

# Xiong Shili and the New Treatise: A review discussion of Xiong Shili, *New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness*, an annotated translation by John Makeham

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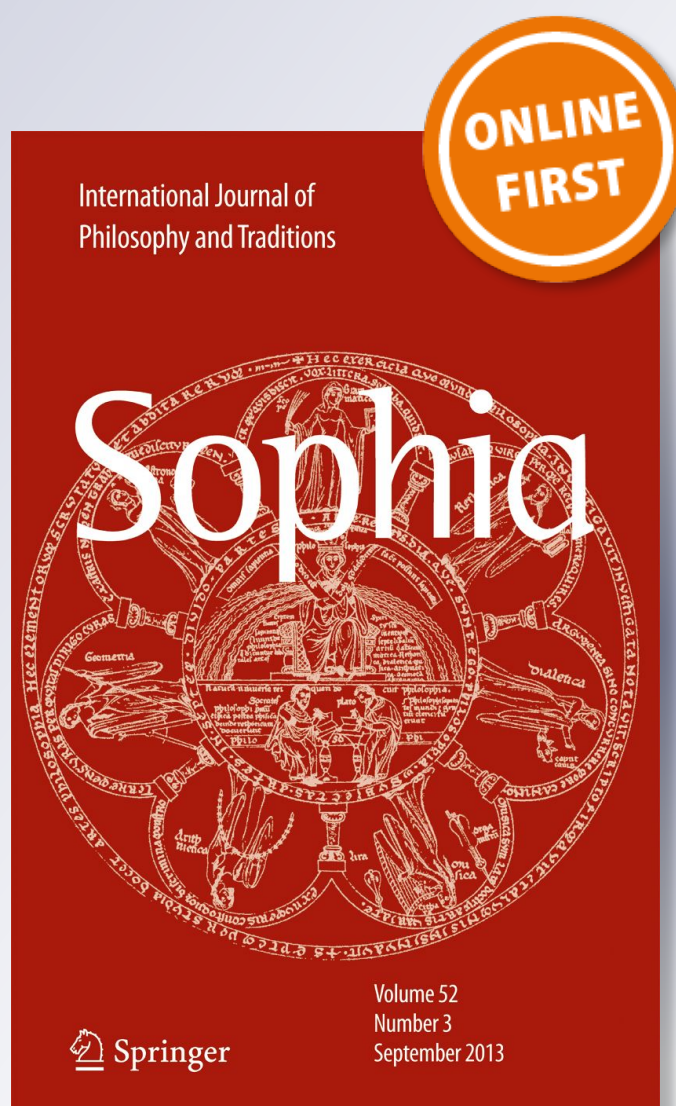
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***Xiong Shili and the New Treatise: A review discussion of Xiong Shili, New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness, an annotated translation by John Makeham***

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Due to the efforts of a small but steadily growing group of scholars (among whom the translator of this book, John Makeham, is prominent), the works of the prolific Chinese philosopher Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) have gradually been coming to the attention of Western students of East Asian thought. In this book, Makeham translates—with an ample introduction and extensive annotation—one of Xiong’s most important representative works, the *Xin weishi lun* 新唯識論. This title is rendered in English by Makeham (reflecting Xiong’s special interpretation) as *New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness*. Xiong is one of the most influential Chinese thinkers of the twentieth century, a founding figure in the scholarly movement known as “New Confucianism,” a late nineteenth to twentieth century intellectual phenomenon in China and Taiwan (to be distinguished from Neo-Confucianism, which is comprised of the works of philosophers and religious thinkers of the Song, Yuan, and Ming periods). Based on his voluminous works dealing with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, Xiong inspired a number of important subsequent contributors to this area of study, perhaps the most important being Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), whose work has

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also recently come to the attention of Western scholars. Although Xiong clearly saw himself as a Confucian (xvii–xviii), he was not a Confucian in the way that the average student might think, in that his primary sources are usually not the *Analec*s of Confucius, or the *Mencius*. Rather, his principal textual bases were more metaphysically oriented texts such as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經).

This is without question an excellent book: a superb translation and scholarly study, a work that could only be accomplished by someone with a breadth of background in Chinese thought equivalent to that of Makeham, as the *New Treatise* covers a vast range of material from *Yijing* studies, Confucianism, Lao-Zhuang Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, Abhidharma, Yogācāra, Buddhist Logic, and even some elements of Western philosophy—all areas that fall under the translator's range of expertise. The translator also shows himself to be deftly aware of Xiong's own special interpretations and nuances of usage of terms that have a specific established meaning in their original Buddhist and Confucian contexts, but which Xiong applies in his own innovative manner. Makeham renders this complex, often wandering discourse through these different fields, in English idiom that allows us to clearly appreciate Xiong's distinctive understandings.

The book begins with an ample, well-organized, and lucid introduction to Xiong's background, life, and thought, followed by a summary of the *New Treatise* itself. This summary turns out to be of vital importance for the reader in the subsequent reading of the main text, as, at least in the beginning, the reader may find it difficult to see exactly where Xiong is going. The translation itself, in terms of the English prose, is clear and accurate. Makeham meticulously identifies the sources of Xiong's ideas in a broad range of Buddhist, Confucian, Yin-Yang, and Daoist texts, demonstrating a firm mastery of the conceptual systems contained within these works. The source text is well-annotated and well-researched.

I have one technical complaint regarding the presentation of the work, which is the decision to render the intralinear notes that comprise the autocommentary in such a way that they run directly in the main text, their presence signified only by a slight difference in lightness of font, without any other brackets, change in font style or size, etc. Reading with this kind of formatting, it took me a good deal of effort and considerable visual strain to pay attention to where the main text ended and the commentary began; so, in the beginning, I just read everything. After a while though, finding some portions of the commentary to be either redundant or simply more than I felt I needed to read, I began to try to skip over the commentary. But, with bits of the main text dispersed intermittently within the commentary, I had to work much harder than I would have liked in trying to figure out where the main text left off and where it began again. Perhaps for younger scholars with stronger eyes than mine, this would not be a problem.

### **Xiong Shili and the *New Treatise*: Assessing His Understanding of Buddhism**

To summarize the thought of Xiong as seen through the content of this book is not a simple task, as he courses through and treats a broad range of topics from the various realms of Chinese philosophy noted above. However, as might be guessed from the

title, the main object of critique for this work is Xuanzang's (602–664) *Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論 (*CWSL*)—the definitive source for the doctrines of East Asian Yogācāra (Faxiang; Weishi 唯識, or 'Consciousness-only') Buddhism. Xiong is mainly interested in the *CWSL*'s descriptions of the mind and mental functions and especially those descriptions attributed to Dharmapāla (sixth century). Xiong critically reworks certain themes of the *CWSL* by trying to integrate these into the matrix of his own system, a system grounded in the native Chinese thought paradigms of creative production through essence and function (*ti-yong* 體用) that can be gleaned from the *Book of Changes* and Neo-Confucian expansions on this approach.

The great extent of Xiong's grasp of a broad range of Chinese philosophical doctrines is evident, and he discusses them in a grand, synthesized manner, that goes far beyond the 'three teachings are one' arguments made by Buddhist scholiasts in China and Korea several centuries earlier. While the *New Treatise* contains many points of criticism of Yogācāra, Xiong at the same time retains much of the Yogācāric description of the operations of consciousness, as he works through its system of causes and conditions, divisions of consciousness, and descriptions of mental functions, often recategorizing and rearranging these, and in many cases redefining them in a way that provides insight and nuance that goes beyond their original treatment in the *CWSL*. Thus, following Xiong through his trenchant examinations of the Yogācāra mind, mental functions, and cause and effect, the student of Buddhist philosophy of mind is provided with a rare opportunity to look at these ideas from a new perspective.

However, (and here I must acknowledge that I have not studied any other work of Xiong's besides this book) I must say that I came away from this book with some doubts about the depth of Xiong's understanding of what Buddhism is and what it seeks to achieve. The central problem, it seems to me, is that Xiong is not interested in seeing Buddhist doctrines on the philosophy of mind as part of a soteriological system, a set of practices and beliefs aimed at enlightenment and liberation. Xiong is rather aiming at the creation of a dynamic and totalistic 'onto-cosmology,'<sup>1</sup> within which the generation of the world and living beings meshes perfectly with Buddhist descriptions of psychological and epistemic function. Xiong seeks to use the Yogācāra writings of Xuanzang/Dharmapāla within his system, but ends up being disappointed with the works of these scholars. He takes issue with, on one hand, the 'empty' approach advocated by Madhyamaka, and on the other, what he sees to be a reified 'seed origination' approach in the *CWSL*. In his view, neither approach provides a satisfactory account of the dynamic production and change that characterize our existence. Furthermore, he sees the Yogācāric seed theory (especially in its *CWSL* presentation) as incommensurate with traditional Buddhist dependent origination. (See esp. pp. 123–25.)

Perhaps it should not be surprising that he finds, from an indigenous Chinese perspective, the Buddhist teachings to be discontinuous and incoherent. Other Confucian critics of Buddhist in the past assailed Buddhism on similar grounds.<sup>2</sup> But such critics also seemed unable to see Buddhism for what it was—a soteriological map

<sup>1</sup> 'Onto-cosmology' is a fitting characterization of Xiong's approach employed by Ng Yu-Kwan in his 'Xiong Shili's Metaphysical Theory About the Non-Separation of Substance and Function,' in John Makeham, ed. *New Confucianism*, New York: Palgrave-McMillan 2003, p. 234 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the criticisms of Buddhism by Jeong Dojeon in A. Charles Muller, *Korea's Great Buddhist Confucian Debate* (UHP 2015), who also criticizes Buddhism for similar apparent doctrinal gaps.



aiming for release from the hindrances of cognition and affliction, ending up in liberation via a transformation of the basis (*āśraya-paravṛtti*). And these Confucian critics also usually failed to grasp the special dimension of language itself within Buddhism, where descriptions that seem to build systems are always ultimately deconstructible in the awareness of their expedient or prajñaptic character. If I am correct in guessing that Xiong had some blind spots in his understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhism<sup>3</sup>, perhaps this was due to the fact that he sought to glean a complete and coherent onto-cosmology from a system that was fundamentally soterically oriented and prajñaptically articulated—one that had at its midst a shifting view of language that made a universally-applicable metaphysical system difficult to construct. The leading Buddhist thinkers of all the major schools usually worked with a strong awareness that the apparent dualisms seen in Buddhism were ultimately deconstructed in the designatory character of language itself, something that Xiong cannot seem to discern in a functional manner in the Buddhist writings. It is my bet that most scholars of Yogācāra would probably assume that Dharmapāla and Xuanzang fully understood that seeds (*bīja*) were purely metaphorical, an imperfect but useful way of trying to explain the phenomenon of individuated cause and effect.

If Xiong wanted to look to Buddhism to help build an onto-cosmology, one would think that rather than going to Yogācāra and the *CWSL*, he might have tried to rely more on the texts that espouse the ‘nature-origination’ notion, or Buddha-nature, as seen in Huayan and other Tathāgatagarbha forms of Chinese Buddhism (such as is expounded in the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *Huayan jing*, etc.) which have an ontological taste that one would think should mesh rather well with his approach. But perhaps this would not have worked well for him, in that in these systems such a nature is related primarily with the notion of intrinsic enlightenment or innate Buddhahood, whereas ‘nature,’ ‘essence,’ or ‘reality’ for Xiong has little to do with this kind of enlightenment-oriented approach. Thus, it is probably no accident that Xiong (at least in this treatise) pays virtually no attention to these seminal texts of the Tathāgatagarbha or Huayan systems.<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, my training as a Buddhistologist, and one who has worked to a fair extent with the *CWSL*, leads me to zero in on some of the specific points of Xiong’s thesis that do not seem to add up. But, by doing so, I do not seek to debunk his work on the whole (or minimize the great accomplishment of the translator) as I would need to read more from his oeuvre to provide a truly valid assessment. It must be acknowledged that the effort made in this treatise to integrate core components of major Confucian and Buddhist systems into a larger, overarching framework has not, to my knowledge, been attempted on this kind of scale and with this level of sophistication at any time in history. In that alone, it is a valuable work, something that any serious student of Chinese philosophy should not be unaware of. Given this intrinsic value of the *New Treatise*, coupled with John Makeham’s superb treatment of it, I certainly recommend this book to scholars in the field.

<sup>3</sup> I am not alone in opining that there were deficiencies in Xiong’s understanding of Buddhism. See Ng in Makeham 2003, 241–242.

<sup>4</sup> Makeham does indicate in his notes at a couple of points that it seems like this or that notion might have been influenced by the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* or Huayan Buddhism, but Xiong does not overtly engage with or cite these texts in any significant manner.