

Why Be Moral?: Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers. By Yong Huang. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 343. \$95.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

In 1987, the theologian-philosopher Robert Cummings Neville wrote in his preface to *Thinking Through Confucius* co-authored by David Hall and Roger Ames:

The great project begun in the nineteenth century of translating classical Chinese writings into English and other European languages searched among the Western philosophers for categories adequate to Chinese culture. Increasing sophistication has revealed the subtle but pervasive otherness between these cultures that distorts the effectiveness of even the best translations. Hall and Ames turn the tables on the search for matching Western categories. The Western categories are inadequate even for Western culture, and like many others Hall and Ames call for a deconstruction of their own languages' representation of the Western tradition, or the Anglo-European tradition as they call it.¹

In describing Hall and Ames's book as an attempt to "turn the tables on the search for matching Western categories," Neville is distinguishing it from earlier works that tried to fit Chinese thought into the Western mode of thinking. A prime example of this "search for matching Western categories" is Fung Yu-lan's 馮友蘭 peculiar way of defining Chinese philosophy. Rather than stating directly what Chinese philosophy is about, Fung gives a list of items that are lacking in Chinese philosophy, such as it is not systematic, it is not concerned with pure knowledge, and it is not schematically sub-divided into metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and logic.² For Neville, these earlier efforts are fruitless not only because "[t]here are no adequate Western categories to translate Confucius," but also because "Western culture should be reconstructed with new categories precisely so as to be able to resonate with and give expression to the riches of Chinese culture."³ The contribution of Hall and Ames's book, Neville asserts, is highlighting two areas where Western philosophers must take into consideration in order to understand the Chinese: their belief in an immanent cosmos and their aesthetic sensibility.⁴

¹ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. xiii.

² Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 1–3.

³ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. xiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv.

Twenty-seven years later, Yong Huang 黃勇 goes a step further in “turning the tables.” In *Why Be Moral?: Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*, Huang is no longer satisfied with showing how Western philosophers may improve their understanding of the Chinese mind. Instead, he proposes a new methodology whereby the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions are compared in such a manner that “while [he lets] Western philosophy dictate what issues to talk about, [he lets] Chinese philosophy have the final say on each of these issues” (p. 11). The result of this comparison is strikingly bold. Huang wants to prove that “Western philosophers have something important to learn from Chinese philosophy” (p. 10).

Seemingly arrogant and ethnocentric, Huang has reasons to ask Western philosophers to learn from Chinese philosophy. First, he makes a prudent decision to focus on the two Cheng brothers—Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107)—whose philosophical insights have been rendered accessible to Western philosophers by A. C. Graham. In his *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'êng Ming-tao and Ch'êng Yi-ch'uan*,⁵ Graham highlights the significance of the two Chengs’ “philosophy of organism.” According to Graham, the two brothers successfully link metaphysics and ethics by viewing the cosmos as a complex network of paths and veins that touches everyone in his or her everyday life. Over the last four decades, this “philosophy of organism” (or moral-metaphysics, if we follow Mou Zongsan 牟宗三) has become the touchstone for understanding the Neo-Confucianism of late imperial China. It has generated heated debates in the Western academy on the uniqueness of the Neo-Confucian ontology, religiosity, and sagehood. In short, Yong Huang’s conclusion—arrogant and ethnocentric as it may appear—is based on decades of research undertaken by such scholars as Wm. Theodore de Bary, Berry Keenan, Shuhsien Liu 劉述先, and Tu Wei-ming 杜維明. In the book, Huang skilfully reminds his readers of this impressive scholarship by devoting a full chapter (pp. 195–221) to discussing the two Chengs’ concept of *li* 理. Paying his respect to scholars of earlier generations, Huang gives the chapter the subtitle: *The Metaphysic of Morals or Moral Metaphysics*.

Second, Yong Huang supports his argument by deploying a unique strategy to highlight the superiority of Chinese philosophy. To explain his strategy, Yong Huang writes: “With this goal in mind, and focusing on ethics just to make this study more manageable, I shall identify a number of important and controversial moral issues in the West to see what representative positions on each of these issues are, what problems there may be with each of these positions, and whether and how the Cheng brothers can have anything, not only new but also better, to say on these issues” (p. 10). The operative word in Huang’s strategy is “representative.” That

⁵ London: Lund Humphries, 1958.

is, he focuses on issues that he deems “representative” of Western philosophical tradition, and then he looks into the writings of the two Cheng brothers to find out their “representative” views on those issues. As such, Huang’s comparison of Eastern and Western philosophies is highly circumscribed and result-oriented. It begins with “Why be moral?” (Chapter 1)—a question that is at the heart of Confucianism during the classical period and the late imperial period. And then the comparison continues on by addressing such issues as “Is a virtuous person self-centered?” (Chapter 2), “How is weakness of the will (*akrasia*) not possible?” (Chapter 3), “Ethics between theory and antitheory” (Chapter 4), “Why the political is also personal” (Chapter 5), “The metaphysic of morals or moral metaphysics” (Chapter 6), and “Hermeneutics as a practical learning” (Chapter 7). As the list shows, while the problématiques of the comparison are derived from the Western philosophical tradition, the two Cheng brothers are always able to provide answers to these issues because they are the foundation of their moral metaphysics.

Even though the comparison is highly selective and intended to favour the two Chengs, Huang uses the comparison to make timely interventions into current philosophical debates. One of the debates into which Huang intervenes is how to respond to the revival of virtue ethics. Focusing on the moral character of an individual with no link to society, virtue ethics gains prominence in the Western academy as the economy becomes more globalized and social media makes communication instantaneous and spontaneous. In response, Huang endorses the ethical thinking of the two Chengs. He writes: “I argue that a virtuous person in the Chengs’ neo-Confucianism, unlike one in Aristotelianism, is virtuous because the person takes care of not only the material well-being but also the character traits of others” (p. 98). Further expanding the two Chengs’ notion of virtuous ethics, Huang emphasizes the importance of the “ethics of difference.” Implicitly aiming at the debates over diversity, multiculturalism, and racial harmony in the United States, Huang writes: “The lesson we can learn from the Cheng brothers’ neo-Confucian ethics is that, when we encounter people with different cultural and religious traditions, we cannot just go ahead and love them but must first learn about their unique ideas, ideals, customs, and way of behaving. Such a consideration, in addition to helping us find appropriate ways to love them, is itself a way to respect them” (p. 160). Toward the end of the book, Huang returns to this theme of diversity and multiculturalism by discussing the Neo-Confucian concept of government. He praises the two Cheng brothers for stressing propriety when discussing rulership and government structure. He writes: “We have presented the Cheng brothers’ neo-Confucian conception of *propriety* as a political philosophy, which is more concerned with how to cultivate the virtues of members of a political community than how those members should be ruled” (pp. 187–88).

These comments—brief and sporadic notwithstanding—are inspiring to those who are interested in applying Neo-Confucianism to contemporary life. Whether or not the two Chengs have the upper hand in answering questions that have perplexed Western philosophers for centuries, the true value of Huang's book is its heart-warming encouragement to develop a different mode of thinking to face the challenges of our times. Throughout the book, Huang urges us to focus our attention on the diversity and fluidity of human life because it is part of a complex network of paths and veins; he asks us to listen carefully to others' voices and concerns because we will not be able to live our lives fully without the people around us; above all, he encourages us to reexamine the current political system in the West that emphasizes following the laws rather than cultivating citizens' moral consciousness.

While Huang succeeds in demonstrating the contemporary relevance of Neo-Confucianism, he misses an opportunity to advance the study of the two Cheng brothers. Since Fung Yu-lan's monumental study of Chinese philosophy in the 1930s, the two Chengs have been seen as the origin of the split between the Learning of the Way (*lixue* 理學) and the Learning of the Mind (*xinxue* 心學) within the Neo-Confucian tradition. As the argument goes, Cheng Yi started the Learning of the Way by focusing on the study of classical texts and the investigation of empirical facts. In contrast, Cheng Hao started the Learning of the Heart by focusing on moral cultivation and spiritual awakening. This perceived difference between the two Chengs received further attention in A. C. Graham's book where Cheng Yi was depicted as a "dualist" and Cheng Hao as a "monist" in accordance with their mode of thinking. Contrary to Fung Yu-lan and A. C. Graham, Huang sees the two Chengs as speaking in one voice. Throughout his book, Huang refuses to differentiate the two brothers when comparing their philosophy with those of Western thinkers. Textually, Huang is correct to treat the two Chengs as a team because their received writings always appear together, such as *Er Cheng quanshu* 二程全書 (Complete Works of the Two Chengs) and *Er Cheng ji* 二程集 (The Collected Writings of the Two Chengs). Methodologically, Huang is on solid ground because linking the two Chengs retrospectively to the two competing Neo-Confucian schools is an exercise of anachronism.

However, other than a few brief remarks in the introduction, Huang is reluctant to engage in the debate over the two Chengs. As a result, readers who look for an answer to the debate are bewildered: Shall they follow Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) who saw the two Chengs as part of a collective enterprise during the eleventh century to revive Confucianism vis-à-vis the challenge of Daoism and Buddhism? Or shall they accept Fung and Graham's view that from hindsight, the two Chengs were the origin of the split between the two schools of Neo-Confucianism? Or shall they focus on the contemporary relevance of the two Chengs' philosophy without worrying about their differences?

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.

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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.¹ 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

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