

## Book Review

Review of *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts*, by Chun-chieh Huang. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2010. 25.80 euros. Pp. 168.

One of the most common features of Confucian philosophy as an inclusive humanism is a commitment to the explanation and elaboration of various aspects of the historically varied pan-Asian tradition. The phase of explanation is dedicated to a faithful exposition of the various historical materials considered canonical or central to scholars of the Confucian Way 儒道. The most common form of explanation is usually some form of commentary. As Confucius once remarked in the *Analects* 7.1, he sought to transmit and not create 述而不作. But as is so often the case, and as Professor Huang so amply demonstrates, such a faithful transmission and its commentary is an immensely creative act every time a philosopher or scholar seeks to present an explanation of the tradition.

The second phase of Confucian philosophical discourse is often a commentarial elaboration, emendation, supplementation, or addition to the received and explicated tradition. And such fine contemporary studies as Huang's *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts* add a third phase to the process of explanation and elaboration. This addition to explanation and elaboration can be called "reflective commendation." In the third phase of commendation, the case is made for reasons why contemporary philosophers will find something of genuine value in reflecting on the humanistic Confucian tradition in East Asia. In fact, one of the most commendable features of Huang's study is that he demonstrates that the Confucian tradition has given rise to creative expression in China, Korea, and Japan. This pan-Asian and now global philosophical enterprise is very much alive and part of the emerging conversation of world philosophy. There is an ever expanding dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophers over a wide range of topics of mutual interest and concern—topics that are explored in Huang's study.

One of the perennial questions that inevitably arise when discussing the history and nature of Confucianism is the place that the Confucian Way occupies in the typology of the ordering of the philosophical sciences in the Western world. Is Confucianism metaphysics, a virtue ethics, axiology, ontology, political theory, humanism, aesthetics, and/or hermeneutics? Huang

makes a completely compelling case that Confucianism ought to be considered a form of inclusive humanism that, while intriguingly different from the Western philosophical tradition, consistently overlaps it in many areas of intellectual and historical inquiry. Few would quarrel with Huang's choice of humanism as the typological placement of Confucianism. This thesis is supported by the fact that the kind of humanism proposed by Huang is a highly open and inclusive form of humanism, in fact a humanism that sees humanity as inextricably interconnected with every facet of the cosmos. Huang makes the case that Confucian humanism begins with the unity of the mind-heart 心 and body, of self and others, and ultimately of a hopefully anticipated harmony of humanity and the natural world.

One of the refreshing features of Huang's presentation is that he makes full use of all the resources of the tradition, be they Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. For instance, from page 33 to 34 he quotes in turn Mencius, Xunzi, and Wang Yangming about the unity of mind-heart and body. He points out how the mind-heart helps to shape and define the mesocosmic (human) order within the micro- and macrocosmic universe, with the mind-heart at the center of the person and the social world. Huang cogently quotes a wide range of famous pan-Asian Confucian scholars to shape his definition of Confucianism as an inclusive humanism.

Yet as Confucius wrote in the *Analects* 4.25, virtue is never alone, because it always has company. The person is not an isolated, solitary self, but is self-consciously formed in relationship to others by a constantly changing set of natural, intrapersonal, and social relationships. In fact, in chapters 2 through 4, Huang illustrates how and why Confucian humanism is resolutely relational in form and function, in personal and social outcomes. It is through our collective personal and social rituals that we become truly human, and at our best, humane 仁. Of course, Huang is sensitive to the various levels of tension that can arise between the self and the other through cultural divergences and political discord. Here too Huang uses Chinese, Japanese, and Korean resources to defend his position. Huang demonstrates that Confucian humanism is a widely shared and appreciated pan-Asian humanism, a notion that includes a wide range of Chinese scholars. Moreover, he recognizes that even such a capacious, shared humanistic Confucian cultural identity was not enough to preclude all the warfare and turmoil that went on, with great suffering and sadness, in Confucian East Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In chapter 4, Huang focuses in the theme of the continuity of humankind and nature, the theme that there is both continuity and unity to be found between human beings and the rest of the natural world. Here again, Huang's main thematic concern is the ongoing Confucian sense of relationship that

runs from the self, to the self in community, and finally to the self embodied within the wider expanse of the natural world. Huang believes that this sense of continuity and unity should lead to a common concern not only of humans for other human beings, but also of humans for the dignity and value of the entire natural world. Ecology ought to come naturally to contemporary Confucian humanists, owing to the historical relational resources of the tradition.

In chapter 5, Huang moves on to discuss the historical consciousness of Confucian humanism. As Huang notes, there is no supernatural tension between God and the world in Confucian philosophy. Rather, there is a constant and “creative dialogue between the past and the present” (p. 81) that helps to give a definitive shape and texture to Confucian humanism. History, with its vast metanarratives and resources, arouses us and, by means of analogies and memories, guides us in our current choices in our *Lebenswelt*. As Huang says, “History is a library for today” (p. 93). Along with the discussion of historical consciousness in the last chapter of the book, Huang provides two appendices that augment his discussion of the role of history and historiography in the Confucian humanistic tradition. In many ways, this outlook on history is the most notable contribution of Huang’s meditation on the humanistic spirit of the Confucian Way.

Huang has provided us with a graceful and insightful tour of the contours of Confucian humanism. He shows how it has developed in East Asia and why, in a world of globalization, reflection on the Confucian humanistic past and present will help inform the development of comparative world philosophy in the future.

John Berthrong  
School of Theology, Boston University