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Wisdom and Foresight in Chinese Thought: Sensing the Immediate Future

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the problematic of foresight in traditional Chinese thought, articulating it with current developments in the epistemology of futures studies, planning theory, and strategic management. It is argued that in Chinese thought the answer to the question "Can the future be predicted?" depends on the forecasting horizon: whereas the immediate future can be sensed and taken advantage of by immersing oneself in the evolving situation, the remote future is fundamentally unpredictable. These dual answers are entrenched in discussions of what constitutes wisdom, opening up productive spaces of encounter between the problematic of foresight and the problematic of wisdom.

Keywords: Distant future, Immediate future, Propensity of things, Epistemology of futures studies, Wisdom, Strategic management.

"The man of wisdom knows how the subtle and incipient forces work" (Cheng Yi)

Introduction

"Is it possible to predict the future?" stands as one of the questions that has underwritten much of Western thought, with answers that have covered the whole spectrum from epistemic optimism (Kelly, 2016) to epistemic despondency (Taleb, 2007). The topic is intrinsically complex, which means that the answers will always remain contested and subject to rounds of qualifications and rebuttals (Aligica, 2003; Peter & Jarratt, 2015; Phillips, 2007; Piirainen and Gonzalez, 2015; Tuomi, 2012; Vespignani, 2009, 2012).

As a contribution to this perennial debate, this paper aims to show that the literature on wisdom in ancient Chinese thought (e.g. *Book of Rites* [An, 2000]; Chu Hsi's *Learning to be a sage* [Gardner, 1990]; Confucius' *Analects*, 2003; *Dao De Jing* [Ames and Hall, 2003]; *Guanzi* [Jianyue, 2005]; *The Huainanzi* [Major et al, 2012]; *Mengzi* [Van Norden, 2008]; *Mozi* [Johnston, 2010]; Sun Zi's *Art of War* [Mair, 2007]; Wang Yang-Ming's *Instructions for practical living*, 1963; *Zhuangzi* [Ziporyn, 2009], etc.) offers a useful standpoint from which to address the question.

To be sure, ancient Chinese thought encompasses a wide variety of intellectual lineages with their own distinctive positions (e.g. Confucianism, Daoism, Chan Buddhism, etc.). Moreover, the ongoing discovery of old manuscripts and their incorporation into scholarly exegesis means that the details of what we know about this tradition of thought keep changing (Bae, 2012, 2014). To compound this problem, ancient texts are notorious for their ambiguity and polysemy, which allow for multiple, sometimes even contradictory, interpretations. Specialized academic journals such as *Philosophy East & West*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Early China*, and the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* constitute, therefore, an important resource for those readers who wish to pursue the topic of internal differences within ancient Chinese thought. In this paper, the focus is on a specific common thread that can be detected in some of the intellectual lineages of traditional Chinese thought, as revealed by the synthetic work of sinologists such as Barry Allen (2015), François Jullien (1999, 2004), and Albert Galvany (2015).

Impending future versus Distant future

Ancient Chinese thought provides a dual answer to the question "can the future be predicted?", by saying that the distant future is impossible to predict, whereas the immediate future can be sensed through a heightened situational awareness. Wisdom is thereby understood both as the grasping of the futility of trying to predict the distant future and as the ability to be acutely aware of one's surroundings in order to sense the propensity (or momentum) of the situation so as to be attuned to its direction of becoming. This acute awareness requires of those who want to sense the immediate future to "vanish into things" *ziran*, 自然 (Allen, 2015). Vanishing into things is an attempt to gather knowledge that goes against the grain of Western epistemology. Instead of operating on the Cartesian assumption of a dichotomy between the subject of knowledge and the object to be known, Chinese thought recommends a form of self-effacing, of erasure of one's boundedness to the point that the subject of knowledge becomes one with the situation or environment. It is this merging, or vanishing into things that affords an attunement with the immediate next steps of the unfolding of a given situation. Wise individuals can therefore control the shape of the future by taking advantage of "shi" 勢 (the propensity of things[1], Jullien, 1999, 2004) so as to seem to achieve outstanding results with minimum effort, thus fulfilling the ideal of "wu-wei" 無為 (effortless superiority through non-action[2]):

> *The genius of wise knowledge is to see problems before they are problems, when they are still but tendencies, still virtual, and to evade them by that minimal intervention Chinese tradition lauds. The challenge to wisdom is to…vanish into things. To vanish into things is not the metaphysical dream of contemplative transparency before finally finished forms. To vanish is to mix. The sugar vanishes into the water, not gone, merely rendered invisible, while endowing its matrix with new tendency. To mix is to mix well…vanishing means becoming (more) internally related. What becomes imperceptible offers no resistance to the mixing that redistributes it. Fluently translated, its form is a phase, its identity experimental. We vanish into things when what they do, their economy, becomes indistinguishable from what we do, our vitality. We vanish by synthesis, symbiosis, and synergistic evolution. We mix well, not losing ourselves, despite losing boundaries that seemed to separate us, and make us think we were subjects confronting objects. The only self to lose is one that was an obstacle to apprehending the incipient and virtually invisible, hindering a resonant rapport with the circumstances that ultimately determine our fate. Vanishing, we become more extensive, complex, integral, and integrally effective, but also softer, not more dramatically powerful, and better at avoiding problems than solving them (Allen, 2015, p. 231).*

Two corollaries of this epistemological position about the limitations of forecasting immediately become apparent. Firstly, foresight cannot be achieved through a cold, calculative, objective, and distant stance. It is not an intellectual exercise. One cannot sit aside and contemplate where the world is going. Instead, foresight presupposes being in the middle of things, with them, even inside them. It requires a participatory position rather than a contemplative one. This first corollary resonates with recent theoretical and methodological efforts by List (2006) and Ramos (2006) to apply the principles of action research to futures studies. Secondly, because the distant future is impossible to predict and only the imminent future can be sensed, there is a premium on the agility of agents in a given situation. Depending on the specific type of situation at hand (stable, chaotic, edge of chaos, disaster; see Phillips & Su, 2013), often there is limited time for careful and elaborate planning of one's response to change. In such cases, as one senses where the situation is going, one needs to quickly improvise a response that fits the situation. Agility, resourcefulness, and the moral courage to decide in the heat of the moment often separate those who succeed from those who fail:

> *One who does not anticipate does nothing premeditated, does not calculate what is coming in order to act preemptively. Instead one waits and responds to things as they arise… Wu wei effectiveness requires an aptitude for the subtle signs of incipience, the beginning or becoming of things, discerning points where development remains pliable and can be inconspicuously diverted. Such an understanding could be called foresight or foreknowledge provided there is no connotation of divination. It is not prognostication, which merely utters future fact and may be right or wrong but not wise. The knowledge active in wu wei effectiveness knows how to improvise on the future, discerning and responding synergistically to its incipience (Allen, 2015, p. 24).*

This discussion of agility and responsiveness in ancient Chinese thought speaks to recent research in strategic management that attempts to establish the boundary conditions within which organizational flexibility provides a competitive advantage (Phillips & Tuladhar, 2000; Schilke, 2014; Wilden & Gudergan, 2015). Thus, in a path-breaking study that is in dire need of replication, Stieglitz, Nils, Knudsen, and Becker (2016) distinguish three dimensions of environmental dynamism (frequency of change; direction of change; and magnitude of change) and find that flexibility yields superior performance only if the respective dynamic economic context of the firm is "characterized by persistent trends and by large, infrequently occurring structural shocks" (p. 1854). If, however, the economic context of the firm is characterized by "frequent directional changes…with fleeting opportunities" (p. 1854) the competitive advantage accrues to "inert organizations that restrict exploration" (p. 1854) because they can leverage the benefit of consistent focus on those actions that yield good average payoffs "independent of environmental volatility" (pp. 1854).

To summarize the argument so far, we have shown that in some strands[3] of traditional Chinese thought long-range predictions are seen as unattainable whereas attunement to the imminent future is deemed possible to the extent that one is capable of "vanishing into things" *ziran*, 自然 (Allen, 2015). The short-range foresight that can become available to the sage does nevertheless provide comparative advantage if one has the agility and quickness of mind to beneficially react to the situation as it unfolds.

Wisdom and Foresight in Chinese thought: unanswered questions

Unfortunately, there are a number of persistent questions that are not answered in this tradition of thought (Mittag & Mutschler, 2010). Chief among them is the provision of a clear rationale of why long-range forecasting is unattainable. We can only speculate as to what this rationale could

be. The more distant the forecasting horizon, the lower the correlation between the present and the future. To put it in terms of systems dynamics (Sterman, 2000), over the short spans of time, the stocks of the system dominate its dynamic, whereas as those spans of time get stretched, the flows of the system (inflows and outflows) become the main drivers of its dynamic. Whereas these attempts at providing a rationale rely on Western concepts and disciplines (systems dynamics; Sterman, 2000), sinologist François Jullien suggests a more fundamental reason why long-term forecasting does not appear as a preoccupation in Chinese thought: one cannot discuss the possibility of predicting the distant future unless one has the 'distant future' available as a concept to begin with. In Jullien's (1999, p. 211) own words[4]:

> *Although Chinese tradition is clearly familiar with the notion of an immediate future – the future that is already hinted at in the present moment and that the current evolving process cannot fail to bring about – it seems to have no place for any idea of a pure, abstract future.*

Indeed, much of the ancient Chinese literature on anticipation and forecasting reveals that the future is customarily understood as that which is about to happen, that which is brewing in the present situation, that which is in the air, or in the offing. This circumscribed understanding of the future as impending or imminent, or immediately adjacent to the present, is reflected by the related Chinese concepts of *zheng* 徵 and ji 幾 . Thus, a quote from the Han commentary on the *Zhouyi* – the oldest part of the *I Ching*/Book of Changes – says that the *ji* 幾 (= the incipient) "is a hint of movement from which one can see in advance *impending* fortune. Exemplary persons having seen the incipient are aroused to action without waiting to see what happens" (in Allen, 2015, p. 25; emphasis added). Relatedly, the concept of *zheng* 徵 (= revealing signs) is "an ingredient that makes it possible to infer the real state of an entity…[and] is frequently used…to refer to precursory factors or symptoms that offer *premonitory glimpses of a coming emergency*" (Galvany, 2015, p. 22; emphasis added).

A second question left open in traditional Chinese thought pertains to the size of the geographical unit to be forecasted. One can foresee the immediate future of a situation by immersing oneself in it and sensing its unfolding from within. But from a geographical point of view, a "situation" remains an awfully vague descriptor. It is one thing to say that one senses the situation at a family dinner table and quite another to say that one senses the investment situation in Silicon Valley. The first situation can be apprehended through a single panoramic act of perception, whereas the second cannot. Chinese thought is unclear as to the geographical limits or scalability of 'the situation' and this fact further restricts the depth of insight futurists, planners, and strategists can hope to glean from it. The way forward, I think, is to articulate this concern with the sociology of occasions (Clemens, 2007; Wynn, 2016) and with the geographical literature on the concept of scale (Herod, 2010; Lloyd, 2014; MacKinnon, 2011; Marston et al, 2005; Moore, 2008; Neumann, 2009), especially considering geographers' theoretically-rich engagements with the problems of forecasting (Haggett, 1994; Anderson, 2010; Amin, 2013; Simandan, 2002, 2010, 2011a-b, 2016, 2017, 2018).

More pointedly, the following five brief vignettes contrast the attainability of sensing the imminent future (minutes to months) with the apparent impossibility of knowing the distant future (years to decades) across situations defined along a range of geographical scales:

1. Interacting with a person: if one is in the middle of a conversation, one has a good sense of where the discussion is going and of how good the relationship is thanks to an ongoing stream of linguistic, emotional, and bodily cues that provide real-time feedback (Clark, 2013). However, how will my interaction with this person be ten years from now? Will we still be friends? Will we still be alive to begin with? Will we still live in the same city? The distant future of interpersonal

relationships is clouded by too many uncertainties and imponderables that emerge from the interplay of chance, choice, and chaos (Rescher, 1998).

2. Urban dynamics: I can see from the window of my office several construction workers finishing work on the last few floors of an apartment complex. I can reliably expect that in a matter of weeks or months the building will be finished, people will be moving in, and the local patterns of traffic and shopping will be slightly altered (Wohl, 2016). However, how will this city of mine be changed ten or thirty years from now? Future buildings that might appear by then will be the results of dreams and projects that have not yet occurred in the minds of those who by then will have had those dreams and projects. Hard to guess demographic patterns will affect city dynamics in close connection to the vagaries of political and economic activity (see Grossmann & Haase, 2016).
3. Oil futures: If one watches the news and hears that the interviewed OPEC leaders are optimistic about reaching agreement on quotas at their still-ongoing meeting, one can expect the stock market to price the good news immediately, in a matter of minutes to hours, as reflected in higher oil futures (Shiller, 2003). However, how can one tell the fate of oil prices ten years from now? Too many sets of interdependent and unpredictable political, economic, and technological variables will shape that price and they cannot be fathomed with precision in advance (Calvert & Simandan, 2010).
4. Industrial location: A given number of particular companies are located at a given moment in time in a specific region. Pervasive processes of regional path dependence mean that it is not particularly impressive to predict that tomorrow or next week or next month those companies will still be there (Martin & Sunley, 2015; Simandan, 2011c, 2012). The economic incentives and regulatory contexts that have shaped their locational decision do not change overnight, and when they do change, economic agents react to the new context with some unavoidable delays (to take in information, to decide, to implement the new decision; see Simandan, 2017, Yeung & Coe, 2015). However, who can predict with accuracy the pattern of industrial location in the same specific region ten or twenty years from now? The world-economy is dynamic and the "gales of creative destruction" of capitalism will occur in unpredictable patterns, themselves often triggered by unpredictable technological breakthroughs (Hudson, 2016).
5. Social movements: When a social movement (e.g. "Occupy") is active and begins to make the headlines, it makes sense to assume that it will be carried forward for a while by its own momentum, by the attention it gets from the media, and by the unavoidable delays involved in mounting an effective resistance against such a movement (Nicholls, 2008; Solingen, 2012). However, what will be the fate of such a social movement ten or twenty years from now? Will it become dormant? Will it cease to exist altogether? Will it have succeeded in its mission? Will its agenda become part of the new social mainstream? Too many imponderables affect social change: how social movements fare depends on critical political junctures or windows of opportunity that are constituted by chance alignment of events (Soifer, 2012; Walder, 2009).

Taken together, the five vignettes suggest that, from the personal to the structural, accurate and precise long-term forecasting is not possible because uncertainty becomes the dominant dynamic the further we peer into the future (Derbyshire, 2016, 2017; Hill, Datta & Acar, 2015; Rescher, 2009). This view needs to be located and appreciated not only in the aforementioned context of traditional Chinese thought, but also within the futures studies literature, with its sensitivity to different epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies (see Bergman, Jan & Jonas, 2010; List, 2004; Brand, 1994;) as well as to the strength or weakness of emerging issues (see Hiltunen, 2006, 2008; Molitor, 2003; Rossel, 2012).

Wisdom and Foresight: articulating Chinese thought with Western scholarship

On a more positive note, traditional Chinese thought on the epistemic limits on our ability to predict the future is remarkable for the explicit link it forges between the problematic of wisdom and the problematic of foresight:

> *…the sage is able to distinguish himself…thanks to his capacity of foresight (xian zhi, xian jian)…This visualizing of the incipient (wei meng), of the abstruse (ming ming), of what is still lacking a completed form (wei xing), is the feature that defines and singles out the wise man…for the person with superior skills of perception, these minuscule, discrete, almost indiscernible elements contain and give prior notice of the unfolding of a series of circumstances which, once they…crystallize into a definitive form, no longer permit any kind of intervention". (Galvany, 2015, pp. 166-167).*

The readers familiar with the futures studies literature on weak signals (Hiltunen, 2006, 2008) and emerging issues analysis (Molitor, 2003) have likely noticed an uncanny resemblance with the foregoing: indeed, we may say that the Chinese probably invented an early form of emerging issues analysis, a form shaped by a moral epistemology of wise leadership for harmony and the social good (see also Galtung & Inayatullah, 1997).

By way of contrast, as recent work on Western conceptions of wisdom has shown (Simandan, 2005a-b, 2011d, 2013a-b), in Western cultures the definition of wisdom in terms of the ability to predict the future is almost never clearly articulated. Instead, the focus tends to be on understanding wisdom as a balancing act (e.g. Sternberg, 2004), or as a type of expertise in the art of living (Kunzmann, 2016), or as a "special kind of virtue" (Kitcher, 2016, p. 117). Traditional Chinese thought highlights the fact that one cannot claim to be wise if one isn't well-versed in the ability to read situations and adjust to their imminent futures by tapping into *shi* 勢 (the propensity of things):

> *At the end of the whole chain of connections which accounts for the great process in which the world is engaged, the term "propensity" [shi] designates both the particular circumstances characterizing the various stages in the process and the particular tendency produced in each case. It is just such a "propensity" that brings the slightest potential for existence to concrete fruition at the first hint. At the most embryonic stage, the tendency toward the fullness of actualization is already latent. It is this tendency that one must examine attentively from the very beginning, from the very first hint of its existence, for it gives us certain information regarding the evolution of things and provides us with a dependable basis for success. Attempting to act upon the physical or social world without going along with the tendency objectively implied in it and governing its development would be vain and therefore absurd (Jullien, 1999, p. 223).*

This explicit link merits further articulation with recent developments in planning theory (e.g. Innes & Booher, 2015; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2017), strategic management (e.g. Chen & Miller, 2015; Gavetti & Menon, 2016), organizational studies (e.g. Chen, 2014; Mathews and Tan, 2015), intelligence studies and risk assessment (e.g. Aven, 2016; Clark, 2016; Feduzi & Runde, 2014; Heuer, 1999), affective forecasting (Hirsch, Raymond & Jordan, 2011; Lorini & Castelfranchi, 2006; Quoidbach, Gilbert & Wilson, 2013), and futures studies[5] (e.g. Kwakkel & Pruyt, 2013; List, 2004; Poli, 2010, 2011; Vecchiato, 2012) because we often understand the fruitfulness of foresight in terms of its promise of making us wiser (e.g. Ramos, 2015). More pointedly, one needs to warn against the risk of overstating the originality and distinctiveness of ancient Chinese thinking about foresight of the impending future (see also Raphals, 1992, 2003, 2013). In Western thought, many

of the same themes analyzed in this paper have surfaced in a variety of often unrelated intellectual contexts and under the guise of different labels. In Western phenomenology, the notion of "protention", definable as "the socially located feel for the immediate future" (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 913) has been extensively deployed in the work of Husserl, Schutz, and Merleau-Ponty, only to be recently co-opted as part of a more comprehensive sociological theory of anticipation that studies coordination and disjunctures among three modes of future making: protensions, trajectories, and temporal landscapes (see Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). In complexity theory, Stuart Kauffman has proposed the concept of "the adjacent possible" (Kauffman, 1996) as a way of stimulating thinking about the opening up of the imminent future to a whole new range of options in the wake of each social or technological innovation. In the field of human factors, Mica Endsley has launched the notion of "situation awareness" (Endsley, 1995), which has subsequently been developed into the study of inter-individual and intra-individual differences in the degree of attunement to unfolding, complex, rapidly-evolving situations. In social theory, Robert Dodgshon has drawn together performative approaches to propose "geographies of the moment" that study "the specious present not just as the window through which we sense *all* times, but also as the window of experience through which we sense change" (Dodgshon, 2008, p. 312; see also Hodgson, 2013). In strategic management, Giovanni Gavetti has elaborated a behavioral theory of strategy that brings to mind the aforementioned portrayal of the Chinese sage, to the extent that superior outcomes are seen as the result of one's ability to quickly recognize, legitimize, and act on apparently unattractive, but in fact undervalued situational opportunities (Gavetti, 2012). Finally, in the field of futures studies the problem of distant-future forecasts is sometimes framed as a mere technical wrinkle (e.g. the injunction by Armstrong, Kesten, & Andreas, 2015, p. 1724, to "modify trends…if the forecast horizon is longer than the historical series"), whereas more fundamental limits to predictability are admitted by Slaughter (2002, p. 493) who prefers "understanding the near-future environment" and by Kaivo-oja, Katko and Seppäläet (2004, p. 531, figure 2), who deem the near future as the realm of forecasting, the medium-term future as the realm of scenarios and simulations, and the distant future as the realm of mere hope. Mendonça, Pina e Cunha, Kaivo-oja and Frank (2004) do not focus on the differential predictability of near versus distant futures but instead propose a "wild card management system" composed of a weak signal methodology "to take into account those wild cards that can be anticipated" (p. 201) and of "the nurture of improvisation capabilities…to deal with unanticipated crises" (p. 201). Counter-intuitively, Denrell and Fang (2010, p. 1653) use analytical modeling to expose the hubris of forecasting, by revealing that "an accurate prediction about an extreme event…may in fact be an indication of poor rather than good forecasting ability" (see also Tetlock & Gardner, 2016).

For one final example of resonance between Western ideas and ancient Chinese thought about wisdom and its relationship to forecasting the immediate present through attention to subtle, incipient signs, consider this advice from the *Laozi* ("*Yu Lao*", in Galvany, 2015, p. 17): "Set about the difficult while it is still easy, the large while it is still small". The same underlying injunction appears in the writings of one of the founding fathers of the (Western) field of futures studies, Bertrand de Jouvenel (1972, p. 283; emphasis added):

> *The proof of improvidence lies in falling under the empire of necessity. The means of avoiding this lies in acquainting oneself with emerging situations while they can still be molded, before they have become imperatively compelling.*

Conclusion

In the context of the rise of China as an economic and geopolitical superpower (Hudson, 2016), attending to traditional Chinese conceptions of temporality may help us moderns understand this complex and consequential phenomenon and, thereby, better navigate the challenges that we face. What might this mean for recasting our epistemological orientations and views of what foresight and wisdom are and can be? The purpose of this paper has been to contribute to ongoing debates about the epistemology of futures studies in at least three related ways.

Firstly, by listening to the concerns expressed by postcolonial theory about the insidious Eurocentrism or Western-centrism of contemporary academic scholarship (Sidaway, Woon & Jacobs, 2014; Syrotinski, 2007), the paper has sought to redress this bias in the field of futures studies by offering an analysis of ancient Chinese thought about the nature and scope of prediction. This manoeuver is part of a broader trend in futures research recently illustrated by the work of Bae (2012; 2014) on East Asian cultures, and Motlagh and Futurist (2012) on Arabic cultures, which will hopefully de-center current debates in productive ways by broadening our horizons of intellectual engagement.

Secondly, by giving attention to the importance of the distinction between the impending future and the distant future, the paper highlights the need to articulate the epistemology of foresight with a culturally nuanced study of temporality (Abbott, 2001; Grzymala-Busse, 2011; Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017; Nisbett, 2003) in order to enrich our vocabularies with finer grained understandings of the future. Whereas the field of futures studies has articulated arguments about the limits of predicting the distant future at least since the 1970s (see the historical overviews by Inayatullah, 1990; Kuosa, 2011; and Son, 2015), more recent empirical work on the poor accuracy of forecasting practices in economics and political science highlights the continuing epistemological and practical relevance of a conceptual distinction between the impending future and the distant future. In Philip Tetlock's words:

> *Taleb, Kahneman, and I agree there is no evidence that geopolitical or economic forecasters can predict anything ten years out beyond the excruciatingly obvious – "there will be conflicts" – and the odd lucky hits that are inevitable whenever lots of forecasters make lots of forecasts. These limits on predictability are the predictable results of the butterfly dynamics of nonlinear systems. In my [Expert Political Judgment] research, the accuracy of expert predictions declined toward chance five years out. And yet, this sort of forecasting is common, even within institutions that should know better. (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015, pp. 243-244; emphasis added).*

Thirdly, the paper has called for a dialogue between scholars of the future and scholars of wisdom (Bangen, Thomas, & Dilip, 2013; Walsh, 2015; Weststrate, Ferrari, & Monika, 2016; Grossmann, 2017), by showing that in ancient Chinese thought the figure of the sage is intertwined with, and assessed by, the ability to detect, and act on, the budding signs of the *imminent* future. The study of ancient Chinese thought through a critical process of unearthing genealogies (Foucault, 1978) may be beneficial to contemporary futures thinking by shifting perspectives and stretching the field's conceptual range. More to the point, Chinese thought can encourage ways of thinking about the future that foreground a moral epistemology of wise leadership for harmony and the common good (Wang & Juslin, 2009). This approach would represent a much needed counterpoint to geopolitical discourse that often portrays China's rise as a threat to world peace and valued ways of life (Agnew, 2010, 2012; Glaser, 2011; He & Feng, 2012; Kaya, 2014). It would also represent a (partial) confirmation of Inayatullah's forecast that the field of futures studies will focus less on scenario development and more on what he called "moral futures" (Inayatullah, 2002, 2008). In the same vein, Western scholars of wisdom (mainly psychologists and philosophers) could productively

broaden their enquiry into the nature of this human ideal by dedicating sustained attention to the intricate ways in which ancient Chinese thought has articulated wisdom with the problematic of foresight.

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Endnotes

1. The concept of "shi" has complex etymologies, and blends temporal connotations of "window of opportunity" or "propitious occasion" with spatial connotations of "efficacious arrangement". Throughout this paper I follow Julien's translation of "shi" 勢 as "propensity of things" or tendencies of things (Julien, 1999, 2004).
2. "Wu-wei" is usually translated in English as non-action, because it combines the Chinese characters 無 ("not") and 為 ("act"). Depending on the context, it may refer to lack of action, to lack of visible action (barely perceptible, subtle action), or more often to apparently spontaneous actions that fit the circumstance perfectly and thereby are maximally efficacious. For a book-length treatment of the complex etymologies and nuanced meanings of this expression, see Slingerland, 2007, whose preferred translation is "effortless action".
3. To reiterate an earlier observation, traditional Chinese thought is extremely diverse, and so are its readings and interpretations by contemporary sinologists. To give just an example, there are major differences between Taoism and Confucianism in their approach to both epistemology and ethics (Allen, 2015). Sinologists normally consider wu-wei a Taoist ideal, not necessarily a Confucian ideal, although Slingerland (2007) has drawn on conceptual metaphor theory to argue that it was in fact a joint ideal of both Taoism and Confucianism. Michel Foucault's genealogical undertaking to historical analysis (Foucault, 1978) provides a useful conceptual framework for acknowledging and reflecting on the complexities, discontinuities, and differences within traditional Chinese thought.
4. I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for pointing out that Jullien's view might not do justice to the whole of traditional Chinese thought. More specifically, it overlooks the work of Chinese macro-historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien – credited as the world's first macro-historian (see Galtung and Inayatullah 1997, as well as Hardy, 1994). Ssu-ma Ch'ien's abiding interest in long-term patterns of change, cycles and arcs may imply an ontologically distant notion of the future and some form of long-term forecasting, even if at a very basic level. See also Bae's recent work on conceptions and symbols of the future in East Asian cultures (Bae, 2012, 2014).
5. As one anonymous reviewer pointed out, we should beware of the risk of "boxing" in futures studies: whereas some futures thinking resonates well with the Chinese themes developed in this paper, we should emphasize that much also does not. For recent metatheoretical discussions of the complex history and internal epistemological, ontological, and methodological diversity of future studies, see Ahlquist and Rhisiart, 2015; Erik Karlsen et al., 2010; Fuller and Loogma, 2009; Hines and Gold, 2013; Kuosa, 2011; Liebl and Schwarz, 2010; Marien, 2010; Miller, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Nelson, 2010; Öner, 2010; Patokorpi and Ahvenainen, 2009; Ramos, 2006, 2010; Roth and Kaivo-Oja, 2016; Samet, 2010; Sardar, 2010; Son, 2015; and Van der Helm, 2009.

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