

*A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today.* By Thomas A. Metzger. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005. Pp. xxviii + 816. \$65.00.

Until the 1980s, the history of thought had been a vital and respected subfield in China studies. Scholars such as Wm. Theodore de Bary, Benjamin Schwartz, Wei-ming Tu, and Ying-shih Yü published regularly on Chinese thought from ancient times to the present. They not only introduced Chinese thought to Western readers, but also compared it with Western thought to underscore its uniqueness. However, during the last two decades, as China has experienced spectacular economic growth, the focus of China studies has been placed on social and economic history. Publications that discuss gender roles, ethnic diversity, market systems, print culture, social hierarchy and trade networks abound. To be sure, these studies provide profound insight into the complexity of Chinese society and economy, thereby deepening our understanding of China's long and complicated history. But at the same time, they do not give sufficient attention to an important aspect of Chinese life: the world of thought.

In his new book, *A Cloud across the Pacific*, the veteran intellectual historian Thomas Metzger reminds us of what is missing in current scholarship. In more than eight hundred pages, he convincingly argues that a full understanding of contemporary China has to be predicated on a careful and thoughtful examination of the writings of Chinese thinkers. By way of a detailed study of political discourses in China and the United States, he explains how ideas such as democracy, liberalism, and political rationality travel around the world. Above all, by comparing liberal thoughts on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, he shows that much of the misunderstanding between China and the Western world stems from their different political traditions and political discourses. This misunderstanding, he contends, has led to significant miscommunications and misjudgments in international relationship and global trade. Thus, to build a more peaceful and integrated world, Chinese and Western thinkers must find ways to resolve their differences through sincere and sustained dialogues.

Similar to his earlier work, *Escape from Predicament*,<sup>1</sup> Metzger focuses his attention on the development of modern Chinese thought from the late nineteenth century to the present. He argues that there has been a continuous evolution in Chinese political discourse from late Qing reformers such as Yan Fu 嚴復 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 to contemporary philosophers such as Yin Haiguang 殷海光 and Li Zehou 李澤厚. But unlike the previous book, he no longer confines his analysis to New Confucianism (*xin rujia* 新儒家) as the historical root of Chinese modernity. Instead, he expands the scope to include three other ideologies in modern China: Maoism, Sun Yat-sen's doctrine, and Chinese liberalism. The expansion of scope not only gives broader coverage of modern Chinese thought but also provides Metzger with a direct link to contemporary Chinese politics. Thus, one may read *A Cloud Across the Pacific* as an extension of *Escape from Predicament*. Whereas the latter is an attempt to explain the subtlety of modern Chinese thought through the lens of Neo-

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

Confucianism, the former is a large-scale study of the same mammoth topic by including all the major players.

True to the title, Metzger divides his book into two halves, each devoted to one side of the Pacific Ocean. In the first half, containing six chapters, he examines the thoughts of Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Hu Guoheng 胡國亨, Gao Like 高力克, Li Qiang 李強, Yang Guoshu 楊國樞, and Jin Yaoji 金耀基.<sup>2</sup> In the second half, again comprising six chapters, he analyzes the writings of John Stuart Mill, John Dunn, Frederick A. Hayek, John Rawls, and Richard Rorty. In the beginning and end of the book, he adds a chapter comparing the two groups of thinkers in four areas — global vision, individual freedom, view of history, and knowledge as an agent of change — finding that the two groups consistently disagree with each other. Whereas the Chinese thinkers anticipate the rise of a China based on a paternalistic government with limited tolerance on dissent, the Western ones firmly believe in the continuing dominance of Europe and United States because of their democratic traditions. And while the Chinese thinkers adopt the views of linear progression and historical truth, their Western counterparts have “turned the corner” in accepting plurality and relativity in their cultural perspectives.

At first glance, Metzger appears to have given himself an impossible task. The political thinkers he examines are so numerous and diverse that it seems difficult to fit them into a single book. Moreover, on both sides of the Pacific, political discourses are difficult to pin down because they evolve in tandem with changing domestic concerns and international interests. Most important, the two sides of the Pacific have been connected in many ways, ranging from foreign relations to migration to trade. Looking at political thought is merely one way in which people may understand one another cross-culturally. Nonetheless, Metzger succeeds in offering a coherent account of a century-long journey in which Chinese thinkers looked to the other side of the Pacific for intellectual inspirations, and in turn gained a better understanding of their own cultural tradition. The saga began with Yan Fu and Liang Qichao of the late nineteenth century, who searched in the Western traditions for a liberal form of government that would suit China. It continued throughout the twentieth century in the name of New Confucianism led by thinkers such as Tang Junyi. By the end of the twentieth century, it has evolved into a complex movement involving thinkers in mainland China (Li Qiang), Hong Kong (Hu Guoheng and Jin Yaoji), and Taiwan (Yang Guoshu).

Throughout the book, Metzger calls this group of Chinese thinkers “discourse #1.” Such a label may cause misgivings insofar as it suppresses the glaring and significant differences among group members. Tang Junyi, for instance, is at least a generation earlier than the rest. Hu Guoheng, whom Metzger describes as “Hong Kong’s Oswald Spengler,” worked in a transnational, capitalistic environment drastically different from Li Qiang’s Beijing and Yang Guoshu’s Taipei. Gao Like, in his rigorous defense of Mao Zedong’s and Deng Xiaoping’s visions of modernity, is at odds with American-trained scholars such as Jin

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<sup>2</sup> For consistency and clarity, I use pinyin to transliterate Chinese names. In the book, Metzger employs a variety of ways in handling Chinese names. In most cases, he uses the Wade-Giles system to transliterate Chinese names, such as Tang Chun-i for Tang Junyi. For Jin Yaoji, however, he refers him by his English name; so Jin is known as Ambrose Y. C. King.

Yaoji and Yang Guoshu. Metzger's decision to address these diverse thinkers under a single discourse risks understating and obscuring the important differences between them. A similar problem bedevils Metzger's grouping of the Western thinkers into "discourse #2." For him, these thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill, John Dunn, John Rawls, Frederick A. Hayek and Richard Rorty, may have differences in their methodology and emphasis, but they are part of the "Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution" (or GMWER) that has helped to create liberal societies and democratic governments in Western Europe and the United States. As with the Chinese case, Metzger imposes an artificial unity on the Western thinkers, such that despite their different views on knowledge and rationality, they seem to have a uniform political agenda.

Nevertheless, for readers who are concerned with the broad picture, Metzger's distinction between "discourse #1" and "discourse #2" pinpoints three fundamental differences in conceptualizing political life. First, "discourse #1" thinkers are more forgiving toward the monopoly of power by the state, while those of "discourse #2" are more interested in limiting the state power by protecting individual rights. Second, "discourse #1" is suspicious of an autonomous (and potentially disorderly) society outside of the control of the state, but "discourse #2" considers free choices in the marketplaces of politics, economy and intellect as the foundation of a liberal society. Third, the former is optimistic about the impact of education on people's behaviour and beliefs, as opposed to the latter, which is sceptical about the objectivity of knowledge and the effect of education. These three differences, Metzger contends, give rise to conflicting views on domestic and international politics, so much so that "the emergence of a peaceful, stable, constructive relation between China and the West, particularly the U.S., is in doubt today" (p. xxiii).

While Metzger's ominous warning may seem pessimistic and alarming to some, his goal is to highlight the central fact that both groups of thinkers are, in many ways, captives of their cultural traditions. Although the thinkers on the Chinese side are vastly different with respect to age, temperament, training and working environment, they share similar assumptions about knowledge, society and polity. Shaped by Confucianism and Buddhism, they are, in Metzger's terms, "epistemologically optimistic" about attaining objective truths, and therefore uniformly reject Western scepticism and relativism. Still living in an élitist society, they place enormous value on the leadership of the educated and the power of a paternalistic government. Influenced by events in the last century, they believe that China should be on the rise after having been crippled by foreign powers. On the other hand, thinkers on the Western side are ethnocentric in assuming that Western modernity must be the model for the whole world. While John Dunn's epistemological approach to political philosophy is not the same as John Rawls's philosophy of liberalism, and Frederick A. Hayek's political theory is different from Richard Rorty's, these thinkers are uniformly reluctant to engage with the ideas of the non-Western thinkers.

The fundamental differences between the two groups of thinkers may be widely known and have been repeatedly discussed, but in restating them in clear terms, Metzger intends to initiate a dialogue between the two groups with a view to resolving their differences. He argues that underlying the differences is a common interest in developing a liberal form of government, and what is lacking is the occasion or mechanism whereby each side may communicate ideas clearly and directly to the other side. To prove his point, he shows that

all six Chinese thinkers he studies have attempted to engage in some sort of a dialogue with Western thinkers, as they mastered the main ideas of their own brand of liberalism, applied them to the Chinese environment and reflected critically on the results. He reiterates that thinkers like Hu Guoheng and Yang Guoshu have openly expressed their concerns about the limitations of Western liberalism, but their concerns, many of which are legitimate and well-intentioned, have not been seriously considered by Western thinkers. These examples show that in the short run, given their different cultural traditions and political discourses, the two groups may have great difficulty coming to a convergence of views. But as Metzger points out, the goal of a dialogue is not to impose one's view on the other, but to provide an opportunity where both sides may begin to listen to each other. One hopes that the Western thinkers will soon follow the example of their Chinese counterparts, who have apparently been more aggressive in engaging in dialogues.

Regardless of whether Metzger succeeds in initiating a dialogue across the Pacific, it is clear that he has put political philosophy to good use. In discussing the contribution of Tang Junyi, Metzger writes, "T'ang's thought, I believe, did what philosophy is supposed to do. It did not solve the problems people everywhere should be worried about. It helped to identify them and so surpassed the great amount of philosophical discussion, east and west, unconcerned with them" (pp. 277-78). The same can be said of Metzger's own work. By identifying the problems that people on both sides of the Pacific should be worried about, it points to areas where more effort needs to be exerted in order to avoid misunderstanding. By revealing their similarities and differences, he is building a bridge between thinkers in China and the United States.

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*Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature*. Edited by Wilt L. Idema, Wai-ye Li, and Ellen Widmer. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. Pp. xi + 533. \$60.00.

A combined product of two successive conferences, this book is a collective study of the complex literary responses to the traumatic Ming-Qing transition between 1644 and 1700. Unlike too many conference volumes that are justified only by a common topic and a summary of chapters in the form of an introduction, this multi-author book is happily much more than the sum total of its parts. Organically structured in form and intricately interwoven in content, all aspects of this volume address, and inter-illuminate, one another. For example, critical analyses of the Qing writer Wu Weiye (1609-1672) as a cultural figure, poet, prose writer, and playwright respectively are informed by, and in turn inform, the general introduction to the book, the division introductions to the poetry, prose, and the drama sections, and other chapters on Wu's contemporaries. As a result, the book offers a richly nuanced, multifaceted, yet remarkably coherent and readable history of early Qing literature with a clear focus and far reaching implications. In this respect, this book sets an