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Yijie Tang

Anthology of Philosophical and Cultural Issues

An Exploration into New Frontiers



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Preface

Since I have often been asked about my life of study, it is better for me to give you a brief account of it here as a preface.

First of all, I have to admit that there is a big gap between me and scholars of my father's generation (such as my father Tang Yungtung, Prof. Tschen Yinkoh and Feng Youlan) in terms of academic background. From a very early age, they received their enlightenment education by reciting the *Four Books and Five Classics*, fully at home with traditional Chinese canons. In their 20s, they were all sent abroad to study further for 5 or 6 years. Having become competent in both Chinese and Western learning with a good command of foreign languages, they came back to China as leading scholars in educational and research institutions. In that sense, my father belongs to the first generation of academics of that kind, Qian Zhongshu is second generation, and I am probably part of the third or fourth generation. Our educational background and opportunities have been different.

As for the relationship between me and my father, we don't have any sort of "family learning" handed down from father to son. In fact, he let me loose on learning. He may be perceived as a man adhering to practices of the past; however, he was not as conservative as many people may think. For instance, he didn't believe in traditional Chinese medicine, nor did he like watching Peking opera, but he did indulge in reading Western detective fiction, and liked Mr. Jin Yuelin very much with whom he frequently exchanged English novels of that kind. Having a research area of Chinese learning, especially in the history of Buddhism and metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, he was oddly very much interested in things of the West, which I think had something to do with his life of studying abroad.

Reflecting on what he taught me, there were mainly two aspects: One was to read certain books, such as Yu Xin's *Lament for the South*. My great grandfather was a teacher who cultivated three Jinshi among his student, including my grandfather. My father also instructed me to read *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*, which I thought was to train my ability in analyzing different concepts. Another thing he taught me was how to behave as a responsible person. Absorbed in his area

of learning, my father was a scholar of non-confrontation. And yet what he wrote in his book was quite pertinent with critical rationality.

In my memory, frequent acquaintances of my father at that time were Qian Mu, Xiong Shili, Meng Wentong, and Lin Zaiping. They often went to Zhongshan Park, drinking tea at the Laijinyu pavilion, when I was about five or six, together with me and my younger sister. After the kids were catered to normally with a plate of *baozi*,¹ they would start their discussions. As recorded by Mr. Qian Mu, the two main topics they discussed were: the national crisis (since the Japanese invasion of Northern China was imminent) and the impact of the New Cultural Movement on traditional culture. Being a conservative group of people, they did not exactly agree with Hu Shih. My father usually contemplated the proceedings and kept quiet even amid heated debates since he was reluctant to argue with anyone, as Qian put it, which more or less taught me to do the same.

My father was a member of the Xue Heng School (school of impartial learning), which was opposed to the New Cultural Movement led by Hu Shih, but his relationship with Hu Shih was not in conflict. In 1931, my father was invited by Hu Shih to teach at Peking University, shifting from the Central University. Ideologically, they were not identical, but still they had a lot in common concerning research in Buddhist history: for example, they all held a critical view of Liang Qichao.

During my study at university, several lecturers deeply impressed me. Mr. Fei Ming, in the Chinese Department, a fellow-villager of mine, taught me Chinese. I remember that he was so bold to say that he had a better grasp of the *Madman's Diary* than Lu Xun (the author) himself. Also he was very earnest about his job—always very carefully corrected and commented on students' essays handed to him once a month. He inspired me to be courageous (but not necessarily confrontational) as well as meticulous.

Mr. Hu Shihua, a lecturer in logic, was a first generation expert in computing science in China. He taught us formal logic, mathematical logic and scientific methods of deduction, which greatly benefited my logical thinking following the path of mathematical reasoning. I think students of Chinese language and culture should all take these courses.

My female lecturer Yu Dazhen's kind attitude made a great impact on me. At the time, she taught the history of English literature in the Department of Western Languages. As a student majoring in philosophy I attended her classes out of extensive interests. Her use of English as the medium of instruction to teach text books all written in English posed a great challenge to my limited English. However, after class she always talked to me to find out where I had missed out and directed me to read certain pages of the book.

Now, let me talk about how I have been engaged in scholarship and what lessons I have learned. Recently, I wrote a book entitled *The Way of My Philosophy*. At the beginning of the book, I state that "I am not a philosopher," which was the question

¹Steamed stuffed buns.

asked by a graduate student at the University of Leuven in Belgium. Since she wanted to write a thesis on the topic, I explained to her the historical reason why I am not a philosopher over 2 h.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was a prevalent understanding that no one could be granted the title of "philosopher" except great figures like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong, who had created new concepts. People like us who are engaged in the study of philosophy could only be called "engagers of philosophy" and their job was to explain the ideas of these philosophers or to apply their concepts to historical or current issues. In his *Author's Preface to Sansong Hall*, Mr. Feng Youlan also confirmed this assertion.

As a well-known philosopher, Feng Youlan dared not to declare his status after 1949, and yet he was unwilling to keep quiet as an "engager of philosopher" either. Since he uttered some "undesirable ideas" from time to time, he was constantly under political criticism. As an "engager of philosophy" myself, I avoided a lot of trouble. After I graduated from Peking University in 1951, I spent more than 5 years at the Party School of Beijing Municipal Party Committee, teaching the history of the communist party and the history of the communist party of the Soviet Union, mainly in the area of socialist economic construction. Later on I switched to teach philosophy.

During this period, I read works of Marx and Engels pretty systematically, which equipped me well to carry out my teaching duties in the field of Marxism. In 1956, I came back to Peking University when the movement of "letting a hundred schools of thought contend" was in full swing. It was followed by the "anti-rightist movement," which left us little time for reading (in fact I had less than a year for reading during that entire period).

Between then and the "Cultural Revolution," I published more than thirty articles, all of which are ridiculous stuff from today's point of view. These articles fall into two categories: One criticized Feng Youlan and Wu Han, mainly on the issue of traditional cultural and moral heritage (I disagreed with Wu Han that morals could be inherited). My naivety had bred my boldness.

The second kind evaluated historical figures. I wrote several papers for the symposiums on Confucius, Mencius, Chuang-Tzu and Lao-Tzu, basically to criticize them. Why? Because basically I was carried away by the textbooks of the Soviet Union, specially by Zhdanov's definitions of materialism and idealism, which simply relate everything progressive to the former and everything reactionary to the latter. In fact, I couldn't really be engaged in scholarship in its true sense until the end of the "Cultural Revolution."

In retrospect, as activists we all participated in student movements led by the communist party and joined the party after "liberation." All along the way, we followed closely the instructions of the party and Chairman Mao who was deemed the greatest philosopher, and whenever discrepancies occurred, we constantly corrected ourselves. Then after the death of Chairman Mao and the end of the "cultural revolution," the first question that came to my mind was: "Whom should I follow now?"

During the “Cultural Revolution” I frequently went astray: by opposing Nie Yuanzi,² I was labeled a “reactionary”; by aligning with the writing group “Liang Xiao,”³ I made even more serious mistakes as everybody knows. As a matter of fact, my faults were constantly identified when I followed Chairman Mao’s instructions closely. Mr. Zhou Yiliang, a colleague of mine in the same writing group, wrote a book titled *After All a Scholar*. Originally it was titled *After All a Scholar who was Cheated by Chairman Mao*, but he dared not write that down. After his death, I put that in an article and sent it to the journal *Popular Tribune*: it was rejected, but later on published by *The Eastern Miscellany*. It seems clear to me now: we have to listen to our own inner voice not that of somebody else, or we will foolishly make other mistakes without reasoning.

During 1979 and 1980, the philosophical issue of how to evaluate idealism was raised again after it had been denounced at a conference discussing the history of philosophy in 1957. What concerned us most was how to correct this denunciation.

I therefore suggested that we might treat the history of philosophy as a cognitive history which has to come down to the issue of philosophical scope, within which philosophers inherited not only materialism but also idealism. The question was then: could we view the development of philosophy outside the dichotomy of materialism and idealism? Following the route of epistemology we might find the contributions made not only by materialism but also by idealism.

Considering how to break through the dogmatic bondage framed by the dichotomy of materialism and idealism, I wrote an article published in *Social Sciences in China* in 1981, mainly exploring this philosophical scope.

In 1983, I went to Harvard University to carry out my research sponsored by the Luce Foundation. In the early 1980s I had focused mainly on Daoism and Buddhism rather than Confucianism. At Harvard, however, I was revitalized by scholars like Prof. Tu Weiming who had continuously carried on the ideas of Mou Zongsan as a Neo-Confucian. And grand international philosophy conferences were held there, composed of several thousand people and many panels. Since the panel on Chinese philosophy was holding its first meeting, it attracted a huge crowd. Invited by chairpersons Cauchy and Tyminecka of international phenomenology, I delivered my speech on the possibility of a third phase in the development of Confucianism, explaining the unity of heaven and man, knowledge and conduct as well as emotion and scenery.

In my view, the study of Chinese philosophy may be approached in this way: the unity of heaven and man is concerned with truth, the unity of knowledge and conduct queries goodness, while the unity of emotion and scenery explores beauty.

My speech was commended by the audience as being lucid and logical. A listener, who used to come to Peking University to attend my lectures, asked me: “It seems to me a bit strange that you have not mentioned Marxism, why is that?”

²A leader of a rebel faction.

³A writing group composed of members of Peking and Tsinghua Universities organized by the “gang of four.”

I answered, “How I understand Marxism is to seek truth from facts. Since I have been following this guideline, my research is very much in line with Marxism.” This has implied to me that one has to cultivate one’s own views whether they are correct or not. The speech was later written up as an article entitled “On truth, goodness and beauty in traditional Chinese philosophy” and published in China.

What are the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western philosophy? Surely there are many apart from plenty in common. In reading Aristotle, Kant or Hegel, one finds a “system of knowledge” concerning truth, good, and beauty. In reading Chinese philosophy, however, one finds above all the “realm of life,” which distinguishes it from the west. I have therefore written another article titled “More discussion on truth, goodness and beauty in traditional Chinese philosophy,” which is definitely my own view.

Recently I have read Yu Yingshi’s book, in which he points out that one of the differences between Chinese and Western philosophy is that the former is characterized by “immanent transcendence” whereas the latter deals with “external transcendence.” I think his viewpoint very much coincides with my understanding of the “realm of life” and the “system of knowledge,” and therefore I have written four more papers on the issue of these two transcendences.

Bearing in mind that Chinese society, from ancient times to the present, has basically been ruled by man, the question then I raise in my articles is: Has this something to do with the concept of “immanent transcendence”? This so-called “transcendence” relies on one’s *xin-xing* (mind-nature) and self-transcendence so as to transcend the mundane world without requiring any external forces. In the West, however, from Plato to Christianity almost all rely on external forces to pursue an external standard out there.

It may be possible that “immanent transcendence” breeds the “rule of man” whereas “external transcendence” leads to the establishment of the “rule of law.” But can we simply conclude that? In studying Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, I have gained some insights into the characteristics of their “immanent transcendence,” which are of value in cultivating morals and temperament. However, they are also linked to the tendency toward rule of man rather than rule of law. In this regard, can we combine the two transcendences at a higher philosophical level? This possibility has now drawn the attention of my colleagues who are contemplating feasible resolutions.

In China, the first article criticizing Huntington published in *Philosophical Researches* was written by me, which arose from my interest in cultural issues. Engaging research in this field had brought up the issue of an “Axial Age,” referring to the time around 500 B.C. when great thinkers occurred almost simultaneously in ancient Greece, India, China, Israel, and Persia. It prompted me to think about the possibility of a “New Axial Age” in the twenty-first century. I then raised the issue at a conference in 1998.

Since then my interest has directed me to study hermeneutics. Because textualism has been widely applied in the humanities and social sciences in China, I wrote an article titled “Can we have a Chinese hermeneutics?” in 1998, the year marking the centenary of Peking University.

China has a longer history than the West of expounding its classics, starting at least from the Warring States period (as I have analyzed in my second article), and yet still has not established systematic theories and methods to elaborate its own philosophical issues. In the Sui and Tang Dynasties, after Buddhism was introduced into China, several Sinicized Buddhist sects were established, such as Hua-yan School, Tian-tai School and Zen Buddhism. They had all been deeply influenced by Chinese thought, especially Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu on Zen Buddhism, the metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties on Hua-yan and so on. Today, based on Chinese concepts and historical records, can we formulate a Chinese hermeneutics? In my understanding, apart from myself, at least four or five other scholars are currently engaged in the subject, including the late American scholar Fu Weixun, who approached the issue from a methodological perspective and categorized the topic into five levels, which makes a lot of sense to me. Now, given that Sinicized Buddhist sects did occur in history, why can't we think about establishing Sinicized Western philosophical schools?

Recently I have started a project to compile *Complete Works of Confucian Canon* using a similar method to collecting abundant commentaries from different dynasties. For instance, the *Book of Changes*, there were more than 2000 commentaries in the history, and the *Analects* alone has been glossed by about 3000 commentaries. The reason I have taken on this job is mainly due to the consideration that it's better for a person of my age to collect data as references for others to do research than to put forward new ideas of my own.

In all these initiatives, three major points have been weighing on my mind which I share with you as follows:

First, in order to achieve better academic results, a solid foundation of Chinese and Western learning must be laid.

Second, in engaging scholarship, one has to be conscious of the problems which are currently confronting our society. For example, in the 1980s I thought about the issue of "harmony," and now we are trying to build a harmonious society; considering "transcendence" earlier, we can now relate it to the building of a society based on the rule of law. We therefore all need an alert mind for current issues from a fresh perspective.

Third, as scholars you need to continuously exploit the new frontiers of academic fields with a broad outlook. Studying philosophy cannot be carried out in isolation; you should, to a certain extent, also be involved in literature or economics or sociology, for instance, to expand your horizons. Also, with foreign language competence, you should be able to read foreign works in their original texts.

As Mr. Feng Youlan points out, we should have "three carry overs" (in fact it should be more than three): Namely, carrying over Western philosophy in the same way we carried over Indian Buddhism in the Sui and Tang Dynasties; carrying over our traditional culture in the same way Neo-Confucianism carried over Confucianism; carrying over Marxism in the same way we carried over a pragmatic approach to solve practical problems, not in a dogmatic way.

In a nutshell, for any culture to prosper it has to be firmly rooted in its foundations: the Renaissance in the West went back to ancient Greece, Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties found its resources in Confucius and Mencius. However, these ancient concepts were merely a starting point, not a terminus. We have to build something on that groundwork by thoroughly mastering the canons if we really want to achieve excellence.

Beijing, China

Yijie Tang

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