

Xiong Shili on Why Reality Cannot be Sought Independent of Phenomena

From at least the fourth century onward, Chinese philosophy has been fundamentally shaped by ideas and constructs derived from Indian Buddhism. Nodal developments in Chinese philosophy from the fifth through to the thirteenth centuries and beyond drew on these constructs for inspiration and renewal, even as these constructs became naturalized/Sinicized/Sinified and their Indian ‘genetic markers’ became effaced (but not erased) over time.

This legacy has provided Chinese philosophy (and indeed East Asian philosophy) with a wealth of sophisticated ideas about such fundamental metaphysical topics as identity and difference, constancy and change, transcendence and immanence, one and many, monism and dualism, the noumenal and the phenomenal. Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885-1968) is a particularly compelling example of how this legacy continues to be of relevance in the ongoing creation of Chinese philosophy.

In China, Xiong is typically regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth-century. Like the Song *Neo-Confucian* Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) before him and the modern *New Confucian* Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909-1995) after him, Xiong was a system builder. He drew syncretically on a diverse range of resources in the Chinese philosophical tradition to construct his own overarching metaphysical vision. He was particularly inspired by the view found in *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Change) that the cosmos is perpetually and vigorously changing. He also subscribed to the notion of the mind as inherently enlightened, but obscured by defilements, a view common to several Sinitic systems of Buddhist thought—Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan—influenced by the *Dashengqixinlun* 大乘起信論 (The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith). This was also a view that shaped Neo-Confucian philosophy, as indeed does much else in Sinitic Buddhist philosophy.

Xiong never realized his goal of constructing an epistemology but he did construct an ontology. The central metaphysical problem Xiong grappled with in the *New Treatise*—and indeed throughout his life—was the relation between the ontological and the phenomenal. Opposed to ontological dualism and pluralism, he was an ontological

monist but in a particular sense—his monism is not reducible to a single quality or characterization.¹ It might be best characterized as a type of monism-as-holism. Xiong sought to develop an ontological monism that was combined with an epistemological dualism, experienced through ultimate truth and conventional truth. The distinction between ultimate and conventional truth is central to much in Buddhist philosophy. Conventional truth tells us how things are conventionally, according to linguistic and conceptual conventions. Ultimate truth tells us of how things really are ultimately, beyond the limitations of conceptual and linguistic conventions.

In introducing Xiong's monism, the paper is structured around his engagement with different traditions of Buddhist philosophy. I am not going to address the Confucian elements in his thought—the Buddhist elements are complex enough. The first and major part of the presentation introduces Xiong's critique of Yogācāra accounts of consciousness. The second part introduces his understanding of the doctrine of emptiness. I also trace the connection between Xiong's understanding and how the concept of emptiness was understood in Tathāgatagarbha school of Sinitic Buddhism.

My aim here is not to be an advocate or apologist for Xiong's recondite philosophical vision. Rather, I seek to provide a charitable interpretation of a major twentieth-century Chinese philosopher's monistic metaphysics, and in doing so explain why he argued that Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena even though he also maintained that phenomena are not real.

1. Xiong's critiques of Yogācāra

Conventionally, Xiong is recognized as a founding figure of the modern New Confucian school of philosophy. Xiong's philosophical training, however, began with Buddhist philosophy—in particular, Yogācāra Buddhism. Yogācāra (*Yuqixingpai* 瑜伽行派; yogic practice) is one of the two most influential philosophical systems of Indian Buddhism, along with Madhyamaka. Introduced into China as early as the fifth century,

¹Unlike substance monism, where substance is understood as something that does not rely on anything else to be what it is, in Xiong's monism, everything relies on everything else.

there was a major revival of Yogācāra in China over the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Over the thirty-year period from the early-1920s to the early-1950s Xiong moved from a largely uncritical belief in Yogācāra philosophy to a position where it served as a foil for his own syncretic system of metaphysics. His criticisms of Yogācāra grew progressively more trenchant over this period. The incremental nature of this transition is reflected in the different versions of his major philosophical writing, *Xinweishilun* 新唯識論 (New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness).² This, however, did not stop Xiong from adapting elements of Yogācāra thought to develop his own constructive philosophy.

As indicated by the title, *Xinweishilun* is presented as a commentary on, or critical response to, Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602-664) *Cheng weishilun* 成唯識論 (Demonstration of Nothing but Consciousness). (This title reflects the idea that all our perceptions are mediated and interpreted by the mind.) *Cheng weishilun* is the most complete exposition of Yogācāra in the entire Buddhist tradition and is a foundational text in East Asian Buddhist philosophy. *New Treatise* consists of an interpretive summary, discussion, and critique of key Yogācāra teachings that feature in *Cheng weishilun*.

Consciousness

The Yogācāra school is best known for its epistemological idealism, according to which all perceptions are mediated and interpreted by the mind or consciousness (the two terms being used interchangeably); no aspect of the outside world appears directly to awareness. Yogācāra distinguishes eight types of consciousness. The first five are the five sensory consciousnesses: the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. The sixth consciousness or *mano-vijñāna* (mental consciousness) is the thinking consciousness. It also brings together and differentiates the sensory impressions derived from the five sensory consciousnesses. That is, it can think about what the other five consciousnesses perceive; the five sensory consciousnesses do not have this reflective capacity. The

²This presentation draws its findings principally from the 1932 literary edition of the *New Treatise*, in *Xiong Shili quanji* 熊十力全集 (The Complete Writings of Xiong Shili), vol. 1. (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001).

seventh or self-centered consciousness (*manas*) is the source of self-attachment; and the eighth, or store consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*), retains the impressions of past experiences and ‘perfumes’ new experiences on the basis of that previous conditioning.

Karmic ‘seeds’ (*bīja*; 種子) or potentials emerge from the eighth, giving rise to the ‘manifest activity’ of the seven other consciousnesses and causing or ‘perfuming’ future seeds. That is, the seeds stored in the eighth consciousness function to generate ‘manifestly activated’ (*xianxing* 現行) consciousness—the activity of one or more of the seven consciousnesses. In turn, these manifestly activated consciousnesses immediately perfume seeds in the eighth consciousness, and the cycle is perpetuated. Each of the manifestly activated consciousnesses is also able to transform and be manifest as a perceiving part (subject) and an image part (object). *Cheng weishilun* presents all experience as contained within the transformations of consciousness.

There is some disagreement among modern scholars as to whether the basic epistemological stance of Yogācāra is the view that there are no entities apart from consciousness or whether Yogācāra represents a type of epistemic caution rather than an ontological pronouncement and is really only claiming that all our efforts to get beyond ourselves are nothing but projections of our consciousness. As for Xiong, he sides with Xuanzang in arguing that to posit external cognitive objects as the cause of cognition simply does not make sense. For example, in responding to the claim that there are external objects because we stop seeing white when white-colored objects are removed from before us and we stop feeling hardness when we stop touching hard objects, Xiong replied as follows:

For consciousness to manifest solidity, whiteness, and other characteristics there must be a cognitive object as cause. I am prepared to accept this meaning.

However, the cognitive object that functions as cause certainly does not have an independent existence separate from consciousness. How so? This is because cognitive object and consciousness are a whole (*yiti* 體; [literally ‘one body’]).

Because they are a whole, they resonate with one another (*jiaogan* 交感). Because they resonate with one another, we can say, nominally, that the cognitive object has the power to function as cause, conveying an image of itself [to the mind].

(This is saying that it is only because cognitive objects have the power to act as causes that they are able to cause consciousness to manifest images that resemble cognitive objects.)³If [cognitive objects] are talked about as causes in this sense, then their existence should be accepted.

Now, for you to state that there are external causes would be illogical. What is the reason for this? Because you presume [the existence of] external causes, you assert that [cognitive objects] are separate from inner consciousness and exist independently. [According to your reckoning,] inner and outer are separated, neither connecting with the other nor close to the other. Since there is no way for them to affect one another, how can there be a sense in which [cognitive objects] serve as causes? Thus your presumption that there is an external realm that causes the characteristics of solidity and whiteness to appear in inner consciousness is nothing more than your own erroneous presumption and rightfully cannot be accepted.⁴

Underpinning Xiong's position is the view that consciousness or mind and cognitive objects are inseparable because they constitute a single body, an indivisible whole. Even to speak of 'them' in these terms is—from Xiong's perspective—to do so only nominally, provisionally (*jia* 假; *prajñapti*):

In terms of appearance only, subject and object are mutually entailing; it cannot be said that either issues from the other. As such, subject and object accompany one another with no identifiable boundary between them. (No demarcation between consciousness and cognitive object can be found.) Thus even if one wanted to separate them, there is certainly no place even to begin. This is due to the so-called flow of the whole.

³ Red highlighted passages marked off in round brackets are Xiong's interlinear autocommentary.

⁴Xiong, *New Treatise*, pp. 15-16.

Occasionally, Xiong did distinguish internal and external cognitive objects, thus giving the impression that he accepted that external cognitive objects give rise to cognition. This is not the case:

Both the sensory consciousnesses[= the first five] and the sixth consciousness get the name consciousness from discerning the characteristics of cognitive objects. Whereas the sensory consciousnesses discern only external cognitive objects, the sixth consciousness discerns internal and external cognitive objects. Internal cognitive objects are the product of cognitive construction. . . .

‘Internal cognitive objects’ are those constructed by memory, which is associated with the sixth consciousness. He continues:

However, because the sixth consciousness is also always responding to cognitive objects it does not preserve a self-nature. This is because when the sixth consciousness arises it conveys the characteristics of the cognitive object (*jingxiang* 境相).

That is, it is transformed into that which is conveyed to it, as an image or images, by one or more of the other consciousnesses. He continues:

For example, when it takes external forms and so forth as its cognitive objects, in consciousness there necessarily appear reflections (*yingxiang* 影像; **pratibimba*⁵) that resemble external forms and so forth. And even though ‘a cognitive object that is taken as the cause of consciousness’ (*suoyuan* 所緣; *ālambana*) is fundamentally not an external cognitive object, in consciousness there still appears a reflection that resembles the cognitive object that is taken to be the cause of consciousness. This kind of reflection also resembles an external cognitive object and so functions just the same as a ‘condition enabling a

⁵ Occasionally I have suggested what I believe would have been the particular matching Sanskrit terms in square brackets, based on typical Sinitic Buddhist usage.

cognitive object to be taken as the cause of consciousness’ (*suoyuanyuan* 所緣緣).⁶

‘A cognitive object that is taken to be the cause of consciousness’ (*ālambana*) is merely a conceptual stop-gap—it represents what is nominally or hypothetically posited to be something that exists ‘externally’ to the mind, to consciousness. As Xiong states, neither the cognitive object that is taken to be the cause of consciousness nor its reflected image—that which we actually perceive on the surface of consciousness, having been interpreted and transformed by the cognitive process—is actually an external cognitive object, but is merely spoken of as if it were. Xiong explains that this is entirely consistent with conventional truth and mundane reality:

As for what is termed ‘knowledge,’ it has always been developed on the basis of looking outwards at things. In the universe that constitutes our everyday lives, because we regard that which our senses detect to be real cognitive objects external to our mind, so we distinguish and deal with them accordingly. This is how knowledge has been developed. Hence knowledge is merely a tool by which to seek principles externally. If this tool is used only in the universe that constitutes our everyday lives—that is, within the world of physical principles—of course it cannot be deemed inappropriate. If this tool is used carelessly, however, when one wants to solve metaphysical problems, and one posits Reality (*shiti* 實體) as a cognitive object of the external realm in order to trace its principles, one will be greatly mistaken.⁷

Reality (*shiti* 實體; **tattva*) is the single most important concept in the *New Treatise* and is invoked frequently, albeit under a variety of names, including: true nature (*zhenxing* 真性), real principle (*shili* 實理), the nature (*xing* 性), the mind (*xin* 心), principle (*li* 理), or just *ti* 體. For Xiong, Reality is the locus that ontologically grounds

⁶Xiong, *New Treatise*, p. 99.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

the phenomenal world yet is not different from the phenomenal world, just as the sea supports waves yet is not different from them.

Transformation

At the most general level, Xiong is critical of Xuanzang for having successfully refuted attachment to external objects but at the price of having fallen into the trap of presenting consciousness as a real entity, a cognitive object. For Xiong, Xuanzang's position was just as flawed as the theories proposed to support the thesis that external objects are real, a thesis that the Yogācāra masters had themselves thoroughly criticized. Xiong insists that consciousness and the appearance of cognitive objects constitute a single, indivisible whole that cannot neatly be separated into two pieces.

Xiong is highly critical of Yogācāra for promoting what he regards as ontological dualism and pluralism. Xiong's critiques are grounded in the Mahāyāna doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*; 緣起), that everything arises from causes and conditions and has no self-nature, no intrinsic nature (*zixing* 自性; [**svabhāva*]). He begins with the concept of seeds. Seeds are the latent residua of a person's actions. Every volitional action deposits a predisposition within one's mental continuum, which represents a propensity to perpetuate that sort of action and also guarantees the karmic repercussions of one's moral choices. As the metaphor of seeds implies, they lie dormant until the proper conditions for their manifestation are present and then give rise to mental states that resemble the original impulses that led to their creation.

Xiong maintains that Yogācāra masters had hypostatized the doctrine of dependent arising into a doctrine of seeds, and in turn had effectively substantialized the concept of seeds—originally just a heuristic metaphor—by presenting seeds as the ontological basis of all things. Xiong's critique of Yogācāra pluralism extends to the division of consciousness into eight groups. 'When they broke-down mind-consciousness, the contents were extremely fragmented, in order to accommodate multiple seeds. It is just as if a material object was analyzed into atoms, molecules, right down to electrons.' The idea here is that consciousness was broken down into eight groups, and these clusters were in turn attributed to seeds.

Here I am going to focus on his critique of the bifurcation of consciousness into an image part and a perceiving part. For Yogācāras, consciousness is always relational: that which does the cognizing and that which is cognized. Jay Garfield terms it a reflexive model of consciousness. This model has two aspects: ‘a directedness toward the manifest object of consciousness and a self-directed aspect that makes possible both knowledge of the conscious state itself and its status as consciousness, as opposed to an unconscious state’.⁸ In other words, reflexive conscious is consciousness being conscious of itself at the time it is conscious of its cognitive object.

The transformation (*zhuanbian* 轉變 [**pariṇāma*]) of consciousness is a key concept in Yogācāra and was a subject of much theoretical elaboration in China from the seventh century onwards. Xuanzang’s *Cheng weishilun* presents all experience as contained within the transformations of consciousness. The perceiving part and the image part represent what manifestly activated consciousness becomes, what it transforms into (*suobian* 所變; *pariṇāma*). The reason the perceiving part and the image part together represent what consciousness transforms into is that both are needed for perception to occur. Consciousness-as-transformer (*nengbian* 能變; *pariṇāmika*)—the capacity of consciousness to transform into a perceiving part and image part—provides the raw material for what consciousness presents to itself and what it (consciousness) transforms into.

Consistent with his monism, Xiong is critical of the Yogācāra claim that consciousness can be bifurcated into an image part and a perceiving part: ‘This is just like taking something that is already whole and then breaking it into fragments. How could this possibly explain what transformation is?’ Instead, he presents his own account of transformation as a direct challenge to, and radical departure from, the seeds-based causal theory found in *Cheng weishilun*. Xiong seeks to develop and defend an ontological account of transformation in which Reality (實體; 本體 [*tattva*]) is presented as nothing other than an uninterrupted holistic process of constant transformation that cannot be reduced to subject-object characteristics.

⁸Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy*, New York: OUP, 2015, p. 136

Xiong begins by asking two questions: What is able to transform? What is transformation? His reply to the first question is, ‘The universe has only ever been this constantly renewing transformation—how could it be possible for there ever to have been something into which it is transformed?’ His reply to the second question is: ‘One contraction (翕) and one expansion (闢) is called transformation’. Contraction and expansion are two terms derived from the *Book of Change*. For Xiong, contraction is the basis for provisionally (假; *prajñapti*) talking about material dharmas (*sefa* 色法), and expansion is the basis for provisionally talking about mental dharmas (*xinfa* 心法).

In Abhidharma literature (ancient scholastic Buddhism), dharmas are real and do not pass away; the composite things they constitute change from moment to moment, but dharmas remain. Madhyamaka theory construes dharmas as impermanent and dependently arisen. Xiong follows this latter understanding. Dharmas are momentary property instantiations, which, in a complex of mutual interdependence, give rise to the deceptive appearance of macroscopic constituents. The series is uninterrupted but its constituent elements, dharmas, are momentary, ceasing as soon as they arise.

Material dharmas are associated with the contracting tendency of transformation; mental dharmas are associated with the expanding tendency of transformation. For Xiong, however, the claim that there are real material objects and real minds is misguided. Material and mental dharmas are devoid of self-nature. The various dharmas extinguish at the very moment of their generation. There is only instant upon instant of separate, sudden ceaseless flow that merely seems to be continuous. Rather, the Reality of material and mental dharmas is ‘constant transformation’ (*hengzhuan* 恆轉).

In Xiong’s revisionist account of ‘transformation’, Reality is nothing other than an uninterrupted holistic process that cannot be reduced to subject-object characteristics. It is in this context that he introduces and elaborates the two concepts contraction and expansion, adapting them to characterize the inherent processual qualities of transformation when viewed from the perspective of conventional truth. Although I do not find his account of contraction and expansion to be particularly compelling, he is really employing them as a heuristic device and should not be taken as Xiong’s actual belief. (For a culturally literate Chinese reader, the terms contraction and expansion are

immediately associated with the process of continuous change that features in the *Book of Change*. These two characteristics also have the advantage of resonating strongly with Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai's 張載(1020-1077) monistic account of the *taixu* 太虛–*qi* 氣 continuum.) Elsewhere Xiong himself explicitly states that his characterization of Reality in dynamic terms was merely the application of 'skillful means' (方便; *upāya*):

As with the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) [teaching of] the inherent emptiness of conditioned phenomena and their characteristics, this leads people to begin to grasp the import of Reality. Although the establishment of this concept [on the basis of] skillful means seems to differ [in approach] from that of the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka School, the end goal is certainly the same—this is beyond question.⁹

What is transformation? Xiong explains it is as follows:

One contraction and one expansion is called transformation. (These two 'one' words simply highlight different tendencies in dynamism. This is not saying that contraction and expansion each have self-nature. Nor can one say that contraction precedes and expansion follows.) It has always been [the case] that movement's constant transformation is continuous and without end. (Here 'movement' is another name for 'transformation'. Just as the first movement ceases the next movement arises. It is like the uninterrupted flash upon flash of lightning—this is what is called 'continuous'. It is not a previous movement's continuing into a later moment of time that is called 'continuous'.) As contraction consolidates it comes close to being matter. It is the basis for nominally talking about material dharmas. The vigor of expansion is such that it is utterly unimpeded. It is the basis for nominally talking about mental dharmas. Because the material and the mental lack reality (*shishi* 實事; [**dravya*]) there is transformation only. ('Real' means

⁹See Xiong Shili, 'Jiangci 講詞', *Shililunxueyujilüe* 十力論學語輯略, in *XiongShiliquanji*, vol. 2, p. 253. The speech was given in 1935.

real constitutive entity. This is because neither material nor mental dharmas have real self-nature (*ziti* 自體 [**svabhāva*]).¹⁰

Material dharmas are associated with the contracting tendency of constant transformation; mental dharmas are associated with the expanding tendency of constant transformation. As such, contraction and expansion are conventional perspectives, not ultimate perspectives. This distinction is important to bear this in mind.

It has always been the case that material and mental dharmas are devoid of self-nature. If one were to talk of their Reality then it would be constant transformation. Material dharmas are when the movement of constant transformation is contracting; mental dharmas are when the movement of the constant transformation is expanding. Fundamentally, contraction and expansion are separate and contrary trends in movement—this is transformation’s unpredictability. Thus it appears to be like arising and ceasing.¹¹

For Xiong, the claim that there are real material objects and real minds is a misguided conceptual projection. Material and mental dharmas are devoid of self-nature, intrinsic nature. The various dharmas extinguish at the very moment of their generation. There is only the ceaseless flow of instant upon instant of generation and extinction.

Material dharmas

In addressing the topic of material dharmas—physical phenomena—Xiong aims to provide an explanation for conventional accounts of the phenomenal world. At the heart of conventional accounts, we are told, is the view that physical phenomena offer physical resistance. He explains that in reality there is no resistance; what we deludedly take to be resistance is actually the process of ‘constant transformation’ (*hengzhuan* 恆轉) in which

¹⁰*New Treatise*, p. 41.

¹¹*New Treatise*, p. 48.

the movement or transformation of phenomena—dharmas—seems to tend towards contraction: ‘the illusory construction of countless moving points’.¹²

As stated in chapter 2 of *New Treatise*: ‘Constantly coalescing, and so without any prearranged agreement, countless points of movement are illusorily constituted, the tendency of which seems to be towards solidifying—this is called “contraction”’.¹³ These moving points appear to have material form but do not, and cease as soon as they arise. They are momentary, contiguous continua. These continua are conventionally real, but consist of nothing that has an independent identity, a self-nature. Xiong further explains that the idea there is a brief interval between each instant of arising and instant ceasing is mistaken because the term ‘instant’ does not refer to time in the conventional sense but rather is merely provisionally or nominally posited. Similarly, the terms ‘preceding’ and ‘following’ used in reference to this process are also posited only nominally.

He continues:

I regard the self-nature (*zixing* 自性) of the phenomenal world to be inherently empty. (*Zixing* 自性’ is the same as saying ‘intrinsic nature’ (*ziti* 自體 [*svabhāva*]). It exists only because of the attachments of false discrimination (*wangqing* 妄情). (‘Phenomenal world’ is the collective name for the various material and mental dharmas that are conventionally attached to. If all of the material and mental dharmas appropriated by views based on false discrimination and the conceptions constructed by the sixth consciousness [*yixiang* 意想] are cut away, then what thing can be named as the phenomenal world?’)

If one understands that the phenomenal world in fact does not exist then one knows that there is no means for causal conditions (*yinyuan* 因緣) to be established. It is only because the phenomenal world to which false discriminations are attached is empty that inherent Reality, which is not empty, is able to be profoundly realized by means of proper attentiveness. (‘Inherent’ means ‘inherently so of itself’ because it is not established by the conceptions

¹²*New Treatise*, p. 72-73.

¹³*New Treatise*, p. 41.

constructed by the sixth consciousness. ‘Reality’ is an alternative name for Fundamental Reality. ‘Attentiveness’ [*zuoyi* 作意] means ‘reflection through accurate cognition’ [*guanzhao* 觀照]. Correct wisdom reflected through accurate cognition tallies with suchness, and is far removed from deluded conceptual projection, hence it is said: ‘attentiveness’.) There has only ever been this Reality. Apart from it there is no phenomenal world to which it stands in contrast.¹⁴

Here Xiong presents the phenomenal world—the world of everyday existence—as the product of the sixth consciousness’ unique capacity to construct concepts. In doing so he is drawing on Yogācāra consciousness theory. His aim is really just to critique conventional constructions of phenomenal reality, and Yogācāra conveniently provides the conceptual tools to do this. As noted above, the sixth consciousness or mental consciousness (*mano-vijñāna*) brings together and differentiates the sensory impressions derived from the five sensory consciousnesses. That is, it can think about what the other five consciousnesses perceive, but it does not experience those perceptions itself. On this basis it generates the concepts used to construct phenomenal reality.

Xiong is arguing that there can be no causal relations between phenomena if they have no self-nature. Drawing on the doctrine of the interdependent arising of all things, Xiong’s point is that phenomena have no intrinsic nature and are conceptual fictions.

Xiong is also drawing on the Yogācāra doctrine of three natures (三性; *trisvabhāva*). This doctrine was developed to explain the idea of ‘consciousness only’ more clearly. Every object has three natures (which are really three non-natures). The first is the imagined or constructed nature our mind attributes to objects and which obscures understanding. This construction is the role played by the sixth consciousness. The second is the other-dependent nature. Everything exists merely through dependence on causes and conditions and has no intrinsic nature. The third nature is the consummate nature. This is what is realized when the imagined or constructed nature our mind attributes to things is removed, enabling us to see that everything exists merely through dependence on causes and conditions, and is empty of the nature we conventionally ascribe to them. It is by ‘reflecting through accurate cognition’ that the consummate

¹⁴*New Treatise*, p. 54.

nature of things is revealed. As the Yogācāra counterpart to the Mādhyamaka concept of emptiness, the consummate nature is actually the antithesis of self-nature.

Mental dharmas

And just as material dharmas lack intrinsic nature, so too mental dharmas, including the mind or consciousness itself. For Xiong, consciousness has no intrinsic nature; it is generated by conditioned arising:

Nominally saying that mind-consciousness is generated by conditioned arising helps people to understand that mind-consciousness is only an illusory manifestation and does not truly exist. If consciousness did truly exist, it would have intrinsic nature. . . . Now, in analyzing this consciousness, it is said to be the manifestation of illusory images generated through the interdependence of many conditions. It is thus amply evident that consciousness has no self-nature. Hence, with respect to conditioned arising, my purpose is not to directly express the view that consciousness arises due to the aggregation of many conditions, but rather it is to refute those who are attached to the view that consciousness really exists.

2. Emptiness and Tathāgatagarbha

Constancy in change

Xiong uses the term ‘mind’ in two different senses. When employed as short-hand for inherent mind (*benxin* 本心) it is synonymous with Reality. He also uses ‘mind’ to mean consciousness; and on occasions he uses the binome ‘mind-consciousness’. When employed in this sense it does not have the sense of ‘Reality’. In this latter sense it is associated with the category of ‘mental dharmas’ and just like material phenomena (material dharmas), mind does not have real existence—it is devoid of a discrete self-nature. There is, however, a self-nature or Reality that makes the experience of mind-consciousness possible.

The question of whether the mind qua Reality is quiescent or moving occupied Xiong for much of his life. In the *New Treatise*, Xiong adopted the view that the mind is

characterized simultaneously by transformation (change, activity, movement) and constancy (quiescence; being undisturbed). He expresses this view of constancy in change as follows:

This mind does indeed flow incessantly yet it is also profoundly tranquil and undisturbed. In regard to its incessant flow it is nominally termed ‘moving’. In regard to its undisturbed, profound tranquility it is nominally termed ‘at rest’. Being both in motion and at rest it is devoid of the characteristic of continuously arising and so time cannot be securely established. Being both in motion and at rest yet lacking a domain, space cannot be securely established either.

Although the phenomenal appearances of arising and ceasing, change and movement, never cease for a moment they are not real and do not abide even momentarily. They are what they are because of what we mistakenly impute to them through deluded attachment. For Xiong it is the ceaseless flow of phenomenal appearances that Reality is revealed.

This, in turn, provides the key to interpreting a series of paradoxes and seeming contradictions:

Arising is precisely non-arising (生即無生) because arising does not exist (不有). (‘Does not exist’ means that there is nothing to impede.) Ceasing is precisely non-ceasing (滅即非滅) because ceasing does not rest (不息). (‘Does not rest’ and so is not empty nothingness.) Change is precisely non-changing (變即不變) because change is always constant (貞). Movement is precisely non-moving (動即非動) because movement does not shift. When this is understood, the myriad phenomena will all appear as they truly are [= suchness] (眞如; [tathatā]). (Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena.)¹⁵

What sense are we to make of this? Xiong’s monism precludes phenomena having self-nature, and even if mental and material phenomena are experienced as temporally

¹⁵*New Treatise*, pp. 69-70.

extended continua they ‘exist’ only interdependently and conventionally—a view justified on the basis of in the doctrine of dependent arising. There can be no arising, ceasing, change or movement for that which is devoid of inherent nature. To be a conventional phenomenon is to be empty.

Xiong, however, does not stop here. Rather, he understands dependent arising to be a conventional truth that points back to what ultimately is non-arising, non-ceasing, unchanging, and non-moving. Whereas a thoroughgoing Madhyamakan perspective would insist that emptiness is emptiness all the way down, for Xiong emptiness provides the heuristic space that enables Reality to be disclosed.

Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 AD) is celebrated for his philosophy of the ‘middle way’ (*madhyamaka*) based on the concept of ‘emptiness’. Following the interpretation of Siderits and Katsura, for Nāgārjuna emptiness is called the middle path because it avoids the extremes of holding that there are ultimately existent things, things with intrinsic nature, and holding that ultimately nothing exists, that ultimate reality is characterized by the absence of being, that phenomena do not exist at all. The middle path ‘is able to avoid both extremes because it denies that there is such a thing as the ultimate nature of reality.... Emptiness is not an ultimately real entity or property of ultimately real entities. Emptiness is no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience’.¹⁶

Rather than understanding emptiness as the mere absence of intrinsic nature, however, Xiong leverages it to secure positive ontological ground. He posits Fundamental Reality as the locus in which phenomena are ontologically grounded, and it is this ontological ground alone that has self-nature, intrinsic nature.

Non-arising, non-ceasing, non-changing, and non-moving can thus all be understood as references to Reality. Arising, ceasing, change, and movement are references to phenomenal appearances, to what which arises dependently. That which underpins non-existent phenomenal arising is Reality, which itself is non-arising. That which underpins phenomenal ceasing is Reality, which itself is non-ceasing. That which underpins phenomenal change is Reality, which itself is unchanging. And that which underpins phenomenal movement is Reality, which itself is non-moving. Failure to see

¹⁶*Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, trans. Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013, pp. 160, 278.

this is due either to attachment to things or to being mired in the belief that absolutely nothing exists:

From talking about arising without yet understanding that arising is non-arising, right through to talking about movement without yet understanding that movement is non-moving—this is to be attached to things. From talking about non-arising without yet understanding the arising of non-arising, right through to talking about movement without yet understanding the movement of non-moving—this is to be mired in emptiness.

Being attached to things is caused by a failure to understand that phenomenal appearances have no self-nature; by looking no further than conventional truth. ‘It is due to following conventional truth that the mundane world is accepted as proven. Earth is nothing but earth, water is nothing but water, right through to the myriad existents Because ultimate truth is experienced, however, there is a categorical refutation of conventional knowing. Hence, earth is not thought of as earth, because earth’s nature is empty. What is manifest before one is Reality (*zhenti* 真體), perfectly clear... Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena’ and ‘the Ruler (*zhuzai* 主宰) is to be discerned amongst the flow [of phenomena]’.¹⁷

Tathāgatagarbha

Why did Xiong insist that Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena? The explanation is to be found in the *tathāgatagarbha* (*rulaizang* 如來藏) doctrine.

Tathāgatagarbha means the womb of the thus-come-one. The *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine is the idea that the potentiality for buddhahood exists in all sentient beings but is hidden or obscured because of ignorance. The doctrine had a profound influence in the development of East Asian Buddhism. In China it became closely associated with the doctrine of ‘buddha-nature’. The *Awakening of Faith* is significant for its discussion of why it is so difficult to attain buddhahood and why so few are aware of their inherent buddha-nature. Specifically, it explores why most beings are enmeshed in delusion, given

¹⁷*New Treatise*, p. 70.

that the mind is inherently awakened, or originally enlightened (*benjue* 本覺). As a system of thought that developed in China between the fifth and seventh centuries, the Tathāgatagarbha school is particularly associated with a cluster of texts in which the concept of *tathāgatagarbha* is a central theme.

The *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* 大乘起信論 has arguably been the most influential. Dating from sixth-century China, its doctrines give expression to traditional Chinese metaphysics and cosmology, as well as to a wealth of ideas imported from India and interpreted through the perspective of Chinese understandings of the world. It played a formative role in shaping the doctrines and practices of the major schools of Chinese Buddhism: Chan, Tiantai, Huayan, and to a lesser extent Pure Land. It also influenced the development of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, particularly the thought of Zhu Xi, the great systematizer of Neo-Confucian thought.

For our immediate purposes, what is particularly noteworthy is that in the *Awakening of Faith* suchness (真如)—the ultimate nature of phenomena—is characterized as both empty and nonempty:

When discriminated verbally, suchness has two senses. What are they? The first is true emptiness, because it can ultimately reveal what is real. The second is true nonemptiness because it has intrinsic nature, which is replete with uncontaminated qualities....It is said to be empty because it is not associated with any of the discriminations that sentient beings, with their deluded minds, create with each thought. This is because when one is free from deluded mind there is really nothing to be emptied. It is called nonemptiness because the intrinsic nature of phenomena is empty and without delusion. This intrinsic nature is precisely true mind—constant, invariant, and replete with pure qualities (dharma).

On this account, emptiness and nonemptiness are complementary. Thus on the one hand, suchness is truly empty because it can disclose what is real. That which is real is what is disclosed when defilements caused by ignorance are removed. In other words, to be truly empty is to be free of false conceptual and verbal discriminations. On the other hand, suchness is truly not empty because it is ‘constant, invariant, and replete with pure

qualities’. (It should be noted that ‘the intrinsic nature of phenomena’ in this passage refers to suchness, to true mind—that which ontologically underpins everything including that which is falsely discriminated—and should not be construed as an attempt to reify phenomena.)

This is very different from the Madhyamaka understanding of emptiness, which denies that there is such a thing as the ultimate nature of reality. Madhyamakan emptiness has also been characterized as ‘a non-implicative negation’ or a ‘non-affirming negative’. As described by James Blumenthal, ‘A non-implicative negation is a negation that does not imply the existence of some other thing. For example, the negation of the existence of flowers that grow in the sky does not imply the existence of other plants that grow in the sky. It is a mere negation with nothing implied’.¹⁸

In contrast, in the *Awakening of Faith*, emptiness functions as an affirming negative. This is achieved in two moves, hence the dual characterization of suchness as empty and nonempty. In the *Awakening of Faith* ‘emptiness’ negates delusion by rendering it unreal and in doing so discloses the reality of ‘nonemptiness’. Overturning delusion enables the practitioner to become aware of what is ultimately real. What is important to note is the pragmatic instructiveness of the false. If it were not for delusion, the practitioner would not awaken to what is real, to the fact that the practitioner is already awakened. It is this same idea, albeit in a different idiom, that underpins Xiong’s regular refrain that Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena.

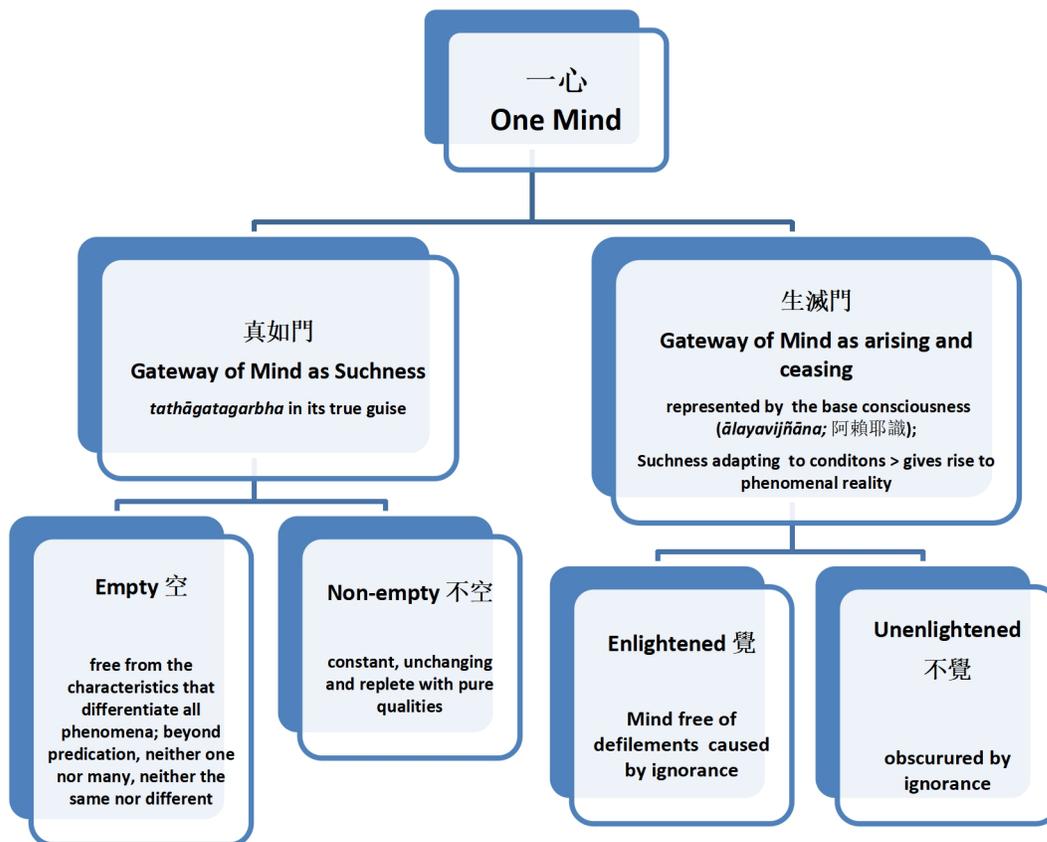
The non-duality of emptiness and non-emptiness in the *Awakening of Faith* follows a similar distinction drawn in an earlier *tathāgatarbha* text, the *Śrīmālā-sūtra*. Because the *tathāgatarbha* is at once empty of all defilements and, at the same time, not empty of all buddha-dharmas or qualities, it is both empty and non-empty. The *Śrīmālā-sūtra* criticizes the teaching of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*—*sūtras* that became the foundation for the Madhyamaka school—as one-sided and incomplete, maintaining that only the doctrine of *tathāgatarbha* reveals the full meaning of emptiness. The *Awakening of Faith* echoes this criticism:

¹⁸ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/saantarak-sita/>

Ordinary people hear *sūtras* explain that mundane phenomena, in themselves, are ultimately empty, and that even the dharmas of nirvana and suchness are ultimately empty, and that nirvana and suchness, in themselves have always already been empty and free of all characteristics. Because people do not know that this is said in order to destroy attachments, they think that the nature of suchness and nirvana is nothing but emptiness. How should this counteracted? By making it clear that the self-nature of the dharma-body of suchness is not empty because it is endowed with limitless qualities.

The view that Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena features as a central teaching in the *Awakening of Faith* and is not limited to its account of suchness as empty and nonempty. The *Awakening of Faith* asserts that the ultimate source of reality is the One Mind, which contains within itself all the phenomena of existence. This One Mind is divided into two aspects or ‘gateways’ (一心二門), the gateway of the mind as suchness (心真如門) and the gateway of the mind as arising and ceasing. (1) The first gateway is characterized by an inherent, pristine, pure Buddha-nature that is intrinsic in all things (*tathāgatagarbha*). Here *tathāgatagarbha* is synonymous with suchness. (2) The second gateway is characterized as subject to birth and death, yet as also being grounded in *tathāgatagarbha*.

The gateway of the mind as suchness or reality as it truly is. The gateway of the mind of arising and ceasing reveals the mind’s propensity to awaken struggling against the mental and physical behaviors arising from the mind’s defilement by ignorance. Both the mind of suchness and the mind of cyclic existence are ultimately the One Mind but, because ignorance obscures realization of the One Mind, deluded beings create false perceptions and so become mired in suffering.



Importantly, it is this second gateway—the phenomenal world—that is affirmed as the ground for Buddhist practice. Variations of this model were central to the development of later schools of Sinitic Buddhism, in particular, Huayan and Chan from the seventh centuries onwards (and to Tiantai from the eleventh century). The model also informed Neo-Confucian thought, central to which were discussion of ‘human nature’ (*xing* 性). In Zhu Xi’s metaphysics, for example, two aspect of the nature are distinguished: the ‘heaven-and-earth-bestowed nature’ (天地之性) and the ‘psychophysical nature’. The ‘heaven-and-earth-bestowed nature’ is pure principle (*li*), and the ‘psychophysical nature’ is principle as it is manifest in and through *qi*. This distinction represents the nature in its fundamental, unconditioned aspect; and in its manifest, conditioned aspect. Zhu Xi argued that although the nature is nothing but

principle, without *qi* there would be nowhere for principle to inhere in phenomena, including human nature. In doing so, he too affirmed the phenomenal world as the ground for practice. Zhu articulates this dimension in his account of the concept of mind (*xin* 心). For Zhu Xi, the mind is the seat of cognitive activity and of our capacity for moral decision-making, enabling us to apprehend and to discern the principles inherent in our nature, as well as those in the world in which we live and the cosmos more generally.

Here I do not have the space to introduce these concepts more fully or to rehearse the arguments needed to flesh out the broader context of a shared body of discourse in which conceptual paradigms derived from the *Awakening of Faith* became a shared resource for East Asian philosophers and religious theorists over the course of centuries. Rather, I would simply make the point that Xiong Shili was very much an active participant in the tradition of East Asian philosophical discourse which focused on demonstrating that Reality cannot be sought independent of phenomena, or in Buddhist terms, that the unconditioned cannot be sought independent of the conditioned.

As already noted, in this paper I have omitted discussion of key Confucian concepts that Xiong incorporated into his monist ontology. These include the nature (*xing* 性) and *qi* 氣; principle (*li* 理) and *qi* 氣; and heaven (*tian* 天) and humans (*ren* 人). Xiong used each pair to illustrate how his understanding of the relationship between the ontological and phenomenal was confirmed in Confucian philosophical writings. These Confucian concepts are not central to the development of his main arguments—they function more as supplementary examples and illustrations.

Over the past three decades there has been a widespread tendency to portray Xiong narrowly as a Confucian philosopher who also happened to criticize Buddhist philosophy. Rather than being understood as an essential framework within which to tease out the complexity of Xiong's thought, his engagement with Buddhist thought has tended to be dismissed as a passing phase or inconvenient distraction. Too often, Xiong's uncompromising critiques of Yogācāra seem to have provided a convenient pretext for ignoring other key elements of Buddhist thought in his constructive philosophy.

In this paper I have argued shows that Xiong's monism was developed dialectically on the basis of a critique of Yogācāra thought, and as an elaboration of the Mahāyāna doctrines of conditioned arising and the inherent emptiness of conditioned

phenomena. Madhyamakan (and Perfection of Wisdom [*Prajñāpāramitā*]) methodological insights are central to the *New Treatise*, in particular those premised on the view that emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two different things but rather are two characterizations of the same thing. It was not, however, exclusively Madhyamakan or Confucian philosophical insights that served as key impetuses in the development of Xiong's creative philosophy. Madhyamaka provided a deconstructive method, a radical apophasis, central to which is the concept of emptiness. Beyond this, however, Xiong also drew substantial (albeit largely unacknowledged) philosophical inspiration from *Dashengqixinlun* as a resource to affirm the phenomenal world, the life-world, and not simply to repudiate it.

Unfortunately, the complex and diverse intellectual identity of modern Chinese philosophy continues to be ignored, distorted or misunderstood. Too often, modern Chinese philosophy is still presented by some as a hermetically sealed tradition or set of traditions that can be understood and adjudicated only by reference to its own 'internal' norms and premises; that modern Chinese philosophy owes its identity most especially as a continuation of Confucianism, to the exclusion of the fundamentally 'foreign' influence of Buddhism. To remedy this situation, it will become increasingly necessary to acknowledge and, indeed, to celebrate and to enhance the hybrid quality of Chinese philosophy, and its rich legacies, if Chinese philosophy is to thrive in a rapidly globalizing world.