

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

How Does Public Theology Engage in Public Debate?

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Lau, Timothy Lee-yii
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-11 16:53:07
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166223

John H. Berthrong. *Expanding Process: Exploring Philosophical and Theological Transformations in China and the West*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. Hardcover, 249 pp, US \$75, ISBN 9780791475157. Paperback, 249 pp, US \$26.95, ISBN 9780791475164.

John H. Berthrong's book is a cross-cultural comparative study of two sets of philosophical writers/writings, one a Chinese Confucian-Daoist mixed grouping, the other a host of thinkers from the West all of whom may be grouped under the name "Process Philosophy." The former set includes of the Confucian Xunzi 荀子, the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi 朱熹 and his disciple Chen Chun 陳淳, and the Daoist text under the name Liezi 列子. The latter set consists of Western philosophical schools of process thought as well as naturalism and pragmatism. What themes or motifs can serve as a bridge to criss-cross between one set and the other? It is the theme of process and its mutations like change, reform, transformation and generativity. And the end-product of such cross-cultural activities? Well, it is "The Alchemy Process," says the Appendix of the book.

At first quick skimming, a reader may be aghast by the wide terrain covered by the book as well as bewildered by the wild treks and by-paths traversed. But more careful reading may lead to a warming-up to the erudition and sophistication of the scholarly venture. No, this will not be a stern-faced book review, for sternness is not on the face of the book. It is more like a pleasurable visit, at the invitation of an old friend, to an estate, which consists of a complex of rebuilt structures, some large and some small, all nicely laid-out with original and creative features from a certain exotic background, but now, now, as a re-built estate, situated in an environment with its own homeland culture yet open to a changing world-scene and to spacious nature. Having entered the estate, the visitor soon finds himself treading on familiar ground and feels quite at home in the various quarters, while he is also in for new surprises. He does not stay long enough, though, to examine carefully the construction as well as the craftsmanship, nor does he care

to look closely into every nook and cranny. But all in all it is a delightful visit.*

First, the front edifices are recognizably Chinese in form and substance. There is the house of Xunzi, not of Confucian orthodoxy yet an important Confucian construction. His controversy with Mengzi 孟子 on human nature notwithstanding, he believed in the possibility of human transformation, through socializing and civilizing ritual (*li* 禮) to become some kind of sagehood. Orthodox Confucians may question Xunzi's loyalty to Konzi and Mengzi's assertion of human beings' intrinsic worth, but thanks to Berthrong's reminder, with the help of commentaries by both Western and Chinese scholars, Xunzi's realism in regard to human nature and the social order strikes a plausibly sane if pragmatic note in a world that has gone discordant and restless. As an instance of fresh insight from Berthrong's study, his notes on Xunzi's thought on *zuo* 作 (to create, make new) as dynamic moral action spark off some new flashes of light in a shadow-ridden world-stage.

Next appears a text under the name *Liezi* 列子. 列 is the surname of a person, who is mentioned several times in the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* 莊子 as a fantastic figure, and zi 子 is appended to the surname to show that he was some kind of respectable scholar. Tradition attributes authorship of the text to someone by the name of Chang Zhan 張湛 of the East Jin 東晉 period. Actually little is known of this man, and there are many editions to *Liezi*, so that whoever the supposed author(s) might have been, the text must have been edited by multiple hands. In learned circles *Liezi* is labeled a spurious Daoist text. It can be called Daoist because it contains, besides fantastic and roguish elements, recognizable Daoist motifs like flux, simplicity, naturalism, and an organic view of cosmology, motifs that are echoed in many parts of the world today. It is to author Berthrong's credit that, citing respectable sinologists, both Western and Chinese, there are selections in *Liezi* that are well worth perusal and pondering over. If we may use the imagery of visiting a Chinese estate in a Western country, what we see here is not a structure but a wilderness with wildly flourishing grassy patches and lovely flowers spreading out sparsely in the wide, open field. Yes, you

* Some years ago the book reviewer actually visited an enchanting place called something like the Chinese Palace in Stockholm, Sweden. The palace is elegantly built, with pavilions and bridges, ponds and brooks in a lovely garden. The details of the whole place and even its exact name fade in recollection. But the fact that it is situated in a European country makes the visit edge out all the more as an unforgettably delightful experience, and it is the memorable visit that is at the back of the mind as this metaphorical book review takes shape.

see small shacks and cottages, primitive but nice, and a brook running thereby, and yonder a small cascade jumping over strangely-formed precipices.

Winding one's way to the other side of the estate, a stately building bearing the inscription *daoxue* 道學 (the study of the way). *Daoxue* is not a recognized school of thought, nor a classical text, hence the first letter need not be capitalized. It is an inscription used here in association with the Song 宋 Neo-Confucian Master Zhu Xi and a student of his Chang Chun 張淳. Zhu Xi is usually labeled under the term *lixue* 理學 (the Rationalist School), in distinction from the *xinxue* 心學 (the Heart-Mind Idealist School). Such a distinction is not always useful. Zhu Xi was both rationalistic in his metaphysical thinking and concerned about heart-mind issues. Keep the label of *lixue* for Zhu Xi and his disciples if you will, but apparently what Berthrong in his book wants to bring out is that Zhu Xi and his disciple Chang Chun take seriously the *dao* 道 (way), in the cosmological as well as moral levels (actually they cannot be separated), and interpret it in terms of process, change, action, and creativity. Whereas Zhuzi shows such an organic sense of things all through his writings, his disciple Chang Chun in the work bearing the title *Tzu-I* 字義 (Glossary) supports his Master's view by insightful word-study. The text, translated into English by the eminent Chinese sinologist Chan Wing-tsit, is an eye-opener showing the process-oriented implications of key Neo-Confucian terms as interpreted by Zhu Xi's school of thought (while he was deeply concerned about principles as *li* 理).

Indeed, deft interpretation-translation such as this caliber (taking the case of Chang Chun and Chan Wing-tsit's works) serves as an indispensable bridge for cross-cultural communication. In Chang Chun's hand, *li* 理 (principle), as taught by his master Zhu Xi is not just dead principle but dynamic force, and *daoxue* 道學 is not necessarily the dull study of abstract principles but the teaching of the living way. If so, that makes Zhu Xi's rationalistic philosophy not a dry pedantic exercise but articulation of a fully developed way of life. To reverse the direction of the translation process, from English to Chinese, the awkward word of "generativity" can be translated into *Yijing's* 易經 felicitous phrase *shengsheng buxi* 生生不息 (generating creativity ceaselessly), as some sinologists have done, as though stimulating creative productivity ever more, in life or art or industry.

Driving on the fly-over thoroughfare, we enter the city, a modern metropolis—or is it a postmodern creation? Let us linger for a while, to be with the earlier twentieth century North American Philosophical

Naturalism. Under that broad sign a long list of illustrious thinkers can be sub-grouped into various categories:

- * Process/Relational: Whitehead, Cobb, Hartshorne, Neville, Loomer, Meland, etc.
- * Pragmatism: Peirce, Kaufman, James, Rorty, Dewey, Mead, etc.
- * Naturalism & Hermeneutics: Randal, Wieman, Buchler, Langer, Hall, Ames, Corrington, McKeon, Pepper, Toulmin, etc.

The list is long and not all names are shown in the space above. Berthrong offers interesting comments on each group and several of the thinkers individually. If the central interest is on process thought, what are the traits of process? In the company of twentieth century North American Philosophical Naturalism, Berthrong tinkles with “the traits of process.” His treatment is not very clear. One would rather go back to Nicholas Rescher’s list in the Introduction of the book:

- * primacy of activity
- * necessity of change and innovation
- * the internal complexity of change and development
- * the idea of process entails various characteristic distinctions concerning change and development over time
- * substance is subordinate to process
- * the real is processional and things are what they do
- * pluralism
- * rationality

For the sake of making a comparative study of contemporary American Naturalism and the Old and New Confucians (the latter being twentieth century figures), Berthrong brings up the category of “ontological parity” on the Westerners’ side and the Confucian dictum of *liyi fenshu* 理一分殊 (principle is one, its manifestations many). But how do the two sets of thinkers meet and interact? This reviewer is at a loss, as though, driving merrily on the highway after his visit to the Chinese estate he runs into traffic jam, quite a bit frustrated. The most he can do is to heave a sigh of resignation, coaxing himself to feel at ease in the foggy weather of philosophical pluralism or relativism in the task of comparative philosophical study.

It is the Appendix, on the “Alchemy of Process,” that a breezy wind blows onto the face, thus reviving a relaxed mood, even in the attempt to seek truth and reach for goodness. Alchemy has an occult element, yet it has a serious intent, to change metals into gold or to obtain a cure from concocting strange chemicals. Cross-cultural encounter and comparative study to gain better understanding and to enrich life have a serious intent and they are not meant to be an easy-going undertaking. Nevertheless there are in philosophical wisdom, spiritual quest, and religious sentiments elements of the unexpected and psychological space is obtained, all beyond rational calculation. Berthrong speaks of “deregulating religion in the modern world” as though it is one of the religious paradigm shifts of this age. One would have thought that our age borders on the postmodern age, if not right in it. But then “post-modernism” is elusive as time and history are elusive. So interfaith conversation and comparative study of process thought in the West and the Chinese sages’ approach to *dao*, the on-going way, are not straightforward and predictable enterprises but rather full of surprises. And that is quite acceptable, even to one who has theological convictions.

PETER K. H. LEE

Retired Director

Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture