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practitioner) of poetry to simply mourn its demise. Although he does not quote Confucius' well-known adage – *shi ke yuan* (poetry may grieve), the author of this study takes the power of poetry to heart. The verses he cites take the reader into the lush, multi-ethnic world of Southeast Asia, and allow one to savor the changing landscape of modernity where grief and pride mix creatively.

In the end, what matters is not the increasing digitization of classical poetry, nor its global humanistic reach beyond China – as exemplified by the journal *The Universal Voice of Poetry* launched in Singapore in 2005 (p. 127). Rather, as Wang affirms, verses matter because they give life fresh meaning. Quoting the film *Dead Poets' Society*, the author gives us the innermost reason for writing this book (p. 129):

We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love – these are what we stay alive for.

Even though the stilted English translation of some of the Chinese poems in this study leaves the reader wondering wherein lies their beauty, the passion comes through undiminished. Wang Bing has succeeded in portraying more than the social and cultural transformations taking place in Singapore over the last 130 years. By choosing the medium of classical poetry, he has heightened awareness of what humanity lives for beyond the Chinese-speaking communities of the mainland and of Nanyang.

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THOMAS FRÖHLICH, *Tang Junyi: Confucian Philosophy and the Challenge of Modernity*. Modern Chinese Philosophy, 13. Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2017. viii, 324 pp. Appendix, Bibliography, Index. € 132 (HB). ISBN 978-90-04-33014-6; Open Access (eBook). ISBN 978-90-04-33013-9

Thomas Fröhlich's latest monograph is the culmination of over a decade of research into modern Chinese intellectual history and the thought of the twentieth-century Confucian thinker Tang Junyi (1909–1978). While biographical details and anecdotes are frequently employed to illustrate and enliven his conceptual narrative, it immediately becomes clear that Fröhlich has not simply attempted to provide a chronological reconstruction of Tang's life and works. Instead, he has provided us with a much more focused, ambitious, and captivating endeavor, namely that of reinstating this often misunderstood modern Confucian philosopher as an eminently socio-political thinker. In his analysis of Tang's "normative reconstruction" (the term is Axel Honneth's) of modern society, Fröhlich displays an acute awareness of the tensions which animate the Confucian philosopher's writings, instead of approaching his work as "a closed system free from inner contradictions" (p. vii). Crucially, as he already announces in the preface, Fröhlich does not simply set out to offer a

descriptive account of the Confucian philosopher's work or to engage in a routine exercise in comparative philosophy, but also attempts to "think *with* Tang and, consequently, at times go beyond him" (*ibid.*).

I think it is safe to say that this book will manage to lay to rest the myth according to which Tang, as one of the foremost representatives of the so-called "second generation" of the "New Confucian" (*xin rujia*) current in modern Chinese thought, was hopelessly bogged down in metaphysical speculation and shied away from the more immediate reality of his historical and socio-political environment. This myth continues to be perpetuated by mainland Chinese critics such as Jiang Qing, who attempt to develop Confucian thought in a more "political" and activist direction and are suspicious of Tang's arguments in favor of liberal democracy, which they view as deeply "un-Confucian" or even "un-Chinese." Conversely, as Fröhlich emphasizes, the portrayal of "New Confucianism" as a stubbornly conservative undertaking severely underestimates the extent to which thinkers such as Tang engaged in a penetrating critique of their own (political) tradition, even if the latter occasionally did tend to advocate the soteriological potential of the Confucian creed with almost "messianic zeal" (p. 33, cf. pp. 82–84). The fact that Fröhlich manages to convincingly reclaim the critical dimension of Tang Junyi's work in itself suffices to make his study highly relevant, not only to intellectual historians or philosophers specialized in (modern) Confucian philosophy, but also to anyone interested in the ongoing reinvention and reassertion of non-Western traditions of thought across the globe.

In the first chapter, Fröhlich sets the stage by providing a concise outline of his study and demonstrating that Tang's intellectual endeavor was "characterized by a persistent effort to keep pace intellectually with an age of unprecedented cataclysms and recurrent political and social turmoil" (p. 2). He argues that the Confucian thinker's position should not be understood as one of dogmatic conservatism or a nationalist, "self-Orientalizing" celebration of the supposed superiority of Chinese civilization. Rather, Tang "was convinced that modern societies were irremediably broken to the point where no single, comprehensive doctrine could adequately respond to their inherently ambiguous life-worlds" (p. 4). Additionally, for Tang, "any attempt to implement a totalistic, substantial reintegration of modern society would inevitably come at the cost of traditionalism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, or even totalitarianism" (p. 6). Fröhlich tries to overcome lopsided interpretations of Tang's work by focusing his exegetical energies on what he identifies as the second of the three major stages in Tang's intellectual development (p. 8), namely his philosophical reflections on politics, society, morality, and history elaborated in the period between the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the late sixties. While indicating the enormous impact of the "watershed of 1949" (pp. 18–22) which drove Tang into exile in Hong Kong and his increasingly trenchant criticism of Chinese communism on Tang's intellectual trajectory, Fröhlich also shows that Tang was equally suspicious of the Nationalist Party's postwar attempts to mobilize a reified form of "traditional Chinese culture" (with Confucianism at its core) in an attempt to ideologically buttress its political and cultural legitimacy in Taiwan (pp. 18–22, cf. pp. 58–59). This effort to distance Tang's work from the stereotypical images reproduced by Western and Chinese interpreters alike is continued and expanded in the second and third chapters, which critically engage with some of the modern Confucian's most vehement critics (Yu Yingshi, Lao Siguang, Wei

Zhengtong, and Lin Yusheng among others) and present us with a sustained argument to recover Tang's thought as "a critical strain within modern Confucianism which has so far been largely ignored" (p. 28). In the process, Fröhlich briefly (perhaps somewhat too briefly) discusses Tang's engagement with Buddhism and German Idealism (pp. 36-40) as examples of how a typical comparative study which interprets a philosopher's thought as the result of a specific conceptual "mixture" of culturally distinct elements risks missing the broader socio-political stakes behind the modern Confucian's eclectic philosophical approach.

In the fourth chapter, by far the longest of the whole book, Fröhlich brings these stakes to the foreground by offering a fascinating interpretation of Tang's cultural conservatism that departs from his experience of exile in the British colony of Hong Kong, a city which appears as an alienating "non-place" (p. 69) and as "a representation of the disenchanted, reified world of modernity" (p. 61) in his writings. Fröhlich argues that Tang approached exile as symbolizing both the modern liberation from the bonds of tradition as well as a situation in which human beings must come to terms with the fact that "considerable parts of their lifeworld, including binding traditions and conventions, have dissolved" (p. 66). Tang's personal experience of being separated from his native language, customs, culture, and environment came to count as an individual expression and reenactment of what he saw as the dramatic separation between nation and culture after the founding of the Communist People's Republic on the mainland. However, his reaction to the condition of exile, which Fröhlich describes as an existential "prism" (p. 3) through which Tang observed the state of tradition and cultural belonging in the modern world at large, was not that of advocating a return to an unreflective form of authenticity or a type of society devoid functional differentiation (lacking, for instance, the crucial distinction between the spheres of morality and law). Instead, Tang's reflections on exile, which often appear chauvinistic and nationalist on the surface, indicate that he tried to maintain a delicate balance between cosmopolitanism and patriotism. The experience of exile allowed Tang to detach his defensive assertion of the normative and transformative potential of Chinese culture from a straightforward identification of the nation-state with a transcendent end in itself.

This brings us to the fifth and sixth chapters of Fröhlich's book, which constitute the actual core of his whole study. In these chapters, the author presents an extensive description and discussion of what he identifies as the basic "civil-theological framework" underlying Tang Junyi's philosophical response to the challenge of modernity. In the remaining chapters, Fröhlich proceeds by analyzing more specific aspects of Tang's socio-political philosophy with reference to this framework. In doing so, he addresses Tang's quasi-Weberian conception of politics as the expression of a "demonic" will to power which entails a radical rethinking of traditional Confucian conceptions of moral self-cultivation and political responsibility (chapter 7), the relation between the state, the individual, and society in the context of the absence of a proper political embodiment for China as a "cultural nation" (chapter 8), the pursuit of democracy with a normative foundation in Confucianism (chapter 9), the idea of a Confucian humanism as a "civic religion" (chapter 10), Tang's approach to the philosophy of history in relation to problem of human agency in modern society (chapter 11), and last but not least, the emergence of totalitarianism in the twentieth century (chapter 12). In this last chapter, which serves as a conclusion

to the whole study and describes the critical potential as well as the internal limitations of Tang's philosophical undertaking, Fröhlich identifies the Holocaust as a "black hole" (p. 270) in the modern Confucian undertaking, as the penultimate symbol of the dark side of modernity, which thinkers such as Tang consistently ignored and did not, or perhaps simply could not, address in their attempts to reassert a normative continuity between the Confucian tradition and modern society. These concluding pages are among the most interesting and enthralling of his whole study, even if the author arguably raises more questions than he can answer, thus leaving the reader hoping for a follow-up to the present study. Generally speaking, since the subject matter covered in these chapters is too wide-ranging and complex to be comprehensively discussed in the context of this short review, I will restrict myself to a discussion of what I take to be the central chapters of Fröhlich's book in what follows.

While interpreters to whom the use of Christian terms such as "theology" and "transcendence" is anathema in a comparative context may quibble over his choice of words, Fröhlich's intentions in outlining what he calls Tang Junyi's "civil-theological framework" are, I think, clear: Fröhlich attempts to demonstrate that Tang's highly abstract, dialectical conception of the Confucian notion of "innate knowing" or "moral intuition" (*liang zhi*) is closely related to his socio-political concerns, a crucial consideration which is all but lost in postmetaphysical readings of his work. Within Tang's fundamental reinterpretation of this traditional concept, human beings' intuitive moral knowledge of the "absolute" at the same time constitutes the self-realization of this absolute, as the transcendent, normative ground of reality and existence as such ("heaven," *tian*). More precisely, the notion of *liang zhi* is "theological" insofar as it points towards the irreducibly religious dimension of Tang's thought, where the human being counts as the "co-creator" (p. 116) of an impersonal, cosmic source of transcendence which Tang usually, though not exclusively, refers to by redeploying the Confucian concept of "heaven." The idea of the possibility of a convergence between the immanence of the individual mind and the transcendence of such an ultimate reality within *liang zhi* explains why this religious form of insight denotes a form of "self-belief" (p. 114). Such "self-belief" is explicitly meant to target the materialist and positivist reification of human beings in modernity. Additionally, Tang assumed that intuition, as the self-realization of the absolute within the human being, ultimately remains foreclosed to reason. There is, in other words, "a deep gap between the philosophical (transcendental-reflective) initiation of such intuitive immediacy and the very act of intuition itself" (p. 119). Tang's taxonomy of knowledge thus places clear restrictions on the ambitions of rational forms of knowledge such as science and philosophy (see pp. 118–130). In general, Fröhlich contends that this conception provided Tang with a conceptual vantage point from which to reflect on as well as criticize the historical environment of modern society, even if, paradoxically enough, the momentary "sagehood" attained through moral intuition is not, strictly speaking, part of historical becoming at all (see below). Tang's reflexive turn towards the moral self as an incarnation and realization of the absolute is indicative, not of a retreat from the immediacy of society and politics into metaphysics, but rather of what Fröhlich felicitously calls "an activist form of inwardness" (p. 16). As such, the state of "sagehood" reached through the momentary unison of the transcendent and the immanent within moral intuition as well as the notion

of *liang zhi* itself thus function as “limit-concepts,” which “are positioned [...] precisely on the border between social reality, on the one side, and the realm of ultimate reality, on the other” (p. 117).

I would like to insert a few critical remarks at this point. Tang’s approach of “innate knowing” and “sagehood” as “limit-concepts” seems to be beset by a certain ambiguity which Fröhlich, in my view, does not manage to sufficiently clarify or disentangle. More specifically, it remains unclear to me how Fröhlich understands Tang’s paradoxical attempt to employ the notions of “innate knowing” and “sagehood” as vantage points for a critique and normative reconstruction of modern society. In Fröhlich’s reading, what Tang takes to be the “elusiveness of absolute truth” (p. 11) cannot be effectively institutionalized as “an enduring form of social existence” (p. 115), but can still somehow serve as the foundation for a critical perspective on society and history. It seems to me that there is a considerable risk that this “ephemeral, intuitive state” (p. 115) of sagehood becomes something like a transcendental “non-place” in its own right. In other words, is this notion not caught in between the desire and ambition to effect a practical existential and social transformation of human existence in modern society while at the same time appearing as a “safe haven” unaffected by the contingency of history? Additionally, Fröhlich’s claim that the Tang’s notion of *liang zhi* qualifies an “anti-dogmatic” form of “ethical pluralism” (p. 144), since it approaches any claim to absolute knowledge as contradicting the momentary and uncontrollable nature of the state of intuition in which the absolute reveals itself, comes across as somewhat forced. While the assertion of the existence of something like “innate knowing” does not necessarily run counter to an anti-dogmatic stance, the latter does not follow logically or even straightforwardly from the former either. Crucially, while Tang’s approach may allow for a plurality of approaches to morality and notions of individual self-perfection, his conception of *liang zhi* seems to suffer from a certain formalism, in the sense that the abstract requirement of dialectical self-actualization of the absolute within the human being does not, in itself, have any positively identifiable moral content at all. A “normative reconstruction” of Confucianism risks running aground here. In a sense then, this notion is simply *too* pluralistic, or rather, too indeterminate and open-ended, since it is not theoretically robust enough to provide us with any means to distinguish between “self-transcendence” as an abstract metaphysical formula on the one hand, and a form of self-transcendence that would be conducive to individual and social improvement on the other. In this respect, I think Tang Junyi and most other modern Confucian philosophers display an exaggerated “self-belief” in the redemptive potential of Confucian religiosity that is too far removed from any empirical and historical reference to address the relation between their own philosophical frame of reference on the one hand and the socio-historical reality to which they responded on the other. Their strange and bewildering neglect of the Holocaust, something which Fröhlich critically engages with in his last chapter, is a dramatic case in point. Just like Fröhlich’s intriguing Freudian remarks on the idea that Confucian self-cultivation might have repressive and delirious psychological consequences for the subject of self-cultivation (see pp. 151–153), such considerations perhaps point beyond the philosophical horizon of modern Confucianism as such.

These few critical comments aside, I hope to have made it clear in the course of my review that the reader should make no mistake about the fact that Fröhlich’s

study is quite simply the best book on Tang Junyi out there, and one of the most sophisticated and rewarding investigations into Chinese intellectual history in general.

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