BOOK REVIEW


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.

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. 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.” 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 新儒學和其發展 (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 蒋國保 (2001) and Yu Bingyi 余秉頤 (2001) argued Fang was a contemporary New-Confucian. Moreover, Wan Xiaoping  Wan Xiaoping (2008) stressed Fang was a Cosmopolitan in philosophy, and Du Baorui 杜保瑞 (2011) contended Fang was a Buddhist in his faith.
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 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, Tian-tai, Fa-xiang, and Hua-yan, 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，这些思想家没有认真研究经典。另一方面，在争夺道统（正统）的过程中，他们陷入了小器和狭隘。为了避免这些错误，方提倡使用学统（学术传统）而不是道统，并专注于认真研究经典而不是玩弄空洞和肤浅的词句。第二，他们对待佛教和道教是不合理的。新儒家从唐时期形成的学术环境中获得了很大的益处。并且新儒家模仿了佛教的哲学风格和一些哲学思想。此外，新儒家的哲学与道家哲学密切相关。第三，他们对孔子和孟子的狭隘关注是问题。方认为《论语》是一本格言学，而不是哲学，而《孟子》有道统的概念，这后来对儒家产生了不良影响。相比之下，儒家哲学的学统，包括《书》和《易经》中的《洪範》章，有着丰富而深厚的资源思想，例如皇極（及其）和乾坤并立（对立的）的思想。不幸的是，新儒家在专注于孔子和孟子的同时，忽视了从经典如《书》和《易经》中获得的哲学遗产。因此，结论是，我们当代人必须突破新儒家的范围，实现对儒家传统的全面理解。

在第三部分的这一章中，作者们对综合和谐进行了详细的解释，这是方哲学的定义主题。方深受《易经》的影响，把它看作是贯穿所有水平的存在。方指出，和谐是通过创造和转变实现和维持的。创造力，由阴阳（阴-阳）原则驱动，代表了推动和谐的宇宙力量；转变，由中和（中心-和谐）原则表示，是将创造性实现和和谐实现的过程。此外，综合和谐可以从三个角度来理解，即自然、人类和文化。首先，自然是一个无限的领域，其中生活的普遍流动正在展现自身并以内在的值得实现。其次，人类在宇宙中扮演着中心角色，通过达到终极善来形成与之和谐的全然。第三，文化作为桥梁，把自然和人类包括进来，实现理想中的完美，实现综合和谐。最后，方强调，综合和谐是儒家哲学对世界哲学最重要的贡献，它纠正了西方主流观念，即自然与人类社会是敌对的。

综合和谐的主题，作为方哲学的核心，贯穿于全书。正如作者所指出的，方对中国哲学的主要贡献是，他提供了一系列基于对和谐的理解的连贯和系统的解释，来回应哲学中的根本问题。
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” \(^4\) 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” \(^5\), and Zhuangzi stressed that the true realm of the perfect man (至人) is to be in “contact with spirits of heaven and earth” \(^6\). 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

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

References


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