Review of Li, The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony

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The core argument of Chengyang Li’s new book is that harmony—understood in particular through the categories of “deep harmony” and “creative tension”—is the central idea of classical Confucianism. Part I contains five chapters that collectively explore the “philosophical concept” of harmony; the five chapters in Part II examine “harmony in practice” by looking at the ways that harmony structures Confucian thinking about person, family, society, world, and cosmos. *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* is a learned work, drawing on Li’s familiarity with a broader corpus of early Confucian texts than is often found in works on Confucian philosophy. I believe that readers will be largely persuaded by Li’s general picture of harmony, as well as by his contention that it is central to Confucianism. At the same time, there are some missed opportunities to dig deeper into the philosophical complexities raised by Confucian ideas of harmony. I will use part of this review to suggest areas where Li might owe us further reflections, including on ways in which his views in this book can dialogue with other scholarly treatments of related issues. Li’s book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Confucianism and of harmony, particularly if he and his readers are able to use the book as a platform for further investigation of its important topics.

The method that Li employs is both “reconstructive and constructive” (2). Part of what he means by reconstructive is that he aims to assemble a wide range of disparate sources, dating largely from the Warring States era and before, into a single coherent view. Some of Li’s key sources include the *Book of History, Book of Poetry, Book of Changes,* and *Record of Ritual,* as well as oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions, excavated bamboo and silk texts, and the *Analects,*
Mencius, and Xunzi. Li makes significant use of etymological analyses of key characters to unearth their early meanings. He sometimes draws on later commentaries, but is more reliant on modern Chinese scholarship to buttress his interpretations of particular words and passages. Indeed, a second reason for his use of “reconstructive” is that he feels that post-classical Confucians have not continued consistently to use “harmony” in the same way as their classical forebears, so “it is time to restore its rightful name” (10). Most of the book operates in this reconstructive vein, confining its sources and interlocutors to early texts, but in the final chapters, Li allows that classical ideas of harmony may have been unsatisfactory (in the case of gender issues) or too limited (in the cases of international and intercultural relations, and of human relations with our environment). Here Li engages in “construction” that expands his model of Confucian harmony by engaging with both later Chinese ideas and with various Western thinkers.

As I stated at the outset, Li argues that one of the key characteristics of Confucian harmony is “deep harmony,” by which he means “an integration of various forces and…an ongoing process in a fluid yet dynamic world. [It]…does not presuppose a given, fixed, underlying structure of the world” (28). Li cites several early sources that describe the initial state of the universe as chaotic, and shows that Heraclitean ideas of harmony—as opposed to the ultimately more influential Pythagorean views—closely resemble Confucian views in this respect. As a result, Confucian harmony is not something that we “discover”; since it is a “multi-dimensional, inclusive, and dynamic creative process, without a pre-established foundation, we need to participate in a proactive way to generate harmony through collaboration” (32). I believe this is correct and nicely articulated. I wish, though, that Li had engaged more explicitly with other recent efforts to draw out the sense in which Confucian ideas of harmony are
foundationless. For example, Michael Puett has argued that many early Chinese texts take as their starting point a “fractured world of unrelated elements”; in this context, “Innovation…makes no foundational appeal to either the individual will or any transcendent ground; it is simply a question of endless ritualization in a world that is accepted to be endlessly fragmented” (2006, 35). Would Li accept as radical a picture as this? In the chapter of *Sagehood* devoted to harmony, I also draw on the work of Scott Cook and others to bring out the way in which harmony is generative, open-ended, and even (in some sense) “creative,” while at the same time recognizing the existence of natural patterns and the possibility of perfection or getting-it-right (*cheng* 成) (Angle 2009, ch. 4). Later in the book, Li mentions the way in which music can feature authenticity and “trueness” (p. 50); it is not entirely clear how this fits with deep harmony. Li is certainly correct that the early Confucian view is very different from Plato, but on more nuanced issues it is sometimes difficult to see where he stands, vis-à-vis other positions that have been staked out in the scholarly secondary literature.

Creative tension is the other central feature of Li’s model of Confucian harmony. In emphasizing “tension”—and still more in saying that “a certain form of conflict is compatible with harmony” (12)—Li is taking a provocative position. He mentions Chung-ying Cheng’s view that “harmony is the absence of strife or conflict,” which I take to be a more mainstream view; in *Sagehood* I argue that we should talk of “complimentary differences” rather than conflict. As far as I can tell, what Li means by “tension” is that two entities must be in “competition” with one another, and “conflict” refers to “the kind of relationship in which one force aims to destroy or eliminate the other” (12-13). I believe that Li has two different scenarios in mind. One emphasizes the generativity of harmony. Rather than see harmony as the once-and-for-all resolution of a competitive situation, he may be thinking (in a rather Hegelian way) that
within our always-changing world, finding a harmonious balance among a set of differences is typically unstable, tending to generate new tensions and thus to push toward new harmonies. Second, in at least one place Li seems content with an arrangement that looks like a scientific equilibrium: wolves eat sheep, weeding out the weaker sheep, but not so many that the sheep are eliminated. “On the population level,” Li writes, “the wolves and sheep are in harmony” (13). I find this intriguing but am not sure that historical Confucians would accept this as an instance of harmony. Li himself cites the idea of “each getting its due,” which according to Cheng Yi means “when each gets what it deserves, there is peace; when they do not get it, there is conflict” (14). I believe that if each element fully internalizes the complete situation—fully takes the whole world into account as part of understanding what “its due” would be, which I take it is what Li’s “harmony consciousness” is striving for (see below)—then the ideal of harmony would be one in which there is no “conflict” or disharmony (Angle 2009, 214). Harmony occurs when all parties accept that the solution is what is called for by the situation with respect to each of them, and none are completely discounted (see Li on the harmony of musical notes, 48, and my discussion of Slote’s “balanced caring” cases in 2009, 79f.). Where does that leave the wolves and sheep? I submit that they are in a form of equilibrium that falls short of harmony.

Stepping back from the central questions of deep harmony and creative tension and ranging more broadly over the book, I find that there are many points in which I am in complete agreement with Li, and some in which I at least feel the need for more argument. Li’s discussion of quan 權 (“weighing” or “discretion”) contains some of each. His explanation of when and how discretion can be applied, and what constraints it must honor, is excellent (131-2). I cannot agree, though, with his claim that quanli 權利, the Chinese term used to translate “rights,” means “accorded benefit after appropriate weighing” (133). There are both historical/contextual and
philosophical reasons for understanding the *quan* in *quanli* as referring to a proper kind of power, and as not being readily subject to situational weighing or discretion—as indeed Li seems to realize, when he says that “a right is more like *jing* than *quan*” (133, and see generally Angle 2002). Another issue emerges in Li’s discussion of the relation between harmony and ritual propriety. This is an important topic and for the most part Li handles it very well, bringing out the balance of differentiation and unification that lie at the heart of both harmony and ritual. To some degree, though, Li forces himself to reinvent the wheel by not drawing on some of the best recent scholarship on Confucian ritual propriety. One example will suffice: at several points in his chapter, Li could have constructively made use of Daniel Bell’s argument that ritual is uniquely well-suited to bring together people of differing status into a constructive whole that does not collapse the differences (Bell 2008). If we turn to Li’s discussion of harmony within the family, we find another place in which the book’s arguments could have been strengthened through more engagement with recent secondary literature. Li criticizes traditional Confucian views of relations between men and women, and takes a few steps toward articulating Confucian “resources useful for building a more equal relationship between husband and wife” (110). As he surely knows, though, much work has been done in this area already; drawing on Sin Yee Chan’s arguments, for instance, would have helped Li develop precisely the kind of “constructive,” modern vision of harmony that he is after (Chan 2000).

One of the reasons that Li did not engage more with my positions in *Sagehood*, no doubt, is his feeling that “the ancient understanding of harmony” was “largely lost in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism” (173n21). Without denying that there are many differences between Classical and Neo-Confucianism, I would resist seeing such a strong differentiation on the issue of harmony, but I do not have the space to make out such an argument here. Instead, let me conclude by
thanking Chenyang Li for authoring such a rich and provocative book. Harmony is an immensely important issue within Confucianism, and if Li has not provided the final word on its every contour, he has nonetheless provided us with clearly articulated positions, and in many cases important steps forward, on a whole range of issues.
Works Cited


