

## ***Zhi* 志 in Mencius:**

### **A Chinese notion of moral agency**

Rina Marie Camus

Visiting Lecturer, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9258-962X>

#### ABSTRACT

*Zhi* is an important Chinese notion that conveys among other things human capacity to set aims, to determine a course of action, or to persist in a resolve. The term naturally turns up in Chinese contributions to Western Free Will debate. In this paper, I explain *zhi* by working out a comparison that goes from East to West. I do a three-fold textual analysis of *zhi* focusing on the *Mencius*. I outline different usages found in the text, examine a nuanced, dominant meaning suggested in 2A.2, and discuss notional features based on language patterns. My analysis yields a more homegrown understanding of *zhi* which I shall compare with Western expressions of moral agency.

#### KEYWORDS

Mencius; *Zhi*; Textual Analysis; Moral Agency; Comparative philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Allegedly, there is hardly any notion in Asian philosophy ‘which could not also be found, in some shape or form, in the annals of Western Thought’.<sup>1</sup> Orientalist and statesman Walter Stace condoned the idea but almost immediately thought of an exception. To the numerous exceptions that can be made we may perhaps add *zhi*. The word is not particularly difficult to translate into English. The problem rather is that many words pose as good renditions under specific contexts, for instance: will, aim, purpose, intention, ambition, ideal, wish, desire, etc. What these words have in common is that they involve conscious acts of volition so that ‘volition’ might be a lexical equivalent. Like volition, *zhi* has to do with personal determinations and on this note has left its imprint on modern Chinese language with words such as *xinzhi* 心志, or firm interior resolve, *zhixiang* 志向, or life aspiration, and *yizhi* 意志, or willpower. Compared to Western notion of volition, however, *zhi* is not pure willing but involves thinking so much so that the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 takes it to be synonymous with *yi* 意, a character associated with thought or idea. Besides, it is not construed as a parallel force to a higher faculty like reason but is linked instead to *xin* 心, that is, the heart or heart-mind. Further, volition is habitually conceived as conscious inclining towards discrete objects or acts while *zhi* is manifested chiefly in persisting in a continuum: a course of action, a long-term objective, a way of living.

As often noted, *zhi* is formed by the ideograms for heart and scholar (*shi* 士) – a suspiciously meaningful combination heart and scholar being loaded words in Confucian philosophy. In early scripts however *zhi* was not written with the ideogram for scholar – its

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<sup>1</sup> The words are an afterthought which Stace recalls from a fellow participant in an East-West conference, see Stace, 1952, p.20.

phonetic component – but with *zhi* 之 (indicating direction) or *zhi* 止 (denoting the sole of the foot or the foot itself).<sup>2</sup> The last two ideograms were originally closer in meaning both conveying a person in motion. The second however came to mean restriction or stopping by Han times.<sup>3</sup> The combinations of these components with the radical *xin* yield etymological definitions of *zhi* such as ‘that to which the heart sets off’ or, following Han lexicon, ‘where the heart stops or abides.’<sup>4</sup> In any case, it is primarily ‘usage, not etymology, that gives words their meaning’ and I have accordingly set for myself the task of exploring *zhi*’s usage in texts.<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of Western Free Will debate *zhi* has naturally propped up in Chinese accounts of the phenomenon – or *illusion* for some – of purposeful human activity.<sup>6</sup> While there are good reasons for rendering *zhi* as free will, I would like in this paper to explore the term by analyzing its occurrences in early Chinese literature. Two considerations inspire my approach: A.C. Graham’s remark that early Chinese concepts ‘tend to be more dynamic than their nearest Western equivalents (whereas) English translation freezes them into immobility’ (Graham, 1967, p. 215), coupled with Shun Kwong-loi’s observation of an asymmetric tendency to adopt Western concepts and frameworks in explicating Chinese thought (Shun 2009). To be sure,

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<sup>2</sup> Karlgren, 1940, 961a-962b. Notwithstanding, scholars take these earlier variations to be equally meaningful. As Sor-Hoon Tan explains, combining *xin* with either ‘going to’ (*zhi* 之) or ‘abiding’ (*zhi* 止) gives the resulting character a sense of ‘setting one’s heart-and-mind on something’, Tan, 2003, pp. 50, 216.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese University of Hong Kong’s on-line lexicon was useful for checking the meaning, etymology, and evolution of characters such as *zhi*, see <https://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk>.

<sup>4</sup> See corresponding word entry in the *Shuowen Jiezi*.

<sup>5</sup> A passing remark which I take as guiding principle from Adkins, 1970, p.16.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of studies which present *zhi* as equivalent of Western concept of will are Chan 2002, pp. 281-310, and Cheng in Shun & Wong, 2004, pp.183-199. The lack of a word equivalent for ‘freedom’ in early Chinese literature led to doubts as well as interesting accounts of purposeful individual agency in Chinese philosophy. I mention some of these publications in my article <details withheld> and call attention too to a literary metaphor that conveys a strong concept of moral agency.

works with this tendency contribute to our understanding of Chinese thought by highlighting its similarities with styles of inquiry that are more elaborate or familiar to readers. Still, it seems a good idea to try the reverse – that is, to proceed from East to West – when investigating a rich and robust Chinese notion like *zhi*.

*Zhi* is an important concept in early Confucian thought and Chinese moral psychology in general. To date however it has hardly been the exclusive subject of a study. The significance of the paper lies in this: a focused and in-depth analysis of its meaning based on an appropriate sample text, the *Mencius*. This a limit of the study but also a useful tactic. *Zhi* appears over 50 times in the text – a significant number in proportion to the size of the text – and it does so in manner that echoes the lexis of Mencius’ milieu. The text in other words recapitulates the word’s semantics in transmitted literature and I shall indicate continuities and discontinuities between Mencius and his sources where appropriate.<sup>7</sup> There is besides a nuanced treatment of *zhi* which deserves attention. I undertake a three-fold analysis of *zhi* in Mencius: the first section outlines senses of *zhi* based on context use; the second zeroes in on 2A.2 and related passages which link *zhi* to the heart-mind; and the third identifies language patterns in the use of *zhi* which reveal notional features. There will be occasion to consider how scholarly renditions of *zhi* are corroborated by its usage in early texts. The conclusion examines analogues of *zhi* in Western philosophy and takes stock of this exercise in East-to-West comparison.

## 2. Senses of *Zhi*

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<sup>7</sup> As a caveat, the dating of transmitted literature which I will refer to in the course of the article are subject to scholarly controversy with parts of these texts or current versions probably being of later origin than the era or authors they are about, see Nylan, 2001. In any case, some forms of early classics would have circulated before Mencius who quotes from these.

As mentioned, *zhi* can translate into different words but it is difficult to think of a single one to match its broad and fluid semantics in Chinese. Translators of Mencius commonly render *zhi* as the ‘will’ simply, if not ‘goal’ or ‘intention’ in particular passages.<sup>8</sup> My analysis of occurrences of *zhi* in the *Mencius* shows the term’s variegated meanings.

The phrase ‘according to *Zhi*’ (*zhi yue* 志曰) appears in a couple of passages about ritual customs.<sup>9</sup> In these *zhi* evidently refers to a written source unknown to posterity. To cross reference, the *Guo Yu* 國語 lists a certain ‘*Gu Zhi* 故志’ among canons such as the *Odes* 詩 that are useful for moral instruction. We have no way to determine however whether this is related to the *Zhi* alluded to by Mencius.<sup>10</sup> We know that *zhi* had the meaning of written records or annals. Chronicling state affairs and ceremonies, *zhi* of this meaning may well have served as reference for rituals to be observed. Records or annals, however, is a later usage of the term, as in the III CE historical classic *San Guo Zhi* 三國志. Returning to the phrase in Mencius, the usage of *zhi* as a document may seem marginal but it is worth noting that the term has the connotation of remembering or holding fast in the mind analogous to how words form indelible marks on a writing surface.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See commonly used translations such as Legge, 1970; Lau 2003; Van Norden, 2008; and Bloom, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See 3A.2 and 3B.1 which quote the ‘*Zhi*’ on rituals for mourning and for hunting, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> The relevant passage from *Guo Yu* counsels to the effect of ‘teaching the *Odes* in order to propagate illustrious virtue and thus dazzle the *zhi* (教之詩，而為之導廣顯德，以耀明其志)’ and ‘teaching the *Gu Zhi* for them to know to subdue excitement and be cautious’ (教之故志，使知廢興者而戒懼焉), see ‘Chu Discourses’, Part 1.

<sup>11</sup> Here is an example of *zhi* as bearing in mind from the *Zuo Zhuan*, Zhao, 15: ‘with one’s words one completes the archived texts, and with the archived texts one *marks* the warp thread. What good does it do to talk a lot and cite the archives if one forgets the warp thread? (言以考典，典以志經，忘經而多言，舉典將焉用之)’, trans. Durrant, Li & Schaberg, 2016. By Han times, *zhi*’s connotation as ‘remembering’ becomes common, so does its alternative written form with a third radical – *yan* 言 (words, speech, or doctrine) – resulting in the ideogram *zhi* 誌.

Apart from this first and rather specific usage of *zhi*, the word likewise denotes power which an individual can muster to accomplish a task or wield an instrument. Accordingly, Mencius speaks about the need to ‘turn the heart and exert *zhi*’ (*zhuan xin zhi zhi* 專心致志), or to ‘really exert *zhi* upon the bow’ (*bi zhi yu gong* 必志於彀) as Archer Yi of old would do (6A.9; 6A.20). In the context of learning a lesson, *zhi* may well translate as concentration, attention, or simply fixing the mind upon a subject or event that is taking place<sup>12</sup>, whereas in the context of wielding an instrument *zhi* means physical force or energy that can be applied to an object. In both cases, *zhi* is an inner reserve (mental or physical, or both) which the individual can harness.

*Zhi* may also denote desire, wish, or ambition making it synonymous with *yu* 欲 and *yuan* 願 in some places.<sup>13</sup> Such is the sense of *zhi* in the expression *de zhi* 得志, literally, ‘to obtain or achieve (one’s) *zhi*.’ In early historical narratives, the phrase has the additional connotation of having one’s way with or being able to hold sway over another. The phrase is typically followed by the locative particle *yu* 於 to mark the subject or ambit over which one comes to exercise influence. In the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 the objects of *zhi* are typically rival states over which rulers or military personages sought to exert, expand, or secure power. So, for instance, ‘Chu sought to *de zhi* over the east of Han river’ (得志於漢東), ‘the people of Jin were unable to *de zhi* over Zeng’ (晉人不得志於鄭), or Jin ‘wished to *de zhi* over Lu’ (欲得志於魯).<sup>14</sup> In the *Guo Yu* as much as in the *Zuo Zhuan*, the phrase also applies to individuals seeking

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<sup>12</sup> This usage is consistent with 6B.5 where Mencius quotes the *Shang Shu* about Duke of Zhou warning the young ruler against ‘not casting *zhi* upon the sacrifice’ (役志於享).

<sup>13</sup> For example *Analects* (An) 4.24 and 11.2. In 5.25 Confucius invites pupils to express their *zhi* and each replies with ‘My *yuan* is...’

<sup>14</sup> Examples abound in the *Zuo Zhuan*. The three cited are from Huan, 6; Xiang, 9; and Cheng, 16, respectively. A recent translation of the classic consistently translates *de zhi* in these contexts as ‘fulfilling X’s aims in Y’, see Durrant, Li, & Schaberg, 2016.

to prevail over another whether an associate who is useful for an end or a rival to be rid of. From examples of passages bearing the phrase one can observe that *de zhi* implies satisfying oneself with proximate ends that are in keeping with a larger goal or plan. In this regard, *zhi* in the expression *de zhi* may not simply translate as ‘ambition’ (Lau 2003, p.66) but the realization of intermediate objectives in view of a larger pursuit. For power-hungry princes, being able to *de zhi* through military victories was for the grand goal of ruling all under Heaven. In contrast, it was ‘to promote the Way throughout the empire’ (*xing tian zhi da dao* 行天下之大道) that sages and worthies sought to *de zhi* with rulers or to *de zhi* in finding office (3B.2). Mencius voiced out this overarching goal and was cautious about pursuing other ends. Note the recurrence of the phrase in the following passage:

When engaging important personages one should hold them in contempt and not be awed by their majesty. Grand halls and towering rafters – though I *de zhi* I would not go for them; luxurious food and servants in waiting – though I *de zhi* I would not go for them; merriment and drinking, riding horses in a chase with a large entourage behind – though I *de zhi* I would not go for them. Compared to them, I would not work for any of these but for the institution of the ancients. What is there in them for me to esteem? (7B.34)

Objects of *de zhi* in the passage were matters commonly sought after. Mencius disdained these as ends which ‘he would not work for’ (*fu wei ye* 弗為也) because they are not in line with a greater end inspired by the ancients.

A closely related sense of *zhi* is intention or purpose that informs what one does. An important variation of this sense is authorial intent, that is, the message – usually moralizing – which verses were meant to convey (cf. 5A.4). Scholar-ministers believed that the *zhi* of inherited texts should be grasped, adhered to, and dutifully passed on to posterity. This process

was part and parcel of moral cultivation. Similar to how *de zhi* expresses intermediary ends or wishes, *zhi* as intention behind actions involves a layering of motives. In 6B.4 an associate of Mencius tries to dissuade a ruler from waging war on the grounds that there would be nothing to gain (*li* 利) from it. Mencius approves of the intention to prevent war calling it a ‘lofty *zhi*’ (*da zhi* 大志). However, he argues that the motive should be benevolence (*ren yi* 仁義) rather than gain.<sup>15</sup> So important is *zhi*-intention that elsewhere Mencius was ready to allow for a minister to banish his sovereign provided that he had the ‘*zhi* of Yi Yin’ (伊尹之志), an ancient worthy – at least in Mencius’ eyes – who expelled then later re-instated a ruler after the latter reformed (7A.31).

Two matters are worth pointing out from examples of the last two related senses of *zhi* as desirable end and as underlying intention. First is the closeness of *zhi* to action or conduct. Mentions of *zhi* in these senses are often accompanied by specifications of deeds or courses of action in line with an end or intention. This operative aspect of *zhi* can be observed in historical narratives where *zhi* is often linked to a scheme or plot (*mou* 謀, *tu* 圖) to be carried out. Similarly in the *Analects* *zhi* is said to be manifest in behavior (*xing* 行, *wei* 為).<sup>16</sup> Hence, while the semantics of *zhi* encompasses desiring (*yuan* 願) and wishing (*wang* 望), it is closer to action. Another point is the treatment of *zhi* as touchstone of morality over and above simple deeds. Mencius clearly thinks that deeds and results obtained from deeds cannot be judged approbatory by themselves. One has to look further into the *zhi* behind deeds such as preventing war or ousting a sovereign.

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<sup>15</sup> Another example is 3B.4 where *zhi* stands for purpose or motive behind what one does for a living, different from what one actually does (*gong* 功).

<sup>16</sup> For example, An 1.11 which posits *zhi* as something that becomes fully evident in a man’s conduct after his father’s demise.



Finally, Mencius also employs *zhi* to mean resolve, as in the phrasal construction ‘to have the *zhi* to X’ (有 X 志) where X represents a decision that one is set to carry out.<sup>17</sup> The same sense of *zhi* is implied in the idea of a ‘determined scholar’ or ‘scholar of firm resolve’ (*zhi shi* 志士) who risks life to act in accord with ritual.<sup>18</sup> Again, this sense of *zhi* shows its close link to action. A privileged example of this usage would be ‘establishing (or erecting) *zhi*’ (*you li zhi* 有立志), that is, to harbor a general moral resolve usually as a result of edification from learning about the deeds of sages and worthies (5B.1; 7B.15). At times the resolve consists in something more concrete such as an ad hoc decision from the turn of events. When Mencius is questioned about departing from places where he had planned to serve rulers, he explained that his ‘resolve to return’ (*you gui zhi* 有歸志) to one state or ‘resolve to leave’ (*you qu zhi* 有去志) another were what he deemed appropriate under the circumstances. Decisions to cut short sojourns entailed revising an original plan which he also designates as *zhi* in the concluding remark, ‘to stay long in Qi was not my *zhi*’ (*jiu yu Qi fei wo zhi ye* 久於齊，非我志也) (2B.11, 12).

In recap, I identified five usages of *zhi* in Mencius: a specific literary source (志曰); power (focus or effort) that is harnessed towards objects or events (志於 X); ends or wishes (得志); underlying intention; and resolve to be some way or to do something (有 X 志). I have pointed out besides that *zhi* connotes bearing in mind, is closely linked to action, and is a moral

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<sup>17</sup> Here is a negative example from the *Zuo Zhuan* where war commanders were wont to observe the fighting spirit of rival camps to gauge their chances of victory: ‘the men of Yun are worried and hide behind their walls, *none have zhi to fight* (莫有鬥志).’ A variant expression is also used: ‘Chen is in disarray and *its people have no xin to fight* (民莫有鬥心); if we attack, they will certainly flee.’ The examples are from Lord Huan, 11 and 5, respectively. Note how *zhi* and *xin* are interchangeable in these verses.

<sup>18</sup> For ‘the determined scholar’, see 3B.1, 5B.7; also An 15.9.

determinant. Add to these is a more substantial notion of *zhi* which can be intimated from Mencius' reference to it as 'commander of *qi*' (*qi zhi shuai* 氣之帥), a rare epithet from 2A.2.

### 3. *Zhi* in Mencius 2A.2

The idea of *zhi* as commanding force signals a conception of *zhi* which I would classify as *nuanced*, that is, a partial novelty in Mencius that it is *different from* but *not unrelated to* senses found in transmitted literature which are echoed by Mencius and summarized in Section 2.

Passage 2A.2 has been subject of many scholarly discussions mostly evolving around the idea of attaining fixity of heart (*bu dong xin* 不動心) – opening theme of 2A.2 – and a controversial maxim found therein. I am interested here in its treatment of *zhi*. The passage does not thoroughly discuss the term but gives insight into its special significance in Mencius. *Xin* and *qi* (氣) are words paired with *zhi* in 2A.2 and we can try to understand *zhi* better in relation to these two.

*Xin*, the heart-mind, refers to the inner depths of an individual where conscious thoughts and feelings arise. To Mencius it is locus and spring of morality. *Qi* is that which 'fills the body' (*ti zhi chong* 體之充) and is described as the energy or motor for any vital operation, physical, physiological, or moral. The passage is complex but we can glean from the outset a preoccupation with erratic movements from within which the individual must manage.<sup>19</sup> Note the presence of words associated with restricting movement: *bu dong* 不動, *shou* 守, and *chi* 持. What is it that moves and must be guarded? The subjects of these verbs are *xin*, *zhi*, and *qi* making evident that there is not just one but a combination of powers to harmonize. *Qi* is clearly

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<sup>19</sup> For a related discussion, Alan Chan discusses 2A.2 focusing on the relation between *qi* and *xin*, see Chan 2000, pp.42-71.

delineated from *zhi* as potencies of different kinds: the former is primarily about organic functioning although it also has bearing on moral progress. As for *xin* and *zhi*, the two seem to coalesce in the course of the dialogue.<sup>20</sup> Mencius envisions a flurry of potencies in man with *xin* and *zhi* on one side and *qi* on the other. When distinguishing between ‘guarding what is essential’ (*shou yue* 守約) and ‘guarding the vital energy’ (*shou qi* 守氣), Mencius determines *xin* and *zhi* to be more fundamental to guard than *qi* in the process of self-cultivation that leads to fixity of heart.

The controversial maxim by an opponent of Mencius touches on key elements for self-cultivation – i.e., words (*yan* 言), the heart-mind, and *qi* – and their proper ordering. The maxim gives Mencius occasion to affirm that *xin* indeed takes precedence over *qi*: when the *xin* is amiss one cannot rely on *qi* (*bu de yu xin wu qiu yu qi* 不得於心，勿求於氣). He then elaborates his stance in manner that places *zhi* in the exact position as *xin* in relation to *qi*. *Zhi*, he explains, has priority over *qi* (*zhi zhi qi ci* 志至氣次) and is its ‘commander’ (*shuai* 帥). The priority is at least temporal: *qi* is nourished ‘by being upright’ (*yi zhi yang* 以直養) and thus requires prior moral resolve. As long as it is not harmed, *qi* in turn will ‘support a person’s pursuit of uprightness and the Way’ (*pei yi yu Dao* 配義與道). In this framework, the primary step in self-cultivation is to ‘uphold one’s *zhi*’ (*chi qi zhi* 持其志) and to ‘focus (or concentrate) it’ (*zhi yi* 志壹). The dynamics between *zhi* and *qi* reminds us of connotations of *zhi* such as power that is wielded or influence that is exerted over another. These connotations are brought into full moral discourse in 2A.2 turning *zhi* into an internal moral reserve that is of utmost importance for self-cultivation and ethical living.

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<sup>20</sup> James Legge makes a similar observation about the passage in question: *zhi* ‘appears to be used synonymously with 心’, Legge 1970, p.541.

*Zhi*'s association with *xin* adds more to the picture. 2A.2 posits a close link between *xin* and *zhi* but it is not clear whether the two are the same reality or simply work together. In fact, the exact relation between *xin* and *zhi* is nowhere explicit in the *Mencius*. What can be intimated from 2A.2 is that the discussion about fixity of heart – literally, ‘not-moving heart’ – and the precedence of *zhi* over *qi* (*zhi zhi yan, qi ci yan* 志至焉，氣次焉, literally, ‘*zhi* is fundamental, *qi* is secondary’) unfolds in such a way that ‘fixity of heart’ is tantamount to firmly establishing *zhi*, just as ‘*zhi* moving *qi*’ (rather than the other way around) is tantamount to ‘the heart-mind moving *qi*’. Notice that the initial inquiry about achieving fixity of heart leads Mencius to explain the need to hold fast to and establish one’s *zhi*, a topic which, in turn, culminates in describing the implicitly unfavorable condition of the heart-mind being swayed by *qi*: ‘now, when a man falls back or rushes forward, that (owes to) *qi* which can move the heart-mind’ (*jin fu jue zhequ zhe shi qi ye, er fan dong qi xin* 今夫蹶者趨者是氣也，而反動其心). These statements and the flow of discussion make the heart-mind and *zhi* interchangeable and may suggest that the two express the same reality. The tendency to treat *zhi* as a stand-in for the heart-mind is not without precedence in early texts.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, Bryan Van Norden takes *zhi* to be nothing other than the heart-mind itself in explaining it as ‘simply the “heart” when it is focused on a particular aim or goal’ (Norden, 2008, pp. 38, 207).

Other passages in Mencius, however, treat the two as a paired phenomenon. In concrete, 6B.15 joins the heart-mind and *zhi* as connected parts of a system, analogous to how muscles and bones make up our physique: ‘When Heaven bestows a great office on man, it first makes his *xin-zhi* suffer and his *muscles-bones* toil’ (*gu tian jiang jiang da ren yu shi ren ye, bi xian ku qi*

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<sup>21</sup> Recall note 17 above, where disheartenment in battle is expressed as either not having the *xin* or the *zhi* to fight.

*xin zhi* 故天將降大任於是人也，必先苦其心志，勞其筋骨). Similarly, 6A.9 unites the two as *working partners* – so to speak – in the expression ‘to devote one’s whole mind and energy’, literally, to focus *xin* and exert *zhi* (*zhuan xin zhi zhi* 專心致志). The surrounding context of this graphic expression is worth closer inspection. In the passage, Mencius laments a ruler’s moral failure which he explains through an analogy: two students attending the same chess lesson in a garden achieve different results because one is attentive and the other preoccupied with shooting a swan. The latter fails to learn not because of lack of personal ability but of conscious exertion: he let his heart-mind stray from the lesson and his *zhi* was dissipated. The analogy illustrates how moral cultivation entails a two-fold act of focusing the heart-mind and applying *zhi*.

A closely-related analogy in the same chapter underpins the fundamental the need to exert *zhi* in moral learning. Passage 6A.20, evokes the legendary bow-bearing strongman Yi who ‘really exerted *zhi* upon the bow’ (*bi zhi yu gong* 必志於彀) when shooting and taught his pupils to do the same.

Passages 6A.9 and 6A.20 both associate *zhi* with archery. The skill is in fact instrumental in Mencius’ understanding of *zhi*: he conceptualizes the relation between the heart-mind and *zhi* in terms of archery which exemplifies the kind of focus and energy needed for the moral enterprise. It is a graphic conception of *zhi* noticed early on by Shun Kwong-loi in explaining that the term has ‘the connotation of firmly directing one’s heart/mind at a certain goal, in the way that one aims steadily at a target in archery’ (Shun, 2016, p.8) or, simply, as the ‘aims or directions of the heart/mind’ (Shun, 1997, p.66). In light of what we have seen about the word’s semantics, I would like to add to Shun’s incisive observation the fact that intensity or exertion of energy is part of *zhi*’s substantial meaning in Mencius. *Zhi* is not merely the aim or direction of the heart-mind but energetic aiming or directed energy of the heart-mind, that is, towards

benevolence (*ren* 仁), the Way, or learning (*xue* 學), words which signify rightful targets of *zhi* in early Confucian literature.<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note besides that Mencius' archery-inspired moral conception of *zhi* calls to mind a verbal usage of the word in transmitted literature, that of aiming at a target'.<sup>23</sup> Here too Mencius transports a technical usage of *zhi* into full moral discourse.

My examination of 2A.2 and related passages in this section sets forth its nuanced significance in the text. Mencius treats *zhi* as a moral power or faculty, establishes a very narrow relation between *zhi* and the heart-mind, and, further, conceptualizes the relation *zhi* and the heart-mind in terms of archery. The resulting understanding of *zhi* is consonant with Herbert Fingarette's explication of *zhi* as 'an intermediary dynamic' in the self, that is, 'a directed dynamism – wanting, willing – that characteristically is what mediates the orientation of the self and the actual conduct of the self' (Fingarette, 1979, p.133). Fingarette's study is based on the *Analects* and he notes that *zhi* does not involve any 'reification of a Faculty of Will (nor) inner machinery or equilibrium of psychic forces' (ibid., p.133). Comparing Fingarette's finding with what we have seen about *zhi* in this section, it does seem that there is a reification of a moral faculty that takes place in Mencius. The appropriateness of translating *zhi* as will is a matter I shall leave for later. For now I probe further in to the term's significance by examining linguistic patterns in its occurrences.

#### 4. Notional Features of *Zhi* based on Syntax

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<sup>22</sup> See An 2.4, 4.4, 4.9, 7.6; also *Mencius* 4A.9, 6B.8-9, 7A.24. As Sor-Hoon Tan observes, 'the most prominent use of (*zhi*) is in relation to ethical purposes', Tan, 2003, p.50.

<sup>23</sup> Hence the remark of an archer in battle 'I was aiming at his eye (吾志其目)', *Zuo Zhuan*, Ding, 8. In the *Shang Shu*, having *zhi* is exemplified by archers focused on a target, hence the phrase 若射之有志, Pan Geng I, 1.

The way *zhi* is structured into sentences is supplementary means for terminological comprehension. I have discussed some examples of phrasal constructs which disclose particular senses of *zhi*, for instance ‘*Zhi yue*’ where it stands for a literary source, and *de zhi* where it signifies desired ends. My observations about language patterns in the use of *zhi* can be summarized in three points: (1) its attribution to personal nouns or pronouns, (2) its accompaniment by a locative particle, and (3) its being subject of verbs of perception. These patterns do not occur in every instance of *zhi* but are recurrent. I hope to show what bearing these have on the term’s semantics.

*Zhi* is customarily used with personal nouns and possessive pronouns. The pattern particularly occurs where *zhi* is used to mean a person’s plan or intention. To recall some examples, Mencius called his prolonged stay in Qi as ‘not my *zhi*’ (*fei wo zhi* 非我志, 2B.23), or the idea of ‘Yi Yin’s *zhi*’ as what spells the difference between an apparent treason and a prudential act by a minister (*you Yi Yin zhi zhi ze ke* 有伊尹之志則可, 7A.31). In early histories it is common to speak about the *zhi* of monarchs or princes (*wang zhi* 王志 / *jun zhi* 君志). There are also a great variety of personal genitive pronouns that accompany *zhi*. In the *Shang Shu* examples of pronouns attached to *zhi* are *ru* 汝 (thou), *jue* 厥 (its/his/her/their), and *zhen* 朕 (I/we), the last one being reserved for emperors. In the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Guo Yu*, personal genitive pronouns used with *zhi* are *wu* 吾 (I/me), *er* 爾 (you), and *qi* 其 (its/his/her/their).<sup>24</sup> Sometimes *zhi* is ascribed to collective subjects. For instance, ‘Zhu’s *zhi* was to attack Song’ (*fa Zhu, Song zhi ye* 伐邾，宋志也), rulers needed to be cautious about the ‘*zhi* of the people’ (*min zhi* 民志),

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<sup>24</sup> Comparable with the *Analects* and *Mencius*: for 其志 or 爾志, see An 11.11, 5.16, 11.26; in *Mencius*, 吾志, 我志, or designating a particular person (伊尹之志) in 1A.7, 2B.14, 7A.31.

and posterity was supposed to abide in the ‘*zhi* of the ancients’ or ‘of early kings’ (*gu you zhi* 古有志 / *xian wang zhi zhi* 先王之志). The attribution of *zhi* to a group – common in transmitted literature – means that it can be shared. The *Analects* and *Mencius* in contrast exclusively speak of *zhi* of individuals. In other words, *zhi* is treated as something belonging to and determined by individual subjects. An often-quoted verse in the *Analects* considers it an inviolable property: ‘A full army may sooner be deprived of its commander than a common man of his *zhi*’ (9.26).

A second pattern is the use of *zhi* in conjunction with the particle *yu* 於, such as in the phrase *zhi yu* (literally, ‘*zhi* on’) where *zhi* signifies power harnessed towards a subject, event, or task. As mentioned, *yu* introduces that to which *zhi* is directed or applied by the individual. In the *Analects* the phrase ‘*zhi yu X*’ (志於 X) typically connects *zhi* with *ren*, *Dao*, and learning.<sup>25</sup> A telling example is 2.4 where Confucius recounts advancing in the moral path by first ‘fixing *zhi* upon learning at age fifteen’ (*wu shi you wu er zhi yu xue* 吾十有五而志於學). Mencius follows this linking of *zhi* with overarching moral pursuits in poignant ways. A handful of examples are worth transcribing. These showcase how rightly orienting *zhi* is the nub of moral living:

If one ‘does not set *zhi* on *ren*’ (*bu zhi yu ren* 不志於仁), his life will end in misery and destruction. (4A.9)

This is how the *junzi* serves his prince: ‘by directing him towards the right Way and establishing his *zhi* on *ren*, that is all’ (*wu yin qi jun yi dang Dao, zhi yu ren er yi* 務引其君以當道，志於仁而已). (6B.8)

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<sup>25</sup> Hence, ‘the scholar fixes his *zhi* upon the Way (士志於道)’ and, ‘if one were to fix his *zhi* upon *ren*, there would be no wickedness (苟志於仁矣，無惡也)’, An 4.4, 9; 7.6.



‘If the prince does not follow the Way and *zhi* is not upon *ren*’ (*jun bu xiang Dao, bu zhi yu ren* 君不鄉道不志於仁), to try to enrich him is to enrich a tyrant.

(6B.9)

Just as flowing water fills everything in its path, ‘the gentleman’s *zhi* is set upon the Way’ (*junzi zhi zhi yu Dao ye* 君子之志於道也); he does not move forth without mastering each step. (7A.24)

It is easy to see from these examples that what characterizes the gentleman is *zhi* that is fixed on what is moral. Passages exhibiting this pattern in the *Analects* and *Mencius* typically include specifications of deeds, behaviors, desires, or plans which *are* or *are not* in accord with a person’s *zhi*. In others words, there are things which a person will or will not do according to the disposition of his *zhi*. This brings us back to the operative dimension of *zhi*, its being spelled out in a continuum of acts or behavior consistent with the overarching purpose determined by the individual.

There is another point that I wish to draw from the coupling of *zhi* with a locative particle: the directionality of *zhi* which gives it a moral valence depending on what it is fixed upon or applied to. Directed towards moral pursuits, *zhi* may be described in early texts as ‘good’ (*shan* 善), or ‘robust’ (*shuai* 帥), or ‘earnest’ (*du* 篤).<sup>26</sup> As for Mencius, he praised the *zhi* of one seeking to prevent warfare as ‘lofty’ (*da* 大) and accused those who merely paid lip service to the ancients as having ‘pretentious’ (*xiao* 嘍) *zhi* (6B.4; 7B.37). For all his differences with Mencius, Xunzi was likewise concerned about achieving ‘fixity’ (*ding* 定) and described the *zhi* of

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<sup>26</sup> The first two examples are from *Guo Yu*, ‘Discourses of Jin’, 7, the third from An 19.6.

cultivated persons as ‘high’ (*gao* 高) and ‘broad’ (*guang* 廣).<sup>27</sup> In the end, it is the individual who determines the valence of his *zhi* in committing (or failing to commit) to moral ends.

*Zhi* takes shape in the interior of an individual and emanates from there. As such, it is a deeply personal phenomenon. At the same time it is regarded as something open to others’ purview, the third language pattern I have observed. Recurring accounts in historical narratives have ministers and scholars of the Way prod rulers into alignment with the *zhi* of their forebears by quoting scripture or recounting their virtuous deeds. Accordingly, the *Zuo Zhuan* speaks of *zhi* as something that can be known by others (*zhi zhi* 知志), transmitted (*chuan qi zhi* 專其志), and conveyed through poetry (*shi yi yan zhi* 詩以言志). As it were, the content and disposition of one’s *zhi* can be communicated directly through words, deeds, or a medium such as writing. For Confucius, a rightly and firmly positioned *zhi* is what characterizes a gentleman (An 4.4, 7.6). Hence, he attended closely to the *zhi* of individuals by observing their conduct. *Zhi* is thus the object of various verbs of perception in the *Analects*: it can be watched (*guan* 觀), seen (*jian* 見), heard (*wen* 聞), or enunciated (*yan* 言) (1.11; 4.18; 5.26; 11.26).

Mencius also took to scrutinizing others’ *zhi*. More importantly, he summed up his work as tending *zhi* and persons he convened with seemed to recognize this. In 1A.7, the King of Qi acknowledges his weakness and implores Mencius ‘to aid his *zhi* and enlighten him through teaching’ (*yuan fuzi fu wu zhi, ming yi jiaowo* 願夫子輔吾志，明以教我). In another occasion, Mencius is pointedly asked about the business of scholars (*shi he shi* 士何事) and he replies, ‘to elevate *zhi*’ (*shang zhi* 尚志) (7A.33). The conversation continues, giving us an explanation of the essence of a gentleman scholar’s mission,

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<sup>27</sup> See *Xunzi* chapter on ‘Self-Cultivation’ (修身).

(Dian) said, And what do you mean by elevating *zhi*?

(Mencius) answered, ‘To fix it on *ren* and *yi*, that is all (...) Is his dwelling wickedness?

It is *ren*. Is his path *wickedness*? It is *yi*. Dwelling in *ren* and following *yi*, that is the business of the great man (*ju ren you yi, da ren zhi shi bei yi* 居仁由義，大人之事備矣).’

The conversation drives home the fact that for Mencius moral existence boils down to a well-positioned *zhi*, that is, focusing and applying it steadily towards ethical pursuits. It also sharply articulates the relationship between gentlemen scholars and *zhi*: the latter is the chief object of concern of scholars of the Way. Along this line, it is interesting to look at examples of verbs used in conjunction with *zhi*. These show its potential to be worked on or influenced by others. As we have seen in Mencius, it can be aided and elevated. Besides, it can be changed (*bian* 變), guided (*dao* 導), made to follow (*cong* 從), erected (*cheng* 成), moved (*dong* 動), and cultivated (*yang* 養). In turn, individuals themselves must take care to uphold (*chi* 持) or guard (*shou* 守) it lest it fall (*jiang* 降) or be lost (*sang* 喪).<sup>28</sup>

In sum, language patterns discussed in this section set forth three notional features of *zhi*. Its customary accompaniment by personal or possessive pronouns show that it is regarded as a deeply personal phenomenon, belonging to and emanating from the individual. Its use with a locative particle indicates its directionality and moral valence. Finally, its modification by verbs of perception and transitive activity show how it is open to scrutiny and influence by others. These language patterns can be observed to some extent in transmitted literature. A marked trend from early classics to the *Analects* and *Mencius* is increased personalization and moralization of

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<sup>28</sup> These verbs are a small sampling of actions performed on *zhi* in transmitted literature.

*zhi*: it becomes almost exclusively attributed to individuals and is indicative of personal dispositions. Mencius takes a further step in treating *zhi* as the ‘ground zero’ of moral living and its cultivation the specific task of gentlemen scholars.<sup>29</sup> The final section takes *zhi* beyond early Chinese horizons to Western discourses on freedom and human agency.

## 5. Is there *Zhi* in Western Philosophy? Analogues of Moral Agency

I have explained *zhi* through textual analysis chiefly based on the *Mencius*. There are more literary sources and contexts that are relevant for exploring the term’s significance and applications. Apart from military-athletic customs (recall specific usages of *zhi* in relation to archery), cosmological beliefs informing self-cultivation practices (implicit in the co-relation between *zhi* and *qi*), and moral discourse, literary and aesthetic theories are also areas where *zhi* has special meaning.<sup>30</sup>

Mencius closely links *zhi* to the heart-mind and construes the relation between the two in terms of steadfast positioning and striving after moral pursuits. The nuanced and substantial idea of *zhi* in Mencius can be articulated as an underlying and operative personal resolve that informs private thoughts and behavior and is manifest in all-out moral striving. On this note, I agree with scholars who see *zhi* as a sort of existential commitment or long-term resolve, for instance, Li Chenyang who explains it as moral purpose or determination that needs to be strengthened and

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<sup>29</sup> Much of my observations about *zhi* in Mencius are consonant with Fingarette’s conclusions about it in the *Analects*, in concrete, the idea that *zhi* ‘is always (...) of a particular person. Indeed it is inseparable from the person’, and that ‘it is intimately related to action (which it) can motor and direct’, Fingarette, 1979, p.133.

<sup>30</sup> For cosmological views and self-cultivation practices behind the concept of *zhi*, see Chan 2000, pp. 42-71. For its relevance to literary theory, see Robert Eno’s interpretation of *zhi* as ‘thematic coherence of character’ in moral narratives, Eno in Chan, 2000, pp. 195-196. A very recent work by Marthe Chandler explains *zhi* as ‘the heart’s intent’ in light of Chinese artistic theory developed by Li Zehou, see Chandler 2017.

reinforced throughout life (Li, 2014, pp.904-5), similarly Frank Perkins who describes it as a unified and stable resolve of the heart (Perkins, 2014, p.121).<sup>31</sup> Shun Kwongloi's characterization is also helpful: *zhi* is 'the (heart's) ability to set directions that guide one's life and shape one's person as a whole' (Shun in Shun & Wong 2004, pp.185-186). Such descriptions conserve better *zhi*'s original resonances than simple freewill.

The semantic scope, variability, and features of *zhi* make it a concept impossible to match with a single foreign term. Words mentioned in the outset – such as aim, resolve, and wish – capture at least some of its salencies. 'Impetus' also comes to mind inasmuch as *zhi* denotes energy drawn from within that is applied to self-determined pursuits. *Zhi* has to do with personal determination of ends – particularly overarching ones – and is in this regard comparable to Western notion of 'will' whose range of meaning includes resolve, wish, desire, and force. Incidentally, will also connotes something written, as in the phrase 'last will and testament.' When comparing *zhi* with modern concept of will, however, we do well to note that the background of *zhi* contrasts sharply with 'mechanistic understandings of nature in terms of atomistic and billiard ball causation' (Marchal and Wenzel in Timpe et al., 2017, pp.375, 384). Where modern Western discourse emphasizes *autonomy* of the will, Chinese account stresses *alignment* with the *zhi* of forebears.

*Voluntas* is an earlier Western term with much the same connotations as will. Another Latin word, *arbitrium*, is comparable to *zhi* as a decision that one makes which involves exercise of individual power and dominion over immediate affairs. However, *arbitrium* – from 'arbiter', or judge/witness – originates from a legal framework and has the connotation of an official

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<sup>31</sup> What Perkins writes about *zhi* is worth transcribing: it is the 'ability to maintain one's resolve' which entails developing 'a kind of autonomy that frees the individual from utter dependence on external conditions', Perkins 2014, 121, 146.

judgment passed over external matters. In contrast, the primary function of *zhi* is to determine one's internal stance. Besides, *arbitrium* is sometimes used to describe choices made against one's better judgement – as when we say that a person 'acts arbitrarily' – putting it at odds with the seriously moral import of *zhi*.<sup>32</sup>

What can be said of will and *voluntas* in comparison to *zhi* apply also to Greek *boulesis*, translated as 'wish' or 'rational desire' in works of classical thinkers. The word's range of meaning extends to most senses of *zhi* in Mencius, i.e., will, wish, desire, purpose, as well as a written document. Further, it has the marginal sense of a poem's intent or meaning.<sup>33</sup> Unlike *zhi* and much like *voluntas* however *boulesis* is an appetitive faculty strictly different in nature from the intellect. *Zhi* does seem to be a moral faculty in its designation as commander of *qi* and depiction as directed power, but it is not parallel to nor delineated from the heart-mind. There is also notable difference in habits of use. *Boulesis* is superior to impulsive and instinctive drives and directs a person's inclining towards discrete objects of pleasure or pain. *Zhi* can be channeled towards discrete objects but it is primarily about *setting up oneself* and pursuing overarching moral ends.

The closest analogue may be *prohairesis*, Greek for deliberated choice or rational decision. The term entails exercise of reason and characterizes moral action. Like *zhi*, *prohairesis* is principle of action and course of living making it synonymous at times with personal conduct and character. Like *zhi*, it also conveys dedication or zeal and its etymology – *pro* (beforehand) and *hairesis* (choice) – implies a prior moral disposition which unfolds in

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<sup>32</sup> The Perseus Digital Library (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>) was indispensable for checking connotations and examples of usages of Greek and Latin terminologies.

<sup>33</sup> An example of this usage is in Plato's *Protagoras*, 344b.

actual choices and deeds.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, *prohairesis* is also linked to archery imagery: at its best, it is envisioned by Aristotle as an accurate shot that is aligned (i.e., to right reason) and aims at a proper object (i.e., acting well).<sup>35</sup> Such depiction of virtuous character has structural similarities with Mencius' idea of *zhi* as underlying moral stance that informs a person's character and varied activities.

Albeit subtle differences in background and habits of use, Western conceptions of moral agency capture important – in some cases even marginal – senses of *zhi*. *Zhi* thus lends itself easily to cross-cultural comparison because it expresses fundamental human experiences of taking up a personal stance, of determining interior dispositions, of carrying out chosen pursuits, ultimately, of being able to establish and sustain resolves of existential reach. Perhaps, after all, it *is* a notion in Asian philosophy that can 'be found, in some shape or form, in the annals of Western Thought' – but it has its own history and resonances which we can best appreciate through East-to-West comparison.

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<sup>34</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.2-3, cf. Bostock, 2000, p.39. Aristotle is inconclusive about the nature of *prohairesis* saying that it is 'either desire-related intellect or thought-related desire', 6.2 1139b, trans. Crisp 2000. Thought-related desire seems closer to *zhi* in Mencius, while desire-related thought resonates more with the *Shuowen Jiezi*'s equation of *zhi* with *yi* 意, a term which covers common senses of *zhi* in Mencius but with semantic emphasis on the cognitive aspect of intentionality.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle uses archery jargon to illustrate the role of rational choice in virtuous activity, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.1-2.

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