Does Michigan Matter?

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When I went off to graduate school, specialists in Chinese philosophy taught in philosophy departments at four significant graduate programs: University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, and University of Hawai’i. Today, of those four programs, only Hawai’i — which in contrast to the other three, has not been viewed as a strong broad-based graduate program — still has specialists in Chinese philosophy. My question here is: does this matter, and if so, to whom?

First of all, it matters to prospective graduate students. In saying this, I do not mean to slight the Hawaii program, which has trained many excellent teachers and scholars. I also recognize that there are several options that a student might consider today. To see why it matters that Michigan, Berkeley, and Stanford have dropped out of the game, let U.S. consider these other options briefly:

1. New U.S. philosophy Ph.D. programs with specialists (e.g., DePaul University, University of Oklahoma, University of Oregon, University of Utah)

2. U.S. philosophy Ph.D. programs with faculty who, despite not having graduate training in Chinese philosophy, have developed strong research and teaching interests in it (e.g., Duke University, University of Connecticut)

3. U.S. Ph.D. programs outside of philosophy (e.g., East Asian Languages and Civilizations or Religious Studies) with faculty centrally interested in the Chinese
philosophical/religious tradition (e.g., Harvard University, Indiana University, University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, etc.)

4. A U.S. philosophy Ph.D. program with no faculty strongly interested in Chinese philosophy, but having a specialist as an outside member of one’s dissertation committee (anywhere, in principle)

5. A non-U.S. philosophy Ph.D. program with specialists (e.g., Chinese University of Hong Kong, National University of Singapore, Peking University, etc.)

Next, let us think about what an aspiring student would want to get out of his or her graduate training:

A. Broad foundation in the Chinese philosophical traditions — texts, commentaries, and secondary literature

B. Deep understanding of at least one time period or tradition, including engagement with Chinese (and perhaps Japanese or Korean) scholarship

C. Strong linguistic and sinological training

D. Broad foundation in relevant history of Western philosophy

E. Deep understanding of relevant area(s) of philosophical research cognate with one’s interests in the Chinese tradition

F. Original and insightful dissertation project

G. Excellent teaching skills

Certainly it is a tall order to acquire A through G. But there is actually one more thing that a student wants, namely:

H. Prospective employers (especially U.S. philosophy departments) recognize that the student has acquired A though G
How well do institutions of types 1 though 5 fare in preparing students, by the criteria A though H?

Let me immediately acknowledge that there is nothing uniquely magical about being employed by a philosophy department. For many people, it may make most sense and be most attractive to aim at other disciplines instead. But I do think that there is something distinctive and valuable about the project of philosophy, and so I empathize with those students who desire a career teaching Chinese philosophy in a philosophy department. For them, I submit that it is difficult for any of options 1 through 5 to be as good at meeting our desiderata as would a top U.S. philosophy Ph.D. program with one (or more) specialists. The reasons are various and mostly obvious. I will comment here only on the importance of D and E, and on their relation to H. I take it that a key goal of those doing research on Chinese philosophy today is (or should be) to engage our colleagues whose research is on historical or contemporary issues in Western philosophy in constructive dialogue. We should be striving to learn from them, and they from us. We should be challenging one another. This is a crucial ingredient in philosophical development, whether that development is accounted in terms of better interpretations of past traditions or more meaningful work on contemporary issues. To be sure, there is much more involved in either of these projects than dialogue, but dialogue is important. Therefore, D and E would be important even if they were not also instrumental to achieving H. As it stands, learning D and E at a strong graduate program tends to result both in learning D and E well, and in having this strength recognized (i.e., H).

So, it matters for prospective students that top graduate programs in the U.S. no longer have specialists in Chinese philosophy.
I have just asserted that not only the study of Chinese philosophy but also the study of Western philosophy would be better off if scholars of each tradition were in dialogue with one another. This may be controversial but I believe it to be common sense: our philosophical work is enhanced by challenges from different traditions pursuing similar-enough questions, and once we start looking, we see that there are many, many areas in which various traditions are similar enough. It is of course critical to avoid reading one’s own concerns into another tradition; the role of comparative work varies, depending on whether one’s main project is historical interpretation or contemporary philosophical analysis and construction. But in most cases there is room for constructive stimulus from comparative perspectives.\(^2\)

If this is so, then it is not just potential students of Chinese philosophy to whom it matters that specialists in Chinese philosophy no longer teach at places like Michigan, Berkeley, and Stanford. It matters to the faculty at these schools, it matters to their students no matter what their area of focus, and it matters to all those who are influenced by the writing and lecturing of scholars at these prominent institutions. My claim is not that cross-tradition dialogue and stimulus is impossible without specialists in Chinese philosophy at prominent graduate institutions. It is starting to happen in spite of the obstacles created by such a lack. But there can be no question that this (hopefully inevitable) progress would be accelerated if more scholars and students at schools like Michigan, Stanford, and Berkeley rubbed shoulders with specialists in Chinese philosophy.

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1 For whatever it is worth, Hawaii does not rank among the top 60 programs according to the Philosophical Gourmet Report (http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com).
Two examples of Western philosophers being stimulated by Chinese traditions might be helpful. In his “The Way of the Wanton” (Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1006893), J. David Velleman draws significantly on Zhuangzi in order to further develop ideas of Harry Frankfurt. Paul Woodruff’s Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue (Oxford, 2001) is importantly informed by his understanding of early Confucianism, especially concerning the relation between ritual and reverence.