

BOOK REVIEW

Chenyang Li, Fan He, and Lili Zhang, *Comprehensive Harmony - Thomé H. Fang's Philosophy*, New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2018, Pp. 91.

In the English-speaking world, the study of Chinese philosophy has been focused mainly on pre-Qin philosophy and Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. In comparison, contemporary Chinese philosophy, as an initial attempt to communicate with western philosophy and world philosophy, has not received sufficient attention. This book is a timely study of the 20th century Chinese philosopher Thomé H. Fang 方東美.

In the 20th century, many contemporary Chinese philosophers were immersed in traditional Chinese education when they were young, then baptized by modern western thought afterwards. After a long period of comparative reflection on Chinese and western cultures, some of them finally constructed their own philosophical systems. Thomé H. Fang is such a typical philosopher. Unlike Liang Shu-ming 梁漱溟, Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭, Xiong Shili 熊十力, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, and others who can be clearly identified as “contemporary New-Confucian”, Thomé H. Fang's thought is very complex and pluralistic, and is difficult for us to precisely characterize his ideological tendency.¹ When Fang was once asked about his philosophical affiliation, he replied, “it is hard to say”, because “I am a Confucian by family tradition, a Daoist by temperament, and a Buddhist by religious inspiration; moreover I am a Westerner by training.”² Evidently, Fang is one of the most open-minded Chinese philosophers in the 20th century. And in order to better promote the spread of Chinese philosophy in the western world, Fang wrote his most important academic work, *Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Its Development* 中國哲學精神及其發展, in English at the end of his life. Thus, if western readers want to have a deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese philosophy, Thomé H. Fang should not be missed.

Comprehensive Harmony - Thomé H. Fang's Philosophy is a small book that aims to introduce Fang's philosophy to the English-speaking world in a succinct manner. The book title indicates that the prominent feature of Fang's philosophy is comprehensive harmony. This book's lead author, professor Chenyang Li, is known for his research on Chinese philosophy and comparative philosophy. Prior to this book, he has published a monograph named *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Such a background undoubtedly ensures that this book

¹ Hu Jun 胡軍 (2000) believed Fang was a contemporary New-Daoist, while Jiang Guobao 蔣國保 (2001) and Yu Bingyi 余秉頤 (2001) argued Fang was a contemporary New-Confucian. Moreover, Wan Xiaoping 宛小平 (2008) stressed Fang was a Cosmopolitan in philosophy, and Du Baorui 杜保瑞 (2011) contended Fang was a Buddhist in his faith.

² Thomé H. Fang, *Mr. Thomé H. Fang's lecture collection* 方東美先生演講集, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, 48.

has a broad vision and professional attainment.

This book consists of six chapters. In Chapter 1, the authors give us a brief introduction of Fang's academic career. Chapter 2 covers the important features of Fang's philosophy in detail. Chapter 3 is a summary of Fang's interpretation of classic Chinese philosophy, mainly focusing on Primordial Confucianism, Primordial Daoism, and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. In Chapter 4, the authors discuss Fang's critique of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. Chapter 5 presents Fang's philosophy of comprehensive harmony. Chapter 6 concludes the book by evaluating Fang's contribution to contemporary Chinese philosophy. In addition, this book includes as appendix an English translation of Fang's masterpiece - *Three Types of Philosophical Wisdom* 哲學三慧, which is helpful for readers to comprehend Fang's own writing on comparative philosophy.³ To my knowledge, this is the first published English translation of this seminal work and it therefore makes the book even more valuable.

The main body of this book can be divided into three parts: defining features of Fang's philosophy, Fang's interpretation and critique of Chinese philosophy, and Fang's philosophy of comprehensive harmony. The first part is introduced in Chapter 2. The authors point out four important features that mostly define Fang's philosophy as well as Fang's main contributions to the development of Chinese philosophy in the 20th century. First, a comparative approach. Based on the investigation of qing 情, li 理, zhi 智, and hui 慧 in *Three Types of Philosophical Wisdom*, Fang maintains that Greek philosophy, European philosophy, and Chinese philosophy represent three types of wisdom and suggests each tradition can benefit from the others because they all possess respective strengths and weaknesses. Second, the philosophy of creative life 生. Due to the great influence of Bergeson's philosophy of creative evolution and the concept of *shengsheng* 生生 (generative creativity) in the *Book of Change* 易經, Fang emphasizes that all Chinese traditions converge on one essential point: they all hold that the cosmos possesses an all-comprehensive urge for life and an all-pervading vital impetus. Third, the unity of nature and value. Closely related to the theme of creative life, Fang further holds that the universe is not a totality of material stuff, but a living organism laden with value. Fourth, comprehensive harmony. By comparison with European philosophy and Greek philosophy, Fang considers that comprehensive harmony, in unison with which man and life in the world can enter into a fellowship in sympathetic unity, can best characterize the overall spirit of Chinese philosophy and is key to understanding this wide-ranging tradition.

³ "Three Types of Philosophical Wisdom" was highly appraised by He Lin 賀麟. In He's view, "Fang compared the three philosophies, revealed the characteristics and advantages of each, and enabled people to appreciate the experience in a compassionate and understanding manner, which was not limited to the merits and weaknesses of eastern and western philosophies, nor was there a stage of successive transition. It could be said that Fang's article provided a proper attitude of virtual appreciation in discussing eastern and western philosophies and cultures." He Lin, *Fifty Years of Chinese Philosophy* 五十年來的中國哲學, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2012, 60.

Meanwhile, the authors highlight that these four features are closely connected, and comprehensive harmony serves as the most important feature of Fang's general philosophy.

The second part contains Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, the authors give readers a detailed introduction of Fang's interpretation of classic Chinese philosophy. Fang's study on Chinese philosophy is a metaphysical standpoint that is the most important in any philosophical tradition. In his term, a metaphysical theory may have three features: (1) preternatural, (2) transcendental, and (3) immanent. Unlike preternatural metaphysics of western dualistic thinking, Chinese metaphysics is shown as transcendental-immanent metaphysics. On the one hand, as transcendental metaphysics, Chinese philosophy rejects dualism and presents as a kind of "ideal realism" or "real idealism"; on the other hand, as immanent metaphysics, Chinese philosophy constructs an integrated view that Dao exists through all forms of concrete things in the world, which can be understood as a kind of "organicism". Moreover, Fang identifies three major shared features in Chinese philosophy: (a) pervasive unity of the universe; (b) pursuit of Dao; (c) exaltation of the human individual into ever-higher realms of existence. It can be found in all three schools of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Fang also maintains that sharing common features does not prevent each of the school from retaining its distinctiveness. For example, in terms of personality types, Fang calls Confucian the "Time-man", Daoist the "Space-man", and Buddhist the "Space-Time-man".

On the specific interpretation of classic Chinese philosophy, Fang has his own distinctive characteristics. First, Fang takes Primordial Confucianism to include Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, but his analysis focuses mainly on the *Book of History* 尚書 and the *Book of Change*. The *Book of History* reflects that Confucianism accepts a primeval heritage and tries to bring it to bear on rational philosophy; the *Book of Change* reflects that Confucianism constructs a profound systematic philosophy. Second, Fang distinguishes "Daoism proper" from "the Doctrine or Tactics of Huang-di and Laozi", and emphasizes that only the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi can be considered true Primordial Daoism. The most important achievement of Laozi is his promotion of Dao, while Zhuangzi's contribution lies in his pursuit of spiritual freedom. Last, Fang contends that Chinese Buddhism, which aims to "achieve greatness" and focuses on how to live in this world, is quite different from Indian Buddhism. And through the analysis of the schools of San-lun 三論宗, Tian-tai 天臺宗, Fa-xiang 法相宗, and Hua-yan 華嚴宗, Fang believes each Buddhist school in its own way presents a powerful expression of the Chinese mentality of comprehensive harmony. In Fang's view, all three traditions, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, have made significant contributions to Chinese philosophy and Chinese culture.

Although Fang regards Song-Ming neo-Confucianism as one of the four important traditions of Chinese philosophy, however, his overall attitude towards it is critical. In Chapter 4, the authors discuss Fang's critique of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism in three aspects. First, there are internal conflicts of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. On the one hand, in pursuing "simple words with deep meanings" 微言

大義”, these thinkers failed to seriously study the classics. On the other hand, in competing for *daotong* 道統 (the orthodox tradition), they fell into pettiness and narrow-mindedness. To avoid these mistakes, Fang advocates the use of *xuetong* 學統 (tradition of learning) in place of *daotong*, and to concentrate on serious study of classics rather than playing with empty and superficial words. Second, their treatment of Buddhism and Daoism is irrational. The precursors of neo-Confucians benefited much from the academic environments created by Buddhism during Tang dynasty. And neo-Confucians had imitated the style of philosophical writing and some philosophical ideas of Buddhism. Moreover, the philosophy of neo-Confucians is closely related to Daoist philosophy. Third, their narrow focus on Confucius and Mencius is problematic. Fang contends that the *Analects (Lunyu)* is a text of moralogy 格言學 rather than philosophy, and the *Mencius* has the concept of *daotong*, which rendered a bad influence on Confucians afterwards. Compared with *daotong*, the *xuetong* of Confucian philosophy, which includes the chapter of “Hongfan 洪範” in the *Book of History* and the *Book of Change*, has rich and profound resources of thought, such as the idea of *huangji* 皇極 (the ultimate) and *qiankun bingli* 乾坤並立 (dual establishment of yin and yang). Unfortunately, neo-Confucians turned a blind eye to their philosophical heritage from such classics as the *Book of History* and the *Book of Change* while focusing exclusively on Confucius and Mencius. In conclusion, Fang emphasizes that we contemporaries must break the confines of the neo-Confucians and achieve a comprehensive understanding of Confucian tradition.

In the third part of this book, Chapter 5, the authors make a detailed interpretation of comprehensive harmony, the defining theme of Fang’s philosophy. Fang was greatly influenced by the *Book of Change*, which enabled him to regard harmony as the leading concept that penetrates every level of existence. Fang points out that harmony is achieved and maintained through creativity and transformation. Creativity, propelled by the yin-yang 陰陽 principle, stands for the driving cosmic force towards harmony; transformation, which is expressed by *zhonghe* 中和 principle (centrality-harmony), is the process through which creativity is materialized and harmony is realized. Moreover, comprehensive harmony can be understood in three perspectives, namely nature, humanity, and culture. First, nature is that infinite realm wherein the universal flux of life is revealing itself and fulfilling everything with its intrinsic worth. Second, humanity plays a central role in the universe by reaching the Supreme Good to form a harmonious whole with it. Third, culture acts as a bridge that embraces and fulfills all beings including nature and humanity into ideal perfection for achieving comprehensive harmony. Finally, Fang stresses that comprehensive harmony is the most important contribution of Chinese philosophy to world philosophy, which corrects a mainstream western idea that nature is hostile to humanity and human society aims to conquer nature.

The theme of comprehensive harmony, as the core of Fang’s philosophy, runs throughout the whole book. As the authors point out, Fang’s main contribution to Chinese philosophy is that he provides a series of coherent and systematic interpretations of traditional ideas based on his understanding of harmony in response to fundamental issues in philosophy. In my opinion, comprehensive harmony of

Fang's philosophy revealed by the authors has at least two levels of significance. First, it is of great value to advocate comprehensive harmony in order to avoid conflicts caused by the differences of civilizations. Zhang Zai 張載, who was praised by Fang as a magnificent thinker in Song dynasty, believed that "the enemy would be reconciled by harmony 仇必和而解"⁴ because human mind-heart is able to understand and sympathize with everything in the universe. As a constant concept in Chinese philosophy, harmony reflects the essential goodness of human nature and is therefore timeless. Second, comprehensive harmony is the ultimate state of individual existence when a person ponders over the meaning of life. For example, Mencius contended that the ideal state of a gentleman 君子 is to "flow up and down with the heaven and earth 上下與天地同流"⁵, and Zhuangzi stressed that the true realm of the perfect man 至人 is to be in "contact with spirits of heaven and earth by himself 獨與天地精神往來"⁶. Humanity as a sacred member of the universe, in pursuit of the unity between Heaven and Humanity 天人合一, realizes its mission through the harmonious existence of individual persons. Therefore, we human beings should attach great importance to comprehensive harmony whether facing the realistic survival or considering the ultimate existence.

At the same time, in my opinion, this book could have been improved in some respects. For example, it would be better if Fang's views on the relation between science and philosophy were explained and discussed. The controversy between science and metaphysics 科玄論戰 is an important ideological event in modern China. It is not only the direct response of the controversy between scientism and humanism in western thought, but also the fundamental question of the future direction of the Chinese culture. Fang's first published book, *Philosophy of Science and Life* 科學哲學與人生, is his own answer to this important question. He believes the universal life is to integrate emotion and reason through harmonious interaction. Science should not violate and disregard emotion in explaining reason, just as philosophy should not destroy reason for preaching emotion. Only when science cooperates with philosophy as well as reason mingles with emotion, can human thought and culture rise to the top of human civilization.⁷ Obviously, Fang used the idea of harmony to resolve the opposition between science and philosophy, which can be regarded as the gestation stage of his philosophy of comprehensive harmony. Nevertheless, the authors of this book have adequately dealt with the key issues of Fang's philosophy and thus provide us with a good study of this important contemporary figure. This book explicates

⁴ Zhang Zai, *Zhang Zhai Ji* 張載集, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985, 10.

⁵ Jiao Xun 焦循, *Mengzi Zhengyi* 孟子正義, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2015, 962.

⁶ Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006, 1098.

⁷ Thomé H. Fang, Preface, *Philosophy of Science and Life* 科學哲學與人生, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, 1.

Fang's sometimes complicated philosophical theories in simple language. It is a good starting point for readers who want to understand Fang's philosophy.

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