Principle, Things, and Four Stances of Chinese Moral Philosophy

Yiheng Ding (丁一恒)

University of Glasgow

1. Introduction

In *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2023)[1], Wang Hui unfolds two interrelated threads for us to understand the historical transition of China from the pre-modern to modernity. One reveals the institutional change in the socio-political realm, transitioning from a society based on enfeoffment (*fengjian zhi*) in the pre-Qin period to an empire characterised by centralised administration (*junxian zhi*) during the Tang–Song eras, and eventually to the modern society that started to emerge from late Qing times. The other thread concerns the paradigm shift in the intellectual realm with particular emphasis on moral (including social and political) philosophy – or 'worldview' in Wang's terms. The paradigm shift transitions from the worldview of the rites and music (*liyue*) to the worldview of heavenly principle (*tianli*), and finally to the worldview of universal principle (*gongli*). This essay reframes Wang's rich depiction of China's intellectual history through the evolving relation between the concepts of 'principle' (*li*) and 'things' (*wu*). Based on Wang's work, this essay identifies three fundamental stances of Chinese moral philosophy and suggests the possibility of a fourth kind.

2. The Concept of 'Principle' and 'Things'

The meanings of 'principle' and 'things' varied across different historical stages, intellectual traditions and even individual thinkers. In an early version of the book, Wang (2004: 50)[2] expressed concerns whether pure conceptual analysis can pinpoint the exact definitions of these two concepts. Thus, Wang's approach is instead investigating both classic texts and the historical contexts from which the two concepts emerged and evolved. Acknowledging his approach, I believe it is still possible to extract certain persistent meanings of these concepts. Even if not comprehensive, this could assist analytical efforts to engage with Wang's work, including those in the later sections.

2.1. **'Principle'**

The notion of principle (*li*) as an abstract, transcendent fundamental order of the universe, rather than referring to knowledge of specifics, began with Zhuangzi (110). Later, Wei-Jin dark learning (*xuanxue*) further consolidated its metaphysical quality (121). However, it wasn't until the Song dynasty when the worldview of heavenly principle was finally established that the concept of principle was systematically constructed. During this time, 'the school of principle created a cohesive system of order' according to which 'heavenly principle formed the original body of the universe, the norms of the myriad of things,

---

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all references in the text are to this work.
[2] This essay also references content from an earlier Chinese edition of Wang Hui's work, published in 2004 under the same title. It consists of *Book I* and *Book II*. The 2023 English edition, published by Harvard University Press, covers the content of *Book I*, while *Book II* remains untranslated.

and the origin of morality' (26). 'Principle' is the manifestation of the heavenly, ultimate, immanent, yet differentiated order of the universe and the world (122).

Coincidentally, since the European Enlightenment, there had been an endeavour to theoretically elucidate a set of principles of the universe, nature and human society. These principles were believed to be universally valid and binding for all rational and reflective beings, regardless of their different cultural, religious or political backgrounds. Those Western views were introduced in China in the late Qing times, and illuminated the worldview of universal principle. Kang Youwei's idea in *True Principle and International Law* (*shili gongfa*) could be seen as an example of this line of thought – though the ultimate order Kang believed in is not heavenly, but scientific (788).

Although the concept of principle in the two worldviews originated from two very distinct sources, it converges upon several commonalities. First, 'principle' represents a view of order in history of Chinese thought. As an assumption shared by both the worldview of heavenly principle and the worldview of universal principle, there exists an ultimate order that transcends the specific historical, social and political contexts. Diverging from the order is seen as non-ideal, and such order is manifested or expressed through 'principle'.

Second, the ultimate order expressed through principle is omnipresent. It encompasses both the natural world and the morality of human society, from mountains and rivers, grass and trees, to social and political practices. In the following discussion, to elaborate the stances of Chinese moral philosophy, 'the moral aspect' of the order and principle would be more relevant. In fact, the moral aspect is also what usually receives greater emphasis in the history of Chinese thought. The original purpose of the conceptualisation of 'principle' in Chinese history of thought is less to explain mechanisms behind natural phenomena but more about supplying the ever-changing social and political practices with moral meaning. This purpose is most evident in the establishment of the worldviews of heavenly principle – I'll return to this point quickly.

Third, the order is not to be understood as an order of the static. Rather it is inherent in historical transformation per se. As such, the order not only persists through changes but also explains, guides and transcends change itself. The intellectual construction of the concept of 'propensity' (*shi*) can be seen as an example of this understanding. The concept played an important role in the worldview of heavenly principle by explaining how the ultimate order brings about dynamics and historical changes – sometimes radical changes – in a very natural way (204–206). In the worldview of universal principle, Yan Fu's conceptualisation of 'evolution' (*tianyan*) probably played a similar role in explaining the historical change. 'Principle' transcends change and explains change by making the various historical relationships and their transformations into a conceivable and natural process (Wang 2004: 62).

2.2. 'Things'

Wang's investigation of 'things' (*wu*) finds that the concept incorporates a broad range of meanings. In general, 'things' belongs to the actualising categories (27); it is about the empirical world (211), but it does not necessarily equate to 'physical objects' or 'facts' as commonly used in modern intellectual discourses. As shown in Wang's work, 'things' being exclusively about objectivity or facticity is merely a contingent status of a certain historical stage, i.e. the worldview of universal principle. A rough survey of the book indicates that the meaning of 'things' converges upon three cohorts.

First, specific material and less material objects, such as water and fire (105), grass and trees (234), tools and impediments (234). A particular historical figure or a group of people can also be instances of things, such as the tyrants Jie and Zhou, vicious people, or infants (125). Some other specific objects are

less material but are also regarded as instances of 'things', such as patterns, images, and numbers (103), medicine (190), and, furthermore, specific types of interpersonal relationships, such as the relationship between father and son (106).

Second, certain processes, sometimes with emphasis on the subjective agency involved. Within the framework of the Northern Song School of Principle (*lixue*), 'things' sometimes refers to events (105) or affairs (235). The subjectivity or agency involved in the process is sometimes especially emphasised, where 'things' can refer to human conduct (105) or actions (217) as well. So, roughly, the concept of things is about what takes place and what is done.

Third, particular norms, including social customs and political institutions (57). Here, 'norm' is largely understood in sociological terms, as what it is in specific social and political contexts, not as what ought to be. For example, in 'investigating things and extending knowledge' (*gewu zhizhi*), the 'things' to investigate often include specific and particular norms. To gain knowledge, one would need to elevate those norms into general moral principles (234). After the collapse of rites and music (*li beng yue huai*), norms are typically seen as what need to be critically examined and evaluated. Thus, 'things' in the sense of 'norms' often receive more emphasis in the history of Chinese thought.

The meaning of 'things' is not clear-cut. Sometimes, it can be as vague and general as any 'phenomenon' before our eyes (105). However, what remains consistent is that 'things' tends to refer to what is particular, specific, and highly context-dependent. In contrast, 'principle' is about the ultimate and omnipresent order that transcends particular contexts. On this framing, the relation between principle and things is a relation between an ultimate order believed to exist, and the ever-changing phenomena presented in front of us plus the practices we engage in.

3. Three Stages and Philosophical Stances

Depending on the different philosophical stances taken in the principle–things relation, Chinese history of thought can be divided into three major stages.

3.1. The worldview of rites and music

The first stage is marked by the worldview of rites and music in the pre-Qin times. China of that time was a premodern society where social lives were arranged along ritual regulations, community compacts (*xiangyue*) and clan law (*zongfa*). It was an organic community (*gemeinschaft*) as Tönnies (2001) described it, or a 'ritual-custom-based society' (*lisu shehui*) as Fei Xiaotong (1996: 42) put it. It was organic in the sense that most social arrangements came into being and functioned in a very natural and spontaneous way. Although the time was marked by a political system of enfeoffment, political life was not so distinct from social life. The former was understood as a process of 'guiding the people towards norms' (*shuai min xiang fang*), where 'norms' referred to local customs and rituals. Thus, political life of that time was essentially about 'letting things establish themselves in accordance with their own nature' (*ge zheng xing ming*) and the central virtue of political governance was nonaction (*wuwei*) (Chen 2014: 170).

In such an organic society, the social practices, institutional arrangements, what is naturally present in front of people and what people naturally do already represent a ritual order. "Natural and systemic classifications are completely uniform, and as such, natural judgment and systemic judgment are also completely uniform" (215). Since aspects of life and world are naturally uniform, there is not much

conceptual awareness of an order that transcends what people see and do; there is no abstract principle above the specific contexts. "The institutions of rites and music themselves were the action of Heaven and the Will of Heaven, with no moral origins existing beyond ritual" (64). As a result, a concept of things as the complementary side of the concept of principle does not exist either. The stance is that 'things' is simply indistinguishable from 'principle'; the two also are naturally uniform and the important conceptual distinction is unrecognised.

3.2. The worldview of heavenly principle

However, this status dramatically changed from the Han Dynasty onward. As China transitioned into an empire, the centralisation of power became a major driving force of Chinese history. With the consolidation of the institution of 'commanderies and counties' (*junxian*), central administrative power increasingly came into tension with the local ritual-and-custom-based society, leading to the decline of the latter. This shift provoked discontent among intellectuals, because the new centralised institutions primarily served administrative functions rather than embodying the rich and profound moral meanings that ritual regulations, community compacts and clan law once carried (166–167). Consequently, what people saw and did became empty forms that no longer naturally represented the ritual order. 'Things' gradually drifted apart from 'principle', and a cleavage emerged between the two.

Out of discontent, intellectuals endeavoured to restore moral meaning in social practices and political institutions. The endeavour was essentially about establishing systems and frameworks to moralise the social and political presence that would otherwise be amoral. The construction of the worldview of heavenly principle during the Song Dynasty represents a climax of this endeavour. Although the ideal of the Three Dynasties of Antiquity and the desire to return to rites and music were often articulated, the worldview of heavenly principle took a fundamentally different stance from the worldview of rites and music. The former presupposed a conceptual cleavage between principle and things, whereas the latter was unaware of the conceptual distinction.

The acknowledgment of the disparity between the heavenly order on the one hand, and what people see and do on the other, allows the worldview of heavenly principle to maintain a critical distance from the actual social and political arrangement of the time (32, 106). However, this stance introduces a unique issue that the worldview of rites and music did not need to address: if 'things' no longer naturally represent the order, how can 'principle' be revealed, and how can the order be accessed?

The solution was to view 'principle as lies within affairs' (*li zai shi zhong*), as something that exists in the process of practice (32). The heavenly principle is a singular principle, yet it could manifest in various things with differential expressions (*li yi fen shu*) (233). However, principle does not necessarily manifest on its own; and therefore, additional effort was required to reveal it. It is upon this stance came the method of 'investigating things and extending knowledge', for only if the principle is inherent in things is it possible to parse out the knowledge from things. Otherwise, the method would simply be an infeasible myth. In light of this, principle and things were not regarded as logically separated in the worldview of heavenly principle. The inquiry into principle and the inquiry into things are homogeneous. The analysis, reasoning, or study of the two are profoundly intertwined. Or in Wang's (52, 151, 208, 211, 218, 235, 290) terms, 'is' and 'ought' were not completely separated. With the stance of 'principle in things', the heavenly order becomes accessible and knowable.

3.3. The worldview of universal principle

From the Qing dynasty to modern times, driven by pressure of international competition, survival of the nation became the primary driving force of China's history. In this stage, a modern society (*gesellschaft*)
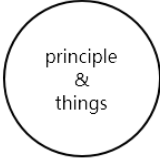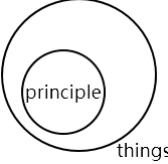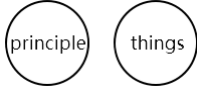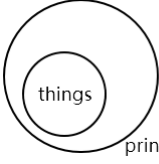
(Tönnies 2001) started to form, which Fei (1994: 42) called a 'law-and-reason-based society' (*fali shehui*). This more modern form enabled greater social mobilisation to cope with the external pressures and international challenges China was facing.

Against the background of this emerging modern society, three significant transitions occurred in the intellectual realm. First, individuals began to be viewed as atomic legal persons defined by a set of rights and obligations, rather than as part of the world under heaven (Wang 2004: 50, 63, 1277, 1283). Consequently, the mysterious nature of the heavenly principle was removed. 'Principle' increasingly took on a public rather than a metaphysical nature, referring to collective will and shared living within social organisations (Chen 2014: 158–159).[1] Second, modern Western science emerged and spread, becoming the dominant new belief of the time. Its focus on observation and experimentation led to the equation of 'things' with pure facts or facticity.

Third, as the meanings of 'principle' and 'things' changed, their relation also evolved. This can be seen in the prominent academic discourse on the differentiation of knowledge, subjects and disciplines. Inspired by the modern division of knowledge into science, aesthetics and society (Wang 2004: 1283), a division between 'scientific facts' and 'moral principles' began to emerge in Chinese intellectual discourse. In the earlier version of the book, Wang (2004: 1300) carefully investigates several main contributions to this grand division: including Du Yaquan's distinction between economy and morality, Zhang Shizhao's separation of material science from morality (2004: 1306), and Zhang Junmai's differentiation between science and the 'view of life' (*rensheng guan*) (2004: 1332–1333, 1360).

That is not to say the view of the ultimate order was abandoned, nor was the order split into several. Rather, in the new worldview, the inquiry into principle and inquiry into things had become heterogeneous, independent realms of study. Unlike in the worldview of heavenly principle, it was no longer possible to parse out moral meaning from practice. Principle and things, morality and practices, become parallel dimensions. Principle and things can still interact – for example, moral principle is still capable of evaluating things. Nevertheless, in this interaction, moral principle is something external to things – it neither lies within things metaphysically, nor shares a homogenous inquiry with them. Using Wang's terms, in this stage of Chinese history of thought, 'is' and 'ought' eventually became separated. This is probably the philosophical stance that most people in this modern time would find utmost intuitive.

The philosophical stances of the three worldviews can be summarised in the following chart. It may be heuristic to imagine the relation between principle and things as the relation demonstrated by the two circles.

Worldview / Principle–things Relation	Rites and Music	Heavenly Principle	Universal Principle	A Fourth Kind?
Conceptual Distinction	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Logical Separation	No	No	Yes	No
Philosophical Stance	Undistinguishable	Principle in things	Principle external to things	Things in principle
Heuristic Image				

4. The Fourth Kind

The stances of 'principle–thing relation' are not exhausted by the first three worldviews mentioned above. This implies the analytical possibility of a fourth kind, and if such a fourth kind were to exist, it would likely adopt the stance of 'things in principle', where the two are conceptually distinct yet not completely logically separated. It is the mirror stance of what the worldview of heavenly principle has taken.

To flesh out the stance of this fourth kind more concretely, let's consider the theoretical efforts on 'moralisation of things' that derive from philosophy of technology (Latour 1992; Peterson and Spahn 2011; Verbeek 2011).[2] For Latour (1992), technological devices, material things and artifacts, certain designs and arrangement – which, from the perspective of Chinese thought, all belong to the category of things – can influence actions in a manner similar to a script in a play or movie, which dictates what characters should do or say. For example, speed bumps that force drivers to slow down, and cars that won't start without seatbelts being worn. Latour points out that these influences are more profound than we think.

If Latour focuses more on the causal relations between things and moral actions, a relatively recent development argues for a constitutive relation between things and morality. Morality is not solely a human construct but also incorporates artifacts, designs and the arrangement of the environment in which human beings act or interact (Verbeek 2011). To illustrate this constitutive relation, choice architecture – or 'nudging' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Sunstein 2014; Sunstein 2016) – makes a helpful case. Choice architecture is a behavioural science-informed technology that has been widely adopted in governance and social policy across the globe in recent decades. It realises morally optimal actions through subtle psychological mechanisms by delicately designing or arranging the things around us. For example, placing mirrors on buses and trains increases self-awareness, encouraging honest behaviour and reducing ticket evasion. Displaying posters with images of watchful eyes in public spaces reduces littering by creating a sense of being observed, prompting more responsible behaviour. A man who wants to quit

smoking might design his working environment in such a way that cigarettes are always kept out of sight. This reduces visual cues and triggers that can prompt cravings for cigarettes.

In these examples, there is clearly a causal relationship between the intentional arrangement of things and the actions taken under those arrangements. But there's more to it. When the man uses choice architecture instead of solely relying on willpower, the decision-making process becomes more complex and indirect. While the decision to quit smoking starts in the man's mind, he then 'outsources' part of his intentionality to the things and surrounding environment by actively designing them. These things and arrangements later nudge him to resist the temptation for smoking in the relevant situations.

On Verbeek's (2011) view, the decision-making process with choice architecture is partially carried by things, and the moral agency is distributed between humans and things. Of course, it is not to say that things become full-blown moral agents, but that humans and things contribute to moral actions and decisions together, forming a hybrid moral agency – which, without the counterpart of things, would not function. In this sense, things can be seen as a constitutive part of moral agency.

From the perspective of principle (*li*)–things (*wu*) relation, the theoretical efforts on moralisation of things likely represents a philosophical stance that resembles 'things in principle'.[3] I believe, it is at least conceivable in a philosophy for 'things' to be integrated into a structure of morality, or the moral aspect of 'principle'. It would be unrealistic to fully develop such a philosophy in this essay. However, if such a philosophy were successfully established, Wang's work would suggest that it holds a unique and significant position in the history of Chinese thought. It might potentially open a vast new territory for Chinese moral, social and political philosophy.

Is this merely an exciting hypothesis, or perhaps the reality of the current world, in which technology has permeated every aspect of our lives and influenced our patterns of thought so deeply, has preliminarily indicated a historical context for such a new type of philosophy to emerge? Thus, the fourth stance is not only a theoretical potential but is also substantialised by the social background and driven by the historical forces of our time? Reflecting on these questions invites not only the efforts of moral philosophers but also concrete contributions from the fields of intellectual history.

Notes

[1] Here, Chen offers an interesting interpretation of the term 'universal principle' (公理, *gong li*). In classical Chinese, the term 'universal' (公, *gong*) can also be understood as a legitimate form of 'public' (共, *gong*). In other words, when 'public' (共, *gong*) attains legitimacy, it becomes 'universal' (公, *gong*). Thus, 'universal principle' essentially concerns the legitimacy of the public sphere. It concerns the public nature of the newly emerged society. This interpretation effectively connects Wang's insights on the worldview of universal principle with the socio-political reality of China in the early modern era.
[2] To be clear, this will not exhibit a ready case. The aim is to help us conceive how 'things in principle' could characterize a moral philosophy.
[3] For a recent Confucian contribution to the topic of 'moralisation of things', see Wong, Pak-Hang and Wang, Xiaowei eds. (2021).

Bibliography

Chen, Yun 陈赟 (2014) 'The transition from the worldview of heavenly principles to the worldview of universal principles: On Wang Hui's discussion of Chinese modernity' (从天理世界观到公理世界观的转换——汪晖关于中国现代性的论说), in He Jixian 何吉贤 and Zhang Xiang 张翔 eds. *Exploring Chinese Modernity: Reviews of Wang Hui's Academic Thought (Vol. I)* (探寻中国的现代性：汪晖学术思想评论集(一)), Beijing: Oriental Publishing House, 152–171.

Fei, Xiaotong (1996) *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society: A translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*, eds. G. G. Hamilton and Z. Wang, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latour, Bruno (1992) 'Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts' in W. E. Bijker and J. Law eds. *Shaping technology/building society*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 151–180.

Peterson, Martin and Andreas Spahn (2011) 'Can technological artefacts be moral agents?', *Science and Engineering Ethics,* 17: 3, 411–424.

Sunstein, Cass (2014) 'Nudging: A very short guide', *Journal of Consumer Policy,* 37: 4, 583–588.

Sunstein, Cass (2016) *The ethics of influence: Government in the age of behavioural science*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Thaler, Richard and Cass Sunstein (2008) *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Tönnies, Ferdinand (2001) *Community and civil society*, trans. M. Hollis, ed. J. Harris, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul (2011) *Moralizing technology: Understanding and designing the morality of things*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wang, Hui 汪晖 (2004) *The rise of modern Chinese thought* (现代中国思想的兴起), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing.

Wang, Hui (2023) *The rise of modern Chinese thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wong, Pak-Hang and Xiaowei Wang eds. (2021) *Harmonious technology: A Confucian ethics of technology*, Oxford: Routledge.