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Review of Cheng and Bunin: Contemporary Chinese Philosophy

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This handsome volume encompasses sixteen essays on leading twentieth-century Chinese philosophers, all specifically written for the collection, as well as an introduction by Bunin and a preface plus two essays (one on more recent trends, the other an over-all interpretation) by Cheng. Each of the main selections includes a bibliography listing the subject’s main works and important studies on the subject, as well as a list of ten discussion questions. The thoughtful design of the collection makes it clear that its goals go beyond simply conveying information: in Bunin’s words, it aims to furnish “a platform for further investigation and innovative philosophical work” (p. 1).

It succeeds splendidly in providing such a platform. The sixteen contributors — all but one of them Chinese, though working in several different countries — have written excellent short studies of their subjects, both expounding their ideas and engaging with the ideas critically. There are occasional complaints one might make about the selections, on which a few details below, but the over-all standard of the prose, its historical accuracy, and its philosophical insight is very high. The selection of philosophers covered by the volume is hard to criticize: these are the leading lights of twentieth-century Chinese philosophy. It is only slightly misleading to think of this book as presenting “contemporary Chinese philosophy,” since (1) while almost all of them are dead, their ideas are very much alive in today’s China, Taiwan, and elsewhere; and (2) Cheng does provide a brief, highly selective look at “recent trends.” Those interested in more information on current philosophy in China can supplement Cheng’s essay with recent journal articles on the subject.1
The sixteen subjects of the book are the giants of philosophy in China, but most of them are little known outside of Chinese cultural spheres. A central goal of the book is to open up their thought to a wider audience, very much including contemporary Western philosophers and their students. One easy way to see this is to look through the discussion questions, which are uniformly well-chosen and thought-provoking. While all questions pick up on some aspect of the subject’s philosophy, they are not answerable by simply looking back at some line of the text. They require thought and can be sure to prompt discussion. (A randomly chosen example, from Jiwei Ci’s article on He Lin: “For the purposes of philosophy, is the mind (xin) best understood in terms of logic or psychology?”) The book is thus well-suited to be used in a classroom, though many instructors will want to assign primary texts by the authors as well. At the current moment, for many of the volume’s subjects, none of their writings have been translated, but a companion volume of translations is underway.

The editors have divided the book’s subjects into four sections, an arrangement that is based both on chronology and on content. Part One, “Pioneering New Thought from the West,” includes Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Zhang Dongsun, Hu Shi, and Jin Yuelin. Part Two, “Philosophizing in the Neo-Confucian Spirit,” covers Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming, Feng Youlan, and He Lin. Part Three, “Ideological Exposure to Dialectical Materialism,” includes Feng Qi, Zhang Dainian, and Li Zehou. Part Four, “Later Developments of New Neo-Confucianism,” covers Fang Dongmei, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi, and Mou Zongsan. One might quibble about the relative arrangement of Parts Three and Four, since all of those in Part Four are as old or older than the oldest in Part Three, and Part Three contains the only philosophers still writing today. The order here is of little significance, though, since while many of the authors covered in Parts
Three and Four were influenced by those in Parts One and Two, the two later groups were largely independent of one another.

Rather than discussing the individual articles one-by-one, it will be more interesting to look at themes that emerge across thinkers and across the century. First of all, at the center of most of the thinkers’ concerns are issues of metaphysics and epistemology, rather than political or moral philosophy; these philosophers (as a group) cite the Book of Change far more than Mencius or any other classic Chinese text. Perhaps related to this is the stress the essayists put on the construction of philosophical “systems.” Elaborate and original systems are seen as marks of significant philosophizing; those who do not build systems are sometimes criticized (see Hu Xinhe’s remarks about Hu Shi on pp. 98-9). It is tempting to ask whether the editors have given us a slightly skewed picture of twentieth-century Chinese philosophy: is there a bias in favor of system and metaphysics, in lieu of more fragmented writings on ethics or politics? My answer is that perhaps there is a slight bias, but it is neither strong nor difficult to justify. The editors are explicit about excluding thinkers who were “lesser philosophers,” though they might have had “greater public impact” than some of the figures included in the volume (p. 1). Mao Zedong is given as an example; presumably Sun Yatsen, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao would be others. In other words, some of the most influential political voices of the day are excluded by this (quite reasonable) criterion. There are other political thinkers who might have been considered; Gao Yihan and Zhang Foquan, for instance, were both sophisticated thinkers who enjoyed at least brief renown. Still, I cannot fault the editors for having chosen the figures they did.

A second theme that emerges in many of the essays is the importance to twentieth-century Chinese philosophy of “intuition.” A number of thinkers deploy concepts labeled “intuition,” though the concepts are not all identical; indeed, as Yanming An points out, Liang
Shuming himself used “intuition” in at least three different ways (p. 154). Some of the most stimulating discussions of intuition occur when several of the thinkers engage directly with Kant’s insistence that “intellectual intuition” is not open to humans. Huang Yong explains very well why Feng Qi needed to argue for the existence of human intellectual intuition, if we are to be able to know dao (p. 216); likewise, Refeng Tang spells out and engages thoughtfully with Mou Zongsan’s arguments to the same effect (pp. 332-6). In the essay which concludes the volume, Chung-ying Cheng notes that the issue of intuition “remains unresolved” in discussions between Chinese and Western philosophers (p. 399).

Other themes that surface include a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward science, a tendency to endorse the fusion of fact and value that Mou Zongsan (for instance) labels “moral metaphysics,” and a serious engagement on the part of many with scholarship on the history of Chinese philosophy. All thinkers covered in this volume draw significantly on the Chinese tradition, but none do so in simplistic fashion. These are critical inheritors of a varied and contested tradition, rather than ideologues promoting some sort of orthodoxy. A final theme is the tremendous variety of ways that the book’s subjects juxtapose or synthesize aspects of different traditions. These Chinese philosophers engage in dialogues with important Western thinkers as much as with the classic texts of the Chinese tradition. In many respects, this could be called “world philosophy” rather than “Chinese philosophy,” though like all philosophers who reach beyond their traditions, these men are nonetheless rooted in a (complex, evolving) culture and politics.

To summarize, this collection is well-conceived and delivers on its promise. It is not perfect, though, and this review would be incomplete without some notice of ways in which the individual essays could have been even better. Mostly, the failings can be seen as failures of
individual essays to live up to the editors’ paradigm, with its balances of exposition and criticism, biography and philosophical essay. The most trivial of flaws are the occasional mistakes in romanization; these mistakes are rarely positively misleading, since the Chinese characters for most terms are given in the Glossary or in the individual bibliographies. A slightly more bothersome issue is the lack, in a small minority of the essays, of adequate citations to the literature on which the essayist is drawing. To the extent this book is intended as a platform for further research, more guidance than is provided in Hu Jun’s article on Jin Yuelin, for instance — which cites only the handful of direct quotations — would prove helpful. A related problem is found in John Zijiang Ding’s piece on Li Zehou: Ding rarely cites Li’s work, nor does he give references for the various critics of Li to whom he (too briefly) alludes. On matters of content, one occasionally feels that an essayist has treated a complex issue too quickly, or failed to take up an adequately critical stance toward his or her subject’s ideas. That these concerns arise as infrequently as they do, though, is a testament to the high quality of the essays over-all. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in twentieth-, or twenty-first-, century Chinese thought, and offers the real prospect of opening up a new area of research, teaching, and cross-cultural exploration.

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