

Of the three options, I find the third one preferable, and I believe it is what Huang tries to tell us. The third option is preferable because it frees us from the history of Neo-Confucianism (especially the rivalry between the Learning of the Way and the Learning of the Mind), and focuses our attention on using Neo-Confucianism to improve our life today. More important, it opens the possibility of transforming Neo-Confucianism into a contemporary philosophy not limited to China or East Asia. To this end, even though Huang does not go far enough in changing the debate over the two Chengs, he shows us what we can do to reinterpret Neo-Confucianism from the perspective of our contemporary life. Intentionally or unintentionally, he starts the process of turning Neo-Confucianism into a philosophy of the twentieth-first century, addressing such pressing issues as political oppression, social inequality, and racial conflicts.

TZE-KI HON

*State University of New York at Geneseo*

***Vanishing into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition.*** By Barry Allen. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 289. \$45.00/£33.95.

This book is about conceptions of knowledge in Chinese philosophy, but it also does more than that. It raises new possibilities for comparative philosophy and points to ways in which philosophy as an academic discipline could be reinvigorated to help address the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

While the subtitle of the book is clear, the title itself perhaps requires explanation. “Vanishing into things” references Guo Xiang’s 郭象 commentary on the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and in particular, the concept of *ming* 冥. The translation, “vanishing into things,” comes from Brook Ziporyn.<sup>1</sup> At the outset, I should make clear that Allen does not offer a “mystical” reading of Chinese philosophy, as the concept of *ming*, which literally denotes that which is dark and dim, may be seen to suggest. *Vanishing into Things* discusses the primary understanding of knowledge in Chinese philosophy in terms of its emphasis on the “point and value” of knowledge, which contrasts sharply with the central preoccupation with “theory and truth” in Western

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<sup>1</sup> Brook Ziporyn, *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).

epistemology (p. 4). In elucidating knowledge in Chinese tradition, Allen is at the same time challenging Western philosophy to rethink its long cherished and seldom questioned epistemological commitment.

A short introduction is followed by two substantial chapters on the classical Confucian and Daoist approaches to knowledge. The next two chapters are shorter, on “The Art of War” and “Chan Buddhism,” respectively. A long chapter on Neo-Confucianism comes next, followed by a concluding discussion on “Resonance” as a unifying theme in Chinese philosophy of knowledge. Although the book surveys familiar landmarks in the history of Chinese philosophy, its focus on knowledge, dialogue with Western philosophy, and engagement with critical issues such as war and technology set it apart from a general introduction to Chinese thought. Its exposition is delightfully clear and often insightful, which I think would make it a particularly helpful resource for students of Chinese and comparative philosophy. Methodologically, I cannot agree more with the author that the study of Chinese philosophy should eschew the tired but nonetheless fierce “etic” and “emic” hostilities and seek new ways to illuminate its key insights and reflect on their possible contribution to issues of global concern (p. 6). By the same token, a radical “deterritorialization” incorporating these insights will benefit the development of Western philosophy (p. 7). The call for interdisciplinarity is made again towards the end of the book (p. 229).

The general thesis of the book is that, exceptions notwithstanding, knowledge in Chinese tradition seeks “not how to get beyond perspective, a view from nowhere . . . [but] to see deeper into the world . . . to know not what is in the world, but what the world is becoming” (p. 10). Such knowledge requires “*penetrating the subtle*—seeing a lot in little things” and “*discerning the concordant and contrary*—knowing the resonance among things, and how to amplify or dampen emerging tendencies” (p. 3). In unpacking this central theme, concepts such as art or *techne*, which play a decisively subordinate role in Western philosophy, “nonaction” or “effortless action” (*wuwei* 無為), the “investigation of things,” and the “unity of knowledge and action” come to the fore. There are differences between Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist conceptions of knowledge, to be sure, but in the main “instead of transcending perspectives,” a core concern in Western epistemology, knowledge in Chinese tradition—*zhī* 知 or *zhì* 智—or more precisely, “the wise knowledge of a sage” (p. 9) means that “we become skilled at never getting stuck in one, vanishing into things” (p. 11).

Allen’s interpretation of the teachings of Confucius centres on the priority of rituals (*li* 禮), which define the fabric of social harmony and the ethical life. There is careful discussion of how *li* is never rigid but requires sincerity, how it gives expression to the virtue of benevolence or humane goodness (*ren* 仁), and how it forms the basis of a “spiritual practice,” the accomplishment of which marks the

*junzi* 君子, translated here as “perfected person.” While the ethical efficacy of *li* is emphasized, the aesthetic dimension of “ceremonial practice” is not neglected (pp. 13–16). In this light, Confucius could be construed as a conservative thinker, in the sense that he saw something of value in the *li* of the Zhou that needed to be conserved and developed. “The Confucian scholar (*ru*) is a custodian of the *li*,” which helps ensure the flourishing of the *dao* 道 (p. 15). As such, learning is always about “the rites and classics,” the wisdom handed down from the past (p. 22). In this conceptual framework, “ceremonial virtuosity” would be the ultimate goal (p. 23), which suggests the ability to live a life of *li* in perfect propriety effortlessly and spontaneously. This, then, brings into the view the concepts of *wuwei* and *ziran* 自然, what is “of itself so,” which to Allen are central to both the Confucian and Daoist imagination.

Chapter 1 also contains a discussion of the Confucian concept of *zhengming* 正名 (“Rectifying Names”), the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (“Maintaining Perfect Balance”), the critique of Confucian philosophy by Mozi and Yang Zhu, and the Confucian response of Mencius and Xunzi. It is no mean feat to be able to pack so much into a single chapter, and with such clarity. At every turn, comparison with Western philosophers from every age makes clear what Allen takes the Chinese sources to mean. The ethical orientation of knowledge in Confucian tradition is well known, but the argument here is not only that the Confucians saw the primacy of *li* in ensuring harmony (p. 65), but also more fundamentally that sage knowledge finds expression in “effortlessly effective *wu wei* action” (p. 29). It is the latter that aligns Confucians, Daoists, and Buddhists in the quest for wisdom. I will not summarize Allen’s specific arguments on these topics, but there are two points I would like to raise for discussion.

First, Allen is of the view that “the Confucian approach to ritual is unflinchingly secular.” The objective of *li* is not to “appease spiritual beings,” and furthermore, “by Kongzi’s time this secular attitude is ubiquitous among the elite.” The only textual support given is *Analects* 6.22, where “we are told to keep [the spiritual beings] at a distance” (p. 16). Religion plays a vital role in Shang and Zhou China. The *Zuozhuan* 左傳, for example, reminds us that “the important matters of state lie in (the proper performance of *li* relating to) sacrifices and the military” 國之大事，在祀與戎 (Duke Cheng 成公, 13th year). *Analects* 6.22 is not only about keeping spiritual beings “at a distance,” even if one accepts that particular interpretation, but it also affirms the need for reverence in religious rituals. Incidentally, it may be of interest to note, Zhu Xi 朱熹 takes this passage to mean that we should not be confused by the question of “ghosts and spirits,” which is “not knowable” (*bu ke zhi* 不可知). I take Allen’s point that “the value of ceremony is to spiritualize life” (p. 16), which recalls Herbert Fingarette’s idea of “the secular as scared,” but it seems difficult to dismiss the role of religion in early China in general or the teachings of Confucius in

particular without considering the historical and archaeological evidence.

The second point concerns the claim that because “ritual puts knowledge into practice, where it proves its wisdom in faultless action,” Confucius “must therefore denigrate experiments.” Self-cultivation as rooted in *li* must adhere to a strict “traditional formula” (p. 22). However, there is evidence that ethical reasoning plays a part in the determination of ritual propriety, as *Analects* 9.3, for example, suggests. Although a ceremonial cap made of linen is prescribed by ritual tradition, Confucius finds the contemporary use of a silk cap to be proper on account of its being more frugal. Tradition and change, in other words, should not be seen as mutually exclusive in the Confucian hermeneutics of *li*. This seems to fit better, indeed, with the overall thesis of the book that sagacious knowledge is able to anticipate changes and respond to changing circumstances with effortless effectiveness.

Chapter 2 first discusses in turn the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi*. Allen argues against a narrow political reading of the *Daodejing* as sage advice intended for a ruler. The more important message is that “sages are among the people, where they are an inconspicuous source of harmony” (pp. 66–67). The concepts of nothingness (*wu* 無) and emptiness (*xu* 虛) in the *Daodejing* should be understood not as non-existence or nonbeing but as the “virtual”: “it is the opposite of actual, not of existing, being, or reality” (p. 67). In this sense, *dao* signifies “becoming” (p. 69), and the mastery of the art of the *dao*, knowledge that is sage wisdom, translates into *wuwei* and *ziran* action, which is “not no intention at all, but vanishing intention. Not no effort at all, but vanishing effort, cultivating the uncomplicated ease that canny perception of the little things enables, and which supports a life of enhanced harmony with the *dao*, the way of changes, when purpose vanishes into the spontaneous becoming of things” (p. 74).

There are real gems in this discussion, and the point that “the *Daodejing* does not operate with a dualism between being and not-being” (p. 77) is especially well taken. The concept of *wuwei* is central to understanding not only the *Laozi* 老子 but also Chinese philosophy of knowledge as a whole, and it is here that I think further reflection may be warranted. On the one hand, there is a sense in which *wuwei* signals a qualitatively different mode of action, which “produces its effectiveness by an inconspicuous expenditure.” In this sense, Allen describes *wuwei* as “a technics of exquisite minima” (pp. 68–69). On the other hand, *wuwei* also seems to suggest doing less in the business of life, which is conceptually distinct from doing things in a qualitatively different way. The story of “Cook Ding” 庖丁 in *Zhuangzi* is a key text favoured by Allen in his analysis, which contrasts *wuwei* or effortlessly effective action sharply with ordinary action driven by cognitive and affective distortions. However, this is not the same as reducing consumption and doing less to attain a higher degree of quietude of mind and stillness of heart. This has a bearing on the

problem of desire in Daoist ethics, which to Allen should be framed as eliminating “a certain sort of desire, selfish desire, and not desire per se” (p. 72). If desire (*yu* 欲) is understood not so much in terms of differentiated desires, as the perpetual movement of *qi* 氣 in the heart-mind, then perhaps *wuwei* should be seen as targeting a reduction of the movement and intensity of affectivity, like lowering the idling speed of a car, as distinguished from eradicating any particular desire. These two senses of *wuwei* may be combined, but in any case a fuller discussion would, it seems to me, further strengthen Allen’s analysis.

The section on *Zhuangzi* introduces the “Inner Chapters” 內篇 especially Chapters 1 and 2, “*Xiaoyaoyou*” 逍遙遊 and “*Qiwulun*” 齊物論. The distinction between “great knowledge” and “small knowledge” provides a focus. There is helpful comparison with scepticism and Stoicism, but overall I have a clearer sense of what Allen understands by *qiwu* than *xiaoyao*, the sense of equanimity and unfettered living that is at the heart of the opening chapter of *Zhuangzi*. A sub-section is devoted to Guo Xiang’s understanding of “vanishing into things” in his *Zhuangzi* commentary, which “epitomizes the accomplishment of sage knowledge as understood in most of the Chinese thought” discussed in the book (p. 107). As art or *techne* is important to Allen’s account of Chinese philosophy of knowledge, he addresses the question of whether Daoist philosophy is “antitechnology” here. Whereas technology that “serves the advantage of the few” may be condemned (p. 113), the possibility of a “more artful *dao*-engineering” (p. 114) should not be discounted. Essentially the argument here is that for the Daoists, “the problem is not the machines but the ethics of the engineers” (p. 115). With “great knowledge” in *Zhuangzi*’s sense, one could envisage a design that “works like nature, having an efficacy that imitates nature’s. It operates *ziran* despite being obviously artificial” (p. 119). Reinforced concrete is cited as one example in this regard. The key point, however, remains that in the Daoist view sages “are artist-engineers of *ziran* effectiveness, poet-technicians of the *dao*” (p. 120).

Chapter 3 examines Sunzi’s “Art of War,” highlighting the sense in which war is a problem of knowledge. For example, deception plays a central role in Sunzi’s strategic thinking, and “successful deception is a form of *wu wei* effectiveness, doing something highly effective while not being seen to do anything at all” (p. 126). The views of Carl von Clausewitz and Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart provide a Western comparison, with the latter being chided for not acknowledging his indebtedness to the *Sunzi*. With the understanding that “violence inheres in social existence, and its use is requisite to self-preservation” (p. 133), the military thinkers of early China seek the *dao* of warfare, which relies on sage knowledge in restoring order. “Art-of-war thinkers differ from Confucians and Daoists in how they direct the effectiveness they expect from sage knowledge, but that is a difference amidst agreement about what such knowledge is and why it is valuable” (p. 139).

The discussion in Chapter 4 on Chan Buddhism focuses first on Nagarjuna to bring out the distinctive Buddhist understanding of emptiness (*kong* 空). This is followed by a study of the *Platform Sutra* 壇經. Compared with the Daoist understanding of emptiness (*xu*), as Allen sees it, the decisive difference is that “Buddhism is not an ontology of emptiness but the emptiness of ontology,” whereas in Daoist philosophy, “emptiness, by contrast, is enthusiastically ontological” (p. 164). When one realizes that even “great knowledge” is empty, all attachments vanish, which is to say that even “vanishing into things” is not enough, but “things too must vanish” (p. 163). In this context, the Buddhist concepts of “no mind,” “Buddha nature,” and “skilful means” can be properly understood.

The long chapter on Neo-Confucianism focuses on the philosophy of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming 王陽明. The discussion emphasizes a dynamic understanding of principle or pattern (*li* 理) that “requires actualization” (p. 174). “Knowledge of *li*” through the “investigation of things” enables “an appreciation of the relations we need to know for the harmonious handling of anything that instigates a response” (p. 175). What I find particularly rewarding in this chapter is the discussion on Luo Qinsun and “the question of Chinese empiricism” (pp. 195ff.). Here, Allen introduces the concept of “evolutionary ecology” to explain the nature of empirical reality as one that is relational and fluid, as relations connect and reconnect and new relations are constantly being formed (p. 205). This brings out clearly the Neo-Confucian sense of extension of knowledge, “completing things” as human beings take their place as “a partner with Heaven and Earth” (pp. 199, 205).

The concept of “resonance” (*ganying* 感應) captures the workings of the process of becoming that underlies Chinese philosophy of knowledge. There is a plea for philosophers to join hands in reflecting on “the ethos or ethics of sagacious sapience” (p. 224)—“That is a call not for more knowledge, but more responsibility, wiser knowledge, a more consistently ethical use of knowledge” (p. 226). The art of knowledge, in the final analysis, is to enable us to vanish into things, in the sense that we become partners with nature in the creative process of transformation and becoming. “Vanishing, we become more extensive, complex, integral, and integrally effective” (p. 231). This is a very wise call, it seems to me.

One may quarrel with Allen on a couple of historical points. For example, in the light of the recently excavated or recovered bamboo texts, one might question whether Mencius was the first to “introduce the concept of *qi*, vital breath or energy, into Chinese ethical literature” (pp. 46–47). Similarly, the attainability of sagehood, that “anyone can be a sage” (p. 19), was contested well into the Six Dynasties period. The famous “Great Stone Bridge” 大石橋 or Anji Bridge 安濟橋 designed by Li Chun 李春 in the Sui dynasty, cited as an example of engineering that exemplifies *wuwei* effectiveness, is located in modern Hebei and not “Shansi” Province as

stated (p. 119). It crosses the Xiao River 洨河, not “Jiao” River, I think. However, philosophically there is much to be learned from the work. There is a fine discussion, for example, on the different understanding of sensory perception in Chinese and Western philosophy (p. 53). Leaving aside the always helpful comparative discussion, there are also fresh readings of Chinese philosophical concepts and problems that should make us review some of the commonly accepted interpretations. For example, the relation between *ming* 名 (names) and *shi* 實 (usually translated as “actuality”) is a well-known topic in Chinese philosophy. Allen argues that *shi* should not be understood from the perspective of substance ontology but rather in the sense of potential coming to fruition, “an endowed potency that can be expected to develop in a particular way” (p. 54). The account of Xunzi’s view on human nature as suggesting that “we are not developmentally calibrated for life with others” (p. 62), to cite but one other example, made me pause to reflect on what I really mean when I rehearse the common assertion that for Xunzi, “human nature is bad.” Perhaps, relating this to the function of *qi* would have taken the discussion even further. I should like to end by quoting Allen’s concluding call, which I believe cannot be made often enough: “China’s presence in the world is only going to grow. As teachers and students of philosophy, we are part of this change. Let us therefore *want to be* part of it, and seek the new questions that will ensure a future for philosophy in a world beyond the superannuated division of East and West” (p. 232). Indeed, even if the influence of China is not on the rise, there is sufficient reason for deeper intercultural engagement.

ALAN K. L. CHAN

*Nanyang Technological University*

***Urbanizing China in War and Peace: The Case of Wuxi County.*** By Toby Lincoln. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 268. \$55.00.

This rich study covers the history of the life of an important Chinese city and its surrounding rural areas through long periods of war and brief periods of peace. Wuxi is a prosperous city of long history and great culture, set in fertile Jiangnan just north of Lake Tai. It has long been a commercial centre; one of its main products is silk. The book shows how the city, and this industry, kept going, and adapted to turbulence. One of China’s celebrated entrepreneurial families, the Rongs 榮, made large contributions to industrial development in Wuxi, their home town, as well as in Shanghai.