

BOOK REVIEWS

Essentials of Contemporary Neo-Confucian Philosophy. By Shu-hsien Liu. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003. Pp. xv + 165. \$98.95/£58.00.

It is always a noteworthy event when the history of an intellectual movement is written by an eminent and publicly recognized member of that movement — an event both fascinating and complicated, to be sure, but one for which we have many reasons to be grateful. It presents special problems and special advantages. We cannot expect an impartial overview of the kind we might get from an outsider without any personal commitments at stake, but neither can we accept a purely subjective and partisan rant. Although we know we are getting a review of precursors and ancestors from within, as it were, and in terms of their relevance to a trend of development that our author wishes to bring to fruition in himself, we expect both reliable information and also creative and engaged interpretation. We might think here of Hegel's lectures on the history of Greek and German philosophy, for example, which are rich in insights into the thinkers under consideration while also being an invaluable resource for illuminating Hegel's own self-understanding of his relation to these forebears. Heidegger's treatment of the pre-Socratics and of Nietzsche would be another useful point of comparison here. In this book, Shu-hsien Liu has given us an exemplary addition to this small but disproportionately important genre.

Liu presents us with a concise but penetrating overview of contemporary Neo-Confucianism (*xinrujia*), of which he is a prominent living representative. He begins with an excellent introductory chapter, "Paradigm Shift in the Transitional Period from the Late Ming to the Early Ch'ing," which not only seamlessly connects to the intellectual narrative to his earlier work of intellectual history, *Understanding Confucian Philosophy: Classical and Sung-Ming* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), but also succeeds in making intelligible the internal connections between the seemingly disjunctive transitions within Neo-Confucianism of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the transformation from the intuitionist idealism of the Wang Yang-ming school to the text-bound humanistic philological studies of the Qing, and how these form parts of a single narrative. Particularly interesting here is Liu's treatment of the handling of the relation between principle and desire, in the development of which Liu discerns, and convincingly presents, a kind of inner dialectic leading imperceptibly to a paradigm shift in late Ming thinkers like Liu Tsung-chou, Huang Tsung-hsi, and especially Chen Ch'ueh. Liu attributes to this somewhat more obscure thinker the "radical break" of eliminating altogether the "transcendent aspect" of principle in its relation to human desire, presenting for the first time a radically naturalistic and humanistic position exclusively emphasizing the immanent aspect and eliminating all metaphysical speculation. Chen, Liu thinks, "plunged into a new paradigm without quite realizing it himself." Liu is critical of this move, seeing the disappearance of the transcendent aspect of Neo-Confucianism as leading to the delegation of ultimate authority to the existing powers that be. As Liu puts it, this kind of conservatism inherits Chu Hsi's

ghost but not his spirit. Liu admits that Chu had indeed elevated conventional morality (e. g., the *san-kang* or three bonds, establishing the authority of ruler over minister, father over son and husband over wife) to transcendent and absolute status, giving them greater authority than they had ever enjoyed before. Nonetheless, the transcendent dimension of the old Neo-Confucian thinking allows Liu to make an interesting interpretive move, which the new paradigm forecloses, as follows: “Chu Hsi’s elevation of *san-kang* was merely a mistake in application, taking what is changing to be something everlasting. Such a mistake can be corrected in principle without any difficulty.” The same cannot be said of the Qing philologists, who took immanent human conventions to be literally, directly and absolutely authoritative, and hence were much more conservative than the conservatives they sought to overthrow. Liu’s interpretative skill here is both illuminating and persuasive.

In his second chapter, “Background for the Emergence of Contemporary New Confucianism,” Liu takes on the situation in the early Republican period, and the surprising resurgence of Confucianism in spite of the fall of its institutional bases and the severe repudiations of the May Fourth Movement. Liu distinguishes three generations of modern Confucians, which he categorizes as follows:

The First Generation:

Group I: Liang Sou-ming, Hsiung Shih-li, Ma I-fu, and Carsun Chang

Group II: Fung Yu-lan, Ho Lin, Ch’ien Mu and Thomé H. Fang

The Second Generation:

Group III: T’ang Chun-i, Mou Tsung-san, and Hsu Fu-kuan

The Third Generation:

Group IV: Yu Ying-shih, Liu Shu-hsien, Cheng Chung-ying, and Tu Wei-ming

It is to the thought of these figures that the rest of the volume is devoted. Liang is seen as the initiator of the movement, although, as Liu notes, Hsiung is rightfully the spiritual leader of its development, being the teacher of all three of the thinkers identified here as Group III (T’ang, Mou and Hsu), in whose works Contemporary New Confucianism developed into a force to be reckoned with in modern Chinese culture. Liu gives a lucid overview of Liang’s tripartite theory of world culture, and its significance in the providing a positive re-evaluation of the place of Confucian values during a period of cultural encroachment and crisis. Liang saw Western culture as forward-striving, characterized by the conquest of nature, scientific method and democracy. At the other extreme was Indian culture, which he saw as backward-looking, focused on religious aspiration and spiritual liberation. In a middle position was Chinese culture, which Liang saw as rooted in sociality rather than materialism or spiritualism, focusing on harmony, equilibrium, contentment, adjustment to the environment and acceptance of authority. On this basis, he advocated an exclusion of the Indian orientation, the selective adoption of Western methods, and a revitalization of the traditional Chinese cultural values, as reformed through the new critical understanding. Although, as Liu notes, Liang’s ideas appear rather oversimplified from the modern perspective, he was the first to suggest a revival of the Confucian Way, understood within

the context of an expanded intellectual horizon of the new international context, to face a current situation.

Liu continues to give a fine overview of the debate concerning the relative value of Western science and Chinese Confucianism that ensued in the early 1920s, involving such thinkers as Carsun Chang (heavily influenced by Henri Bergson and Rudolf Eucken) and Ting Wen-chiang (a follower of Ernst Mach and Karl Pearson). These affiliations led the debaters to give, as Liu says, rather one-sided views, pitting a highly subjectivised vision of metaphysics against a radical scientism. It is in this context that the stage is set for the gradual consolidation of the point of view of “The First Generation” of Contemporary Neo-Confucians. After the revolution of 1949, Carsun Chang, Ch’ien Mu, Thomé Fang, T’ang Chun-i, Mou Tsung-san and Hsu Fu-kuan fled overseas or to Hong Kong or Taiwan. In 1958, Chang, T’ang, Mou and Hsu together published “A Manifesto for a Reappraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture,” a landmark in the movement. Liu gives us several excerpts from this intriguing document, which spelled out the relation between Chinese and Western thought as understood by these thinkers. Most notable is the distinction made between Chinese thought and both religion and atheism as understood in the West, focusing on the doctrine of *hsin-hsing* (literally, “mind-nature”), which Liu glosses somewhat unhelpfully as “concentration of mind on an exhaustive study of the nature of the universe,” a translation which somewhat obscures the sense of this important term. This is declared to be the basis of ethics and the source of the central Chinese theories on “Heaven and humanity in union” (*t’ien-jen-ho-i*), a concept which is seen to be an “extension of primordial religious passion to ethical moral principles and to daily living.” The manifesto makes recommendations for the Chinese adoption of scientific method and democratic political institutions, but at the same time, more audaciously, makes some suggestions about what the West can learn from China. Among these suggestions, the first is perhaps the most intriguing: “the West needs the spirit and capacity of sensing the presence of what is at every particular moment [*tang-hsia chi-shih*], and of giving up everything that can be had [*i-ch’ieh fang-hsia*]....” One may wish that Liu gave a more thorough exegesis of exactly how these thinkers wished these intriguing and pregnant phrases to be understood, although part of the answer is scattered through the following chapters. Instead, he gives a very broad overview of the stand taken by these Neo-Confucian scholars, emphasizing the metaphysics of creativity, the intuitionist epistemology, and the assertion of intrinsic meaning and value of existent things in the world.

The rest of the book is devoted to chapter-long summaries of the careers and philosophies of the five most central modern Confucian thinkers — Fung, Hsiung, Fang, T’ang and Mou — followed by a concluding chapter on the contemporary situation. Liu recounts Fung’s “New Learning of Principle” (*hsin li-hsueh*), giving a brief but useful description of Fung’s distinction between the “real” and the “true,” the system he builds around the four concepts of principle, material force, the Way as substance, and totality, and the relation of Fung’s ideas to Greek and Hegelian philosophy. Of particular interest is Fung’s troubled relationship to Maoist orthodoxy in the PRC. Forced to join the anti-Confucius movement during the Cultural Revolution, Fung publicly repudiated his former philosophy. After the fall of the Gang of Four, he voiced his critical evaluations of Mao’s thought, but, as Liu points out, without overstepping the official government line.

Nonetheless, late in his career, Fung advocates the dialectics of Song Neo-Confucianism, particularly Chang Tsai, as opposed to the Marxist-Leninist version; both, thinks Fung, advance the idea of the unity of opposites, but the Confucian version sees the necessary conflict between entities as a temporary stage, so that “hatred would eventually be dissolved by harmony,” whereas the Marxist concept of class struggle, as Fung interprets it, suggests rather that “hatred would last to the end.” Liu admits Fung’s historical importance on the basis of four points: his advocacy, like Liang Sou-ming, of Confucianism in a hostile environment; his clear, persuasive prose style; the international influence of the English translation of his *History of Chinese Philosophy*; and his continued work in Mainland China even during the People’s Republic era. Nonetheless, Liu judges Fung not to be a great philosopher of the movement, nor one whose thought had any influence on overseas Neo-Confucianism. For that, we must turn to Hsiung, the subject of the next chapter.

Unlike Fung, Hsiung never repudiated his Confucian philosophy, even during the heyday of Communist anti-Confucianism, and never couched his thought in Marxist-Leninist terms, in spite of continuing to live in the PRC until his death in 1968. Both his stubborn integrity and his metaphysical acuity have been formative influences in subsequent Confucianism. Liu gives a concise but helpful overview of Hsiung’s development, from his early study of Yogacara Buddhism to his involvement with the *Book of Changes*, followed by the development of his complete system of Confucian metaphysics and epistemology. Hsiung’s metaphysics are rooted on the notion of the “nonduality of substance and function” and “transformation through closing and opening,” derived from the *Book of Changes* and elaborating the Confucian idea of universal creativity with a new level of intricacy. Hsiung’s epistemological distinction between the original mind and the habitual mind allows him to continue the discussion of the relation between scientific and metaphysical truths along the lines first sketched out in the earliest phases of the movement, but with a greater degree of nuance and sophistication. Liu notes the influence of Marxism on his later thought, in particular his political ideas and the condemnation of Mencius in his later philosophy. While Liu is critical of Hsiung’s social philosophy — “he did not have the slightest idea of how democracy works...” — he acknowledges that he was the most original thinker of his generation, and the fountainhead of modern Neo-Confucianism.

The following two chapters, on Fang and Tang, have a slightly more perfunctory feel to them than the chapter on Hsiung, and even that on Fung Yu-lan. Liu shows great admiration for both of these thinkers, but he does not give the kind of detailed exposition of their thought that he gives to Hsiung and, later, to Mou Tsung-san. There are several reasons why this might be so. First, Liu’s own brand of Confucianism develops from and resonates most with the tradition of Hsiung and Mou, and these two chapters are the real heart of the book; these are where we find Liu really getting rolling up his sleeves and digging into the heart of the matter. Fang and Tang, especially the former, appear here as side players, who were brilliant and worthy of the greatest respect, but who are presented somewhat, one feels, as secondary offshoots of the main thrust of the movement. Second, both Fang and Tang were broad synthesizers, who created architectonic systems of thought rich with particular insights and detailed explorations of stray ideas, a style of thinking that is very resistant to brief summarization. It would be quite difficult to give any sense of the richness of their thought in a short overview. Liu frequently has recourse, in both of these chapters, to the “it

is impossible to go into all the details in the space allotted me here” escape clause. That said, Liu does an admirable job of at least providing an overview of their concerns and approaches, which is of great value because there is no comparable short introduction to these thinkers in English. Fang’s “Grand Scheme of Comparative Philosophy” is presented in terms of his unfinished proposal for a comparison of Greek, Modern European, Indian and Chinese thinking, the extant outline of which, as Liu says, allows us to appreciate the grandeur of his scheme. Fang did manage to give his understanding of three of these four traditions in his speech on “Three Types of Philosophical Wisdom.” Each of these three has three further subdivisions representing its component spiritual tendencies, as follows:

Greek: the Apollonian, the Dionysian, the Olympian
Modern European: the Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo
Chinese: the Taoist, the Confucian, the Moist

To this Fang would later add:

Indian: the Upanishadic, the Buddhistic, the Bhagavadgitaic

This sort of bold speculative summary of the essential aspects of these various world cultures, with its free use of Hegelian, Nietzschean and Spenglerian motifs, its strong literary and artistic sensibility, and its synthetic power, is typical of Fang’s approach. Such a project stands in the tradition of intercultural comparison begun by Liang Sou-ming in the first generation of the movement, but with far greater subtlety and insight. Liu gives a useful roadmap of Fang’s ideas, but his brevity here sometimes makes it seem merely a listing of the terms and categories Fang was so fond of creating, rather than a real summary of their content, let alone an exegesis thereof. We are told, for example, that Fang in his posthumously published *magnum opus* created a philosophical anthropology which classified the Confucian as a “Time-man,” the Taoist as a “Space-man,” the Buddhist as “a Space-Time man with an alternative sense of forgetting,” and the Neo-Confucian as a “concurrent Space-Time man” manqué. No explanation is given for these tantalizing descriptions. One would like to hear much more. However, that is perhaps not Liu’s job, and he does at least point us to where we can in fact obtain this knowledge: Fang’s own works. Fang stands alone as a solitary figure, not quite a part of the mainstream of modern Confucianism. His marked ambivalence toward the Song and Ming Neo-Confucians is especially noteworthy in this connection.

The treatment of T’ang Chun-i is also quite brief and schematic. Liu stands closer to T’ang than he does to Fang, one feels, but Liu treats only one small corner of T’ang’s vast thinking in his succinct description here, concentrating almost exclusively on T’ang’s famous and influential study of *Li* (“Principle”) in the history of Chinese thought of all schools. Tang noted six distinct senses of the term, which provide a structure with which to understand the various developments in its usage, and the thinking embedded therein, throughout Chinese intellectual history. Liu gives a short summary of each of these senses and the meaning Tang attaches to them, which in itself is quite useful. But Tang’s similarly great contributions to the understanding of other key terms and concepts — for example,

hsing and Tao — are passed over in silence. This seems like a very one-sided and misleading presentation of Tang's work. The chapter ends with a summary of T'ang's late work on "Spiritual Spheres of the Mind," composed by his disciple Li Tu, which is very valuable to have in English. Liu notes the similarity to Hegel's phenomenology of spirit, while also pointing out the difference: "T'ang had avoided using a deductive model that would force empirical data into his system in a rigid fashion, and his system was open-ended without the need to culminate in Hegel's Absolute Spirit." This open-endedness is characteristic of T'ang's work, and distinguishes him from many of the other figures treated here; it goes hand in hand with the detailed absorption in individual philosophical points and issues that we find in his often difficult but always rewarding works. As Liu puts it, "T'ang did not try to resolve the contradictions between the worlds he envisaged, adhering to the adage: to each his own. For T'ang, everyone has to find the best for himself in the context given." This non-dogmatic pluralism is a rare quality in an engaged and systematic thinker of T'ang's stature, and here again one wishes Liu had paused to expound on it at greater length.

Liu's treatment of Mou Tsung-san's lifework is the centrepiece of this book. It is beautifully done, and quite illuminating. Here Liu gives us a step-by-step analysis of Mou's intellectual development, the components of his expanding philosophical vision, the distinctive steps taken in bringing together his wide variety of inspirations and the inner logic of his eventual conclusions. Mou used Kantian resources to clarify the central themes of Chinese intellectual history with a new level of rigour which has proved highly inspirational to the next generation of Chinese thinkers, including Liu, combining this also with a rediscovery of Tiantai Buddhist thinking which has proved revolutionary not only among Neo-Confucians but among Buddhist intellectuals as well. Astonishingly, Mou was able to use both Kantian and Tiantai categories to rebuild a Confucian metaphysics of morals, thereby critiquing not only Cheng-Zhu Confucianism and establishing his own version of an orthodox line of Confucian succession, but also Kant himself, and Tiantai as well. Although, as Liu points out, Mou has much in common with T'ang and agrees with him in many particulars, Mou works in a contrary direction to T'ang's open-endedness. He borrows the Tiantai classification of teachings to create his own hierarchy of teachings, both Western and Chinese, with a boldness and audacity that are backed up with prodigious skill. By means of a borrowing of Kant's concept of intellectual intuition, he flattens Kant himself; by means of a borrowing of Tiantai paradoxical identity of value opposites, he steps beyond Tiantai to a new Confucian orthodoxy. How this was pulled off makes for an amazing story, and Liu presents it with great clarity, feeling its inevitability as it were from within, so that it comes to make sense to an English reader. This is a great contribution. The recounting of Mou's critique of Heidegger, and the distinction between "ontology with adherence" and "ontology without adherence" as Liu translates, is perhaps of especial value to comparative philosophers. However, "adherence" as a translation for *chih* will probably not prove very illuminating to an English reader unfamiliar with the Chinese tradition. The standard Buddhist translation of the term, "attachment," would perhaps have done the job more efficiently. Perhaps equally important is Liu's explanation of Mou's contribution to political thought and his critique of traditional political culture. As we have seen, the modern Neo-Confucians are all committed at least in name to the embrace of democracy, while also maintaining the Confucian ideal of "inward sageliness and outward kingliness," and the

traditional Confucian ethicocentrism which had little patience for rule of law or objectively accountable institutional forms. Reconciling these two seemingly contradictory demands has been one of the greatest challenges confronting modern Confucianism. Mou's is perhaps the only of these figures who faces the problem squarely, and whose metaphysical orientation has a genuine internal solution to offer to this kind of problem. Mou asserts that the traditional way of straightforwardly connecting ethics and politics, regarding the latter as an isomorphic extension of the former, is doomed to failure. Rather, the ideal of *jen-cheng* — government of humanity, or benevolent government — can only be reached through contrarian means, the way of *chu-tung* (roundabout approach), which allows politics to be independent of ethics, as in the modern West. The dialectical relation between the ethical and the non-ethical, which has been virulently denied by most Confucians, is here affirmed by means of an insight into the paradoxical union of opposites, reflected also in Mou's attraction to Tiantai thought. It is a stunning application of creative speculative thinking to work through a difficult pragmatic political problem, and Liu's presentation of this point is highly valuable.

The final chapter of the book treats the third generation of Neo-Confucian thinkers, including Liu himself, giving a brief biography and overview of each thinker and the international spread of the movement. While there are some intriguing Borgesian possibilities embedded in a project like this, where the works of a writer are discussed in one of his own works, Liu plays it straight, and provides good solid explanations of the development and interests of himself, Yu Ying-shih, Cheng Chung-ying and Tu Wei-ming, their achievements and divergences, equipping us with the programme notes with which to observe and appreciate whatever further blossoming the movement may undergo in the future.

All things considered, this is a work that is of great value and usefulness. It succeeds in presenting twentieth century Neo-Confucianism in a succinct, thumbnail form that will be comprehensible to interested comparative philosophers, sinologists, or survey course undergraduates who are curious to know what this modern Confucian movement is all about. As the only English language presentation of much of the material between its covers, it provides an invaluable service. As the work of one of the representative members of the tradition of thought it presents, it is a work of historical significance in its own right. On the negative side, its treatment is sometimes partisan, sometimes skewed or strangely weighted, sometimes marred by omissions or unexplained mentions of important concepts, and sometimes so brief as to run roughshod over fine nuances or to neglect important aspects of some of the thinkers considered. But as an introduction to a school of thought of great and increasing social and intellectual importance, it is a valuable resource, allowing us a glimpse at the scope and intertwinings of the issues that grip these thinkers and the way in which these ideas live and breathe in the pulse of these thinkers, as vital spiritual concerns. Liu's work places before us both the spirit and the letter of the Confucian tradition as it lives now.

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