

A Review of *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* by Chenyang Li (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, Pp. 197, ISBN: 978-0-415-84474-1)

Publication of *the Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* is a significant event in the community of scholars in Chinese studies. Chenyang Li, who is Associate Professor of Philosophy and founding director of the Philosophy program at Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, has brought to us a scholarly work based on more than a decade of his accumulated research in Confucianism in particular and Chinese classic philosophy in general. Scholarly reviews have it that this book makes significant contributions to the studies of classic Confucianism in the Western world. "The ideal of harmony is central to the Confucian tradition, but not a single book-length manuscript has explored its value in the three thousand year Confucian tradition. Chenyang Li's book finally fills the gap," said Daniel Bell. Although research projects on Confucian idea of harmony are not absent in the literature of studies of Confucianism, Li's book, standing on the top of the literature, offers "the most comprehensive and intriguing scholarly treatment of the concept of harmony in Confucianism," said Vincent Shen. In the "Foreword" of Li's book Roger Ames gives the following evaluative comment: "Although the expression 'harmony' (*he* 和) as one of the central terms of art carries enormous philosophical weight in the Confucian tradition, in the Western literature on Chinese philosophy it has frequently been elided with a meaning of harmony not its own. ...Chengyang Li has brought more than a decade of his painstaking research on Confucian harmony into monograph form to address this problem and this sense and this history of harmony into focus for us." All these comments highlight the scholarly contributions that Li's book makes to the studies of Confucianism and show that this book is of interest to students and scholars of Chinese studies, East Asian studies, and philosophy in general. My reading of Li's book endorses these comments. And more can be read off behind the words and between lines.

Unlike those armchair philosophers, whose interest, concern and vision do not go beyond the academic perimeters, Li paints a picture of Confucian philosophy of harmony that embraces both theoretical plausibility and practical applicability. This feature is reflected in the general structure of his book which is divided into two parts. Part I, which consists of five chapters, is theoretically focused, clarifying the concept of harmony in Confucianism. Part II consists of another five chapters and describes how the Confucian ideal of harmony applies to various levels of human life. These two parts are strategically structured in such a way that they are both logically consistent and argumentatively coherent, exhibiting the unity of theory and practice as a salient feature of Confucianism. As Roger Ames' remarks in the Foreword... "he is able to quarry the Confucian tradition and lift out of it ideas that can be applied profitably to address less than productive attitudes in the increasingly complex world in which we live." Overall, the reader should be convinced that harmony is one of the central themes that run through the social, political, ethical theories of classic Confucianism as well as an ultimate goal that cuts across personal, familial, communal, social, and cosmic levels in a life of the Confucian style.

For those who are intrigued by the Confucian conception of harmony, especially for those who would like to learn about harmony of the Confucian style in contrast to that of the Western style, reading Li's interpretations of Confucian canonic texts may be a thought-provoking maneuver that gives rise to controversial issues for future research projects. Throughout his book, Li attempts to convince the reader of two interrelated points formulated on the basis of his interpretation of the Confucian conception of harmony. Both are academically interesting and intellectually stimulating. The first point is that Confucian harmony is harmony with creative tension. This point entails that for Confucians, tensions together with their sources (differences) and consequence (conflicts) are not *external* conditions which coexist with harmony, nor they are *merely* necessary conditions that *circumstantially* prompt demands for harmony, but rather they are *intrinsic* properties or *internal* constituents of harmony. One must consider this idea in light of his second point which is that for Confucians, harmony is an ideal to attain rather than a pre-established order to accord. Individuals, families, communities, societies, and the human world are not inherently harmonious. Harmony for Confucians is a dynamic process of balancing and rebalancing diverse forces, aiming at equilibrium at various levels. In this process there are not only tension and possibly conflict but also coordination and cooperation among the involved parties. This process thereby transforms (resolves or dissolves) tensions and creates a harmonious state of existence. According to Li, it is this whole process rather than merely its final state that is what Confucian harmony is really meant to be. Therefore, "harmony with creative tension" must mean that tensions are included in harmony. Li's book encourages further research projects that require us to quarry Confucian classics and take up the following issues. There is the question of how Confucians would synchronize harmony as tension resolution (or dissolution) and harmony as tension inclusion. There is the matter of how Confucians would reconcile the apparent disagreement between the point that Confucians do not believe in pre-established harmony and the point that "Confucians hold as a fundamental point of faith that the universe is ultimately harmonious" (p. 43). Issues may also arise from our strategic approach to classic Confucianism, especially our approach to drawing implications of its modern relevancy. The terms "dynamic" and "creative" have been fashionable for decades in the studies of Confucianism from Harvard to Hawaii; however, given abundant evidence that indicates that classic Confucianism valued stability and conservation, describing classic Confucianism as dynamic and creative tends to yield torrential elaborations out of meager textual inputs.

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