004: 606-7)

There is not enough space to reconstruct his argument, but to highlight that knowing-as is aspectual in the sense that it is built on rules that are present in sharing a perspective: “he [Zhuangzi] knows the fishes’ happiness *as like* the happiness that he and Huizi both experience in their roaming together” (Beaney 2023: 75-6, emphasis in original). His reading suggests that the dialogue is presenting an argument between Zhuangzi and Huizi. Zhuangzi won because Huizi was not able to deny that both of them shared a similar perspective in that moment.

Building on Beaney, Lai draws on the concept of knowing-as for Confucian philosophy. Here, to know a sage as sage sheds light on the epistemic process of how the Confucian sage is known: “To know Confucius as sage – as opposed to merely regarding him as one – requires that he be correctly identified as sagely” (Lai 2025: 1464). In this context, identifying Confucius as sagely requires shifting the focus from attributing the qualities to a composite of learning to identify. I suggest that

this also applies in light of the Confucian notion of *zhi* as 'knowing others' (brought up in section 1.2). In the passage, wisdom as knowing others was described through two connotations: knowing to apply the straight to the crooked and being wise in choosing good ministers. Because being born with unchangeable knowledge is stated as nearly impossible, learning from the ancients and their practices seems to be the best practice one can follow. On the other hand, knowing who to choose as minister reveals a type of knowledge that is based on a controlled inquiry for making decisions in momentary situations. 'Knowing others' is thus not best explained as having an objectual account of 'knowing a good minister' that is then turned into a propositional judgment in the sense of 'know of a good minister' or 'know that X is a good minister,' but that the knower reveals a relation of their virtue into the judgment. It is a presentation of their awareness of what they learned, being aware that to be born with an unchangeable virtue is extremely rare. Additionally, it knowing-as reveals information about the knower: They are appropriately connecting their knowledge of a person to an adequate model. The model is adequate because it has been recognized as an important name in Confucian reality.

Through both a Confucian and Daoist framework, we have seen that knowing-as is an adequate schema in Chinese epistemological claims. Thus, knowing Harding as a feminist in Chinese philosophy reveals the possibility to learn how to take her account adequately as a Western feminist account. Or to share a conversation with her. With this Harding's reliance on feminist movements having the power to inform a standpoint can become a central focus in discussion. This, however, does not mean that it is the only one informing what a feminist standpoint is. Her actions are met in engagement and then possibly identified together. This opens up question how such epistemic agency is to be thought of. I propose to look at the dynamics between varying conceptualizations of agency, specifically between action and non-action for knowing.

3.2 Knowing different Chinese philosophical standpoints of action: *zhi* and *wu-wei*

Epistemic agency has been a recurring topic throughout the chapters. For FSE, situated knowledge and the critique of the anthropocentric universal enable the possibility to approach thinking through the fragmentation of standpoints. In Chinese classical philosophy, epistemic agency has been related to a process of fundamentally reflecting one's moral agency as navigation in the world, either social or natural. With this, acting knowingly in the world is related to cultivating virtue (*de*) or having a moral sense – this moral sense being navigated around the question of *dao*, the appropriate principle alignment to form connections with the world and people around. Thus, knowledge (*zhi*), action and virtue (*de*) appear as interrelating concepts. In addition to that, varying

concepts regarding action appear in Chinese Philosophy. One recurring theme was action as *wei*, highlighted by the Mohists as focusing on the effects that Confucian sagely action has on the world. In addition to that, both Confucian and Daoist texts also include accounts of *wu-wei*, translated as ‘non-action’ or ‘effortless action’ (cf. Slingerland 2003b). In this section, I focus on the possibility of connecting *wu-wei* to considerations of *zhi* if we ask the question about if effortless action is part in the process to grow our epistemic agency. And what this means to reconsider Chinese philosophy in discussions on epistemic standpoints. I argue that taking different notions of ‘power’ into account, in which *wu-wei* is set to work without effort, enriches the comparison between feminist critiques of institutional power (i.e., knowledge as produced in science and in science as an institution).

In both Confucian and Daoist contexts, *wu-wei* appears as a reference to connecting with Heaven (*tian*) through walking in the Way (*dao*), i.e., the adequate connection of people to grow virtuous action. In Confucian philosophy, *wu-wei* appears in respect to governance or a process of role development. In the discussions on political thought in the Mencius, *wu-wei* is presented in the different interpretations of relations that are described through the action between ruler and people, in short, the ideal of a “wuwei 無為 sage-king” (Lai 2023: 286) that is discussed around the lines of Confucian democracy. Here, the question is who holds power in Confucian governance, building around the tension of the power granted to the ruler only through Heaven (power of rulership originates in the Mandate of Heaven) and the power between ruler and people. Although Mencius does not show a direct use of the term *wu-wei*, and Lai neither gives a definition of what such sage-king entails, passages that are related to the righteous behaviour of a ruler entail action that is guided through qualities of moral righteous consideration to stabilize the socioeconomical situation, such as Mencius 1A7. Here, Mencius is asked by the king of Qi about the virtue and thus competent sway of a king and replies, “the love and protection of the people; with this there is no power which can prevent a ruler from attaining it” (Mencius 1A7, trans. Legge 1895: 4). Followed by an explanation how a king shows compassion to what he sees and still is able to make a decision (in sparing the ox whose suffering appeared to him but deciding to offer the sheep), this ability to act is distinguished to “not doing a thing”¹⁶ (Mencius 1A7/5/1, trans. Legge 1895: 5), which is not described through *wu-wei*. Thus, *wu-wei* is related to the action of a sage-king, but it is an action that happens out of reflection and not the king’s innate desires:

“By weighing, we know [*zhi*] what things are light, and what heavy. By measuring, we know what things are long, and what short. The relations of all things may be thus determined, and it is of the

¹⁶ 不为者与; also translated as ‘those who do not act.’

greatest importance to estimate the motions of the mind. I beg your Majesty to measure it.” (Mencius 1A7, trans. Legge 1895: 6)

For this thesis, this opens the first axis of power related to *wu-wei*, namely that sage rulership is a concept that is discussed in Confucian political philosophy. In this the sage-king is advised to act through mindful measuring, to have a mind that is not moved by selfish desire. Thus, an ideal governmental action is directly tied to the moral justification of a ruler in position, navigated through a relationship between ruler and people and a relationship of action that is classified in a relation of knowing and following sages.

In addition to this, Slingerland provided a Confucian account of how *wu-wei* has been incorporated in the Analects. He presents the ruler-ruled relationship in the passages where Heaven governs the natural world. In the social world, the sage-king is the representative of Heaven, governing over people. Here, Shun is described as ruling “by the means of *wu-wei*” (Analects 15.5, trans. Slingerland 2003a: 44), exemplifying the action of a sage-king whose rule aligns all people in harmony “through the power of De” (Slingerland 2003a: 44). In a comparison to Analects 11.26, Slingerland defines Confucian *wu-wei* as a state of showing one’s human virtues effortlessly that is combined with moments of joy instead of hard study or fully devotion to one’s societal role. In this sense, to act in accordance with *wu-wei* implies an action in accordance with a natural possibility of virtuous action. This goes in line with the basic possibility of everyone to cultivate virtuous qualities. Another side of *wu-wei* also reflects in the Confucian idea of growing as a person, which appears in Analects 2.4:

The Master said, “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood [*zhi*] Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.” (Analects 2.4, Slingerland 2003a: 9)

Building on the passage that action in *wu-wei* implicates a core naturalness in virtuous behaviour, this passage suggests that the core situation of a person in society does change with age. Slingerland’s discussions on *wu-wei* did not include this passage, but interestingly, for this thesis, a notion of *zhi* is implied in the process of growth of what is considered easy through different ages. With this, understanding Heaven’s Mandate, and thus *zhi*, is linked to a natural way of growing one’s virtues through time. This would imply rethinking, for example, Lai’s notion of reliability, since what appears to be the case is that the reliability of a role changes with the age at which the role is attained, or the continuous years in which the role is fulfilled. At the same time, it reveals another dimension of feminist standpoints. If women’s experience is informing the problems in science, then how are women’s experiences through time or across multiple generations informing problems? Can these experiences be linked to a shared growth of women aging in society? Clearly not, as this would imply an essentialist notion of processing gender through time. Or it would posit

Confucian philosophy in front of the feminist problem of how gender roles (as wives, as mothers, etc.) change through aging in society. Maybe the argument lies in the middle, suggesting not to take the age in the passage of the Analects literally, but to introduce a notion of change in one's natural behaviour through time. At the same time, feminist standpoint theory can ask the question about time: At what time, or order of processes, is a standpoint obtained? With this, we see that FSE is already facing different questions if Chinese philosophical accounts of action are thought at the centre of knowledge.

On the other hand, Chinese philosophy itself is ambiguous about the fundamental notion of *wu-wei*. Daoist philosophy, in contrast to Confucian philosophy, highlights an idea of action that decreases anthropocentrism and considers the relation between humans and the cosmos. The discussion of *wu-wei* in the Zhuangzi is directly related to an account of knowledge, namely, in the layer of discussing the debate between the normative value of Mohists and Confucianists about who is right and wrong. Zhuangzi addresses this discussion of right or wrong as an innate limitation of the whole idea of knowing Dao, because any knowledge of Dao and thus virtuous behaviour lies beyond language:

“The unity of the Way is something that virtue can never master; what understanding does not understand is something that debate can never encompass. To apply names in the manner of the Confucians and Mohists is to invite evil.” (Zhuangzi 24 17-8, trans. Watson 2013: 229-30)

Following this, the limits of language also imply a full account of *wu-wei*. As Slingerland notes, *wu-wei* is described as the state of the Daoist sage who empties the self in the sense of understanding distinctions without the normative values that conventional words are used to describe the distinctions; the sage “is rather able to understand that these distinctions dissolve from the point of view of Heaven” (Slingerland 2003b: 191). Relating to this, not knowing (*wu zhi*) plays a significant role in Daoist philosophy. Wisdom, as the Confucian virtue, is either discarded as obscuring and not enhancing living according to the way (cf. DDJ 19), because of the hierarchy of Confucian-instated governance, beginning in the Warring States period. Besides that, the linguistic limitations in conceptualizing knowledge of the Dao as Way to be virtuous are recognized. Here, *wu-wei* is questioned as a universal right behaviour of virtue. In highlighting the point of view of Heaven, we come back to see the unity of distinction in the object itself, i.e. the ‘this’/‘that’ distinction that is valid in different natural perspectives, but not valid in the view of the object. Relating this to epistemic standpoints, the knowledge that is highlighted as going beyond language is thus not concerned with discerning right from wrong values, but with reestablishing the dynamic relationship that distinctions have for humans to realize interaction. Or as Yang, Qin and Schrader put it:

“Only after losing our initial biases do we learn how to care for and love each other. However, this care and love will not bring us back to the fundamentally genuine nature. Instead, we will interact with each other with care and love.” (Yang, Qin & Schrader 2023: 55)

Knowing a different standpoint in Daoist philosophy is thus related to the question of the universality of the language in which one would describe one’s perspective and justification of behaviour. Instead, what is highlighted is the dynamic approach between two parts that inherently enables the distinction in the world.

3.3 Knowing-as and the problem of objectivity

As a final step of this thesis, I consider transforming knowing Harding as a feminist into the famous happy fish dialogue of the Zhuangzi. It presents as follows:

Amy and Beth are taking a walk together, talking about feminist standpoint theory.
Amy said, ‘Look, there is Sandra Harding. She is a great feminist.’
Beth said, ‘You’re not Harding, how do you know that she is a great feminist?’
Amy said, ‘You are not me, how do you know that I don’t know that Harding is a great feminist?’
Beth said, ‘I am not you, so certainly I don’t know you; you are certainly not a Harding, so the case is complete for your not knowing that Harding is a great feminist.’
Amy said, ‘Let’s go back to the beginning. You said, ‘How do you know Harding is a great feminist?’, in asking me which you already knew I knew it; I know it from our shared conversation.’

Analogously to Beany who suggests that the happy fish dialogue can be transformed into a dialogue about Chinese logic (cf. Beany 2021: 355), I propose the story on Harding as feminist. Here, the conversational partners share a conversation about Harding. Here, both share the root perspective in their conversation about FSE. Raising knowledge about feminism is shared between the two conversational partners, knowing that it is only presenting one of many possible perspectives.

In this last section, I argue that all these considerations bring us back to the question of how to discuss terms of feminist objectivity in an encounter of intercultural philosophies. There are multiple in the sense that fundamental problems, methods of thinking about them, or societal problems they encounter are set in different background assumptions. That does not mean that both theories or modes of inquiry cannot be understood in relation to each other. It just requires an openness to let both backgrounds inform the directedness of the conversation.

In the complex situation of women's inquiries in the Chinese context, different approaches have been distinguished for the engagement with feminism. Spakowski differentiates between three lines of argumentation that respond to the travel of Western theory: universalism, particularism and complex semi-stable answers (Spakowski 2021: 40-1). Universalism means that women around the

globe can share a mutual perception towards the goal to end oppression. Particularism means that local self-definitions are the only possible definitions for local solutions. The third complex of semi-stable answers is “a plurality of responses” that explicitly name the interdependencies and how temporal grasps of an issue, such as gender, form both the contextual nature and contradictions in naming it to reveal why dialogues along these specific tensions have still supported results (ibid.: 41).

Especially the third semi-stable strategy that takes feminist engagement as a productive encounter between feminist situations appears fitting for Harding’s vision of a plurality of sciences. However, it remains to be worked out how we can best understand the situatedness of knowledge that arises from feminist tensions and productive mutual understanding, for example, on the different importance or understandings of gender in society. Next to that, it can be asked whose feminist values are centred. With this, the issue at stake is: Is the active engagement with feminist norms necessary to articulate justification for a standpoint, and if so, to what degree and to what notion of ‘feminist’ self-reflection? In other words, since our aim is to bring them into dialogue with each other, there is a question to ask about whose perspective we want the texts to say something to each other. With Spakowski’s three lines of Chinese answers to engaging with Western feminist theory, three lines of response emerge:

- A) There are shared universalist feminist norms to end social disadvantages to inform knowledge because of acting against the dominant view.
- B) There are particular feminist norms that arise as different local solutions to contextual problems. These norms can be shared and compared.
- C) There are feminist norms that arise acknowledging the tensions of a particular situation with a widely shared solution to a problem that deals with feminist issues.

In all three cases, different justifications for objectivity can be defined. In the first case, objectivity is solid because there is a common denominator: the feminist standpoint sees the commonality of a social movement that seeks to end oppression. In the second case, objectivity is almost permeable. Since each context follows its own logic, what is chosen in the context itself and filled with meaning there can be described as feminist. In the third case, objectivity is a tense term. Even in dynamics, a definition is secondary and gives way to the reality for which the feminist label is used. Such a purpose can, for example, mean a difference between being heard or not being heard or acknowledged in power dynamics. Here, the power of objectivity is related to the discursive power. Or it can point towards a resignification of feminist hopes between cultures and in light of global power imbalances. Such a suggestion has been made by Dai through the concept of solidarity between feminist struggles. In a philosophical discussion of possible future accounts for encounters

between Chinese-American feminist solidarity, Dai proposes an approach of transcultural feminist philosophy. Drawing on Epstein's notion of transculturalism (Dai 2020: 142 ff.), she identifies transculture as the continuing possibility of cultures to interact with each other in multiple ways and create cultural identities as shifting categories over time and in contact with each other (ibid.: 142). She motivates such transcultural thinking for feminist theories that do not assign minority or majority groups full rights over cultural values:

“Rather, values of the whole cultural world are adapted and revised as a result of transcultural communications, through which each culture recognizes advantages and disadvantages of its value systems and is more open to further communication.” (ibid: 163)

In short, her argument presents a core intention to move away from fostering insurmountable divisions between ‘feminist’ values while at the same time not suggesting that values that arise in different societal frameworks collapse into an imagined unity or shared sense of liberation or oppression. Her project for a feminist lens is more focused on the action that it provokes. This means that different perspectives interact with each other through respect and thus build possible spaces of communication through actively engaging with each other.

Given the background of U.S. feminist influence in global feminist movements and on institutions, Dai's account addresses the issue of hierarchy of feminist accounts that are measured as similar or different to U.S. feminisms and argues for a network of interacting feminist voices with their own historical trajectories. To capture this multiple logics within global flows, her account builds on a historical pluralism of the concept of women that measures difference through dialogical and not global imperial encounter.

Conclusion

“Walking in a company of three, I will surely find a teacher.”

(Analects 7.22, trans. Slingerland 2003a: 71)

The aim of this thesis was to understand the argumentative pattern in Chinese philosophical engagement with feminist standpoint epistemologies. I have done so by reconstructing the two important theoretical implications: (1) Harding's notions of FSE and (2) Chinese philosophical accounts of *zhi*. As a possible further connection or distinction between both accounts, I have engaged with the tensions that Chinese struggles for women face in light of the global traveling of Western feminist concepts. Throughout the thesis, I have argued that (3) a ‘feminist’ notion is a connecting element in the theoretical accounts. This is because challenging the (more or less)

missing debate between Chinese philosophy and the participation in social movements to inform the power of contributing knowledge allows for an ongoing conversation between the two contexts. In this thesis, I propose that FSE, which, as Harding suggests, can take into account different standpoints from different world philosophies, allows to establish the discursive power to enter into dialogue with internal and external tensions to Western philosophy. This comes with the importance to reflect on the dominance of Western feminist notions. Taking this reflection seriously, I argued that an ongoing conversation can only be established if both parties participate in the theoretical engagement without bending their different assumptions because of a predominant guiding norm. Thus, the main step of my argument relied on showing that Chinese philosophical Confucian and Daoist accounts are open to the possibility of knowing Harding as a feminist, and are thus open to letting the conversation set around questions of feminist notions in their accounts.

I have argued for three suggestions in which being part of social struggles can be considered as a conversational point between FSE and ancient Chinese philosophies. This has been done through suggesting Beaney's idea of integrational interpretation as a ground for intercultural philosophical engagement. Building on his account of knowing-as, which suggests knowing analogously to the situation one is engaging in. It has to be acknowledged that the point made in this regard is a reflection on working out the engagement as an open conversation. By providing this semi-solid ground that is based on a transcultural encounter, or an intercultural ground for deeper reflection, more questions came through. One prominent example is how Confucian rectification engages with the possibility of a feminist role in society, or if such rectification needs to be considered through a Daoist reflection on language. Regarding the open conversation, it has to be stated that Chinese Buddhism has not been part of this conversation. I hope that this can be established in the future. Nonetheless, I hope that such further research will soon enrich the landscape of Chinese accounts of knowledge and action, as *zhi* may be.

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