Review of Makeham: Learning to Emulate the Wise

Stephen C. Angle, Wesleyan University
Not long ago, twentieth-century Chinese philosophy was little studied and poorly understood in non-Sinophone countries. Thanks in no small part to the energies of one person, John Makeham, this situation is improving rapidly. In less than a decade, Makeham has edited and contributed two chapters to *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, published *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*, inaugurated the “Modern Chinese Philosophy” series at Brill, and now edited *Learning to Emulate the Wise*, to which he contributes both introduction and epilogue as well as three chapters. As is well-known, the term “zhexue” (or tetsugaku in Japanese) was coined in the late nineteenth century to correspond to “philosophy” and its correlates in Western languages. This new volume’s subject is thus two-fold: on the one hand, what is philosophy/zhexue? On the other hand, what specifically is *Chinese* philosophy—if indeed there is such a thing?

In their ten chapters, Makeham and his collaborators explore the intersection of these questions from many perspectives. Barry Steben looks at Nishi Amane’s formative role in Japanese discussion of both “philosophy” and “Chinese philosophy.” Makeham’s three chapters explore the influence of “Masters Studies (zhuzixue)” in making “Chinese philosophy” possible; Zhang Taiyan and the role that Yogācāra Buddhism played in Zhang’s articulation of philosophy; and the significance of the notion of “system” in Hu Shi’s thinking about philosophy. Xiaoqing Diana Lin brings out some of the pluralism of early academic studies of Chinese philosophy by examining the philosophy departments at Peking, Tsinghua, and Yenching Universities from the 1910s through the 1930s.
Buddhism is again central in Thierry Meynard’s look at its relation to philosophy in the thought of Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, and Tang Yongtong. Hans-Georg Moeller explores Feng Youlan’s efforts to articulate a modern (“Daoist,” says Moeller) Chinese philosophy, which can be contrasted with Carine Defoort’s discussion of Fu Sinian, the historian and philologist who celebrated the fact that, in his view, China had no philosophy. Yvonne Schulz Zinda contributes two chapters: the first introduces readers to Jin Yuelin’s ambivalent relation to the Chinese tradition, while the second summarizes a range of pre-1949 Marxist views of traditional Chinese philosophy. Every chapter is informative and well-grounded in substantial scholarship.

What do we learn from all of this? A good starting point is Steben’s articulation of the relation—for Nishi and for most Chinese scholars covered in the volume as well—between the new system of Western learning and Chinese traditions of learning: “The creative tension between the two is embodied permanently in the name tetsugaku itself, a compound of Chinese characters designed to name the Western field of philosophy in contradistinction to the existing East Asian traditions of learning, and yet by its very nature calling out to be applied as well to a certain portion of the East Asian intellectual heritage” (p. 63). The dominant position that emerges in the volume is that philosophy/zhexue/tetsugaku is global or universal, rather than confined to the West; that Chinese philosophy can be further articulated or developed by drawing on other philosophical traditions; and that other global philosophical traditions can learn from or be critiqued by Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophy is a synthetic, dynamic, and permeable entity. Feng Youlan is unusual in being explicit about the distinction between continuation/articulation, on the one hand, and critical development, on the other; often
this important difference is occluded. A significant theme of the volume is the degree to which Buddhist thought played major roles in the catalyzation of “Chinese philosophy”: Western philosophy was not the only model of systematic thinking and analysis on which early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals could draw.

Of course not everyone endorsed the idea that the tension embodied in “tetsugaku/zhexue” was “creative.” Early critics like Zhang Zhidong saw “philosophy/zhexue” as Western “empty talk,” something to be avoided in favor of “solid principles” of China’s own traditions (p. 82). As Defoort explains, Fu Sinian seems to have arrived at a similar view, according to which the abstract, metaphysical emphasis in Western philosophy is largely absent in Chinese traditions, for which Fu is thankful. Jin Yuelin distinguished between “philosophy in China” and “Chinese philosophy” and had something of a dim view of the latter, although his own work deploys key Chinese terms in ways that resonate strongly with traditional conceptualizations.

Criticism of “Chinese philosophy” continues today. A main theme of Makeham’s Epilogue is the increasing strength in both Anglophone and Sinophone China studies of what he calls the “inner logic paradigm,” which stresses “the continued agency and relevance of the past in the present” (p. 361). Makeham then connects this to recent arguments that contemporary discussion of Chinese thinking should draw exclusively upon native sources and categories, which he calls “epistemological nativism” (p. 364). It is important to emphasize, perhaps to a greater degree than Makeham himself does, that the move from “inner logic” to epistemological nativism is a non-sequitur. Even if we imagine that Chinese thought had always developed in complete isolation from other traditions of thought, that still does not give us a reason to think that this should remain
the case going forward. Only if one argues that Chinese thought does not have general or universal scope—that it is only a kind of local practice that is parochially limited to the Chinese—can one justify epistemological nativism. On top of this, there is the further point that Makeham and others in the volume vividly illustrate, namely that Chinese thought in the twentieth century manifestly does not develop in isolation, so the nativists must further believe that Chinese traditions can somehow be extricated from a century of cross-pollination.

In sum, *Learning to Emulate the Wise* is a splendid and unusually unified collection, as important for thinking about the nature of philosophy around the globe today as it is for understanding the complex Chinese intellectual world in the first half of the twentieth century.

Stephen C. Angle
Wesleyan University