

# Tang Chun-i on Human Existence

## A Phenomenological Interpretation

Is the life of man indeed enveloped in such darkness?  
Is it I alone to whom it appears so? And does it not  
appear to be so to other men?

Zhuangzi

人之生也，固若是芒乎？  
其我獨芒，而人亦有不芒者乎？  
（《莊子·齊物論》）

## Introduction

Tang Chun-i (1909-1978) is one of the leaders of the contemporary Neo-Confucianist Movement. Tang came to Hong Kong in 1949 as an exiled philosopher to escape Communism in China. He never thought that his most productive intellectual life would be spent in this British colony. His co-founding the New Asia College, establishment of the philosophy department, co-authoring of the 1958 Manifesto “Chinese Culture and the World” together with more than thirty significant and original works on Chinese philosophy and culture have definitely distinguished him as one of the most important Chinese philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born and raised in the most chaotic period of modern Chinese history. All through his life he found that Chinese culture was in crisis, the world was in crisis. Hence human existence was also in deep crisis. Philosophy for him was never a theoretical speculative thinking exercise but an existential challenge to solve the crisis of Chinese culture and in turn, the meaning of human existence. Confucianism, though under severe criticism in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century China, was for Tang the key to solving these problems. To be sure, Tang was not a conservative. He understood the political and cultural challenge the West presents for China, and that a simple return to classical Confucianism would lead nowhere. He had to rethink philosophy in its entirety; i.e., not only Chinese philosophy but also Western and Indian philosophy were to be examined.

It is impossible for me to discuss Tang's philosophy as such since his works are not yet known to the Western philosophical world.<sup>1</sup> My task here is to introduce Tang's philosophical reflection on human existence in the light of phenomenology, or to be exact, of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. While Tang is not a phenomenologist in the strict sense, his deep interest in the existentialist movement is reflected in his discussion on human existence. His long essay on Heidegger from 1952, based on Werner Brock's work on Heidegger, is the first substantial and comprehensive introduction to Heidegger's philosophy of Dasein in Chinese.<sup>2</sup> For more than thirty years before the Chinese translation of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in 1987, this work, though essentially an exposition rather than a critical discussion, constituted one of the most reliable literatures on Heidegger in the Chinese world. And although Tang never made explicit reference to Heidegger's phenomenology in his work, his explication of human existence in his little but important book *The Lived Experience of Human Existence, Supplementary Volume* (1961) shows a hermeneutical phenomenological tendency.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this chapter is an attempt to delineate Tang's philosophy of human existence.

## Tang Chun-i and Existentialism

Tang was a contemporary of Sartre (1905-1980), Camus (1913-1960) and Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). They all experienced the suffering and anxiety of wars and cultural chaos. Hence when existentialism, originated in post-war France in the late 1940s and later migrated to the United States, became an intellectual movement in Japan and Taiwan,

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<sup>1</sup> Of course Tang's philosophy is well known in the contemporary discussion on Chinese philosophers by Chinese and Western philosophers. However, since Chinese philosophy as such is still not considered as a proper philosophical discipline, it is seldom taught in philosophy departments in the West. Chinese philosophy, together with Indian and Japanese philosophy, is taught in most Western universities either in Religion departments or in departments of East Asian Studies.

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, with an introduction and analysis by Werner Brock, South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1949; Tang Chun-i, "An Exposition of Heidegger's Existential Philosophy" 〈述海德格之存在哲學〉 in *Existentialism and the Problem of Life* 《存在主義與人生問題》, 香港: 大學生活社, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Tang Chun-i, 《人生之體驗續編》, 1961, later collected in *Three Books on Life* 《人生三書》, 北京: 中國社會科學出版社, 2005.

Tang was surely aware of this powerful philosophical trend. He considered existentialism as most important in his days because the central question of human existence was also Tang's own concern. In this respect, Tang regarded Heidegger as one of the existentialists: the *Seinsfrage* is only the problem of human Dasein. He had no interest in phenomenology as such. Commenting on other existentialists like Jaspers and Marcel, Tang said, "Despite all of them do have their own enlightening insights and wisdoms, I still consider that it is Heidegger's thinking which provokes more readily a feeling of novelty and foreignness and is more capable of guiding people into much deeper questions."<sup>4</sup> Tang was confident that he had understood Heidegger even though he did not read *Sein und Zeit* in the original.<sup>5</sup> He continued, "But as for the peculiarity of Heidegger's own way of thinking, his original intent is still not so readily recognizable, even with and through Brock's explanations. Nevertheless, such a philosophical spirit in Heidegger does not appear foreign to me, since I regard myself as having already acquainted myself with a similar kind of spirit in Eastern philosophy. I regard myself as able to know in which way his philosophy is developing among other ways of philosophizing."<sup>6</sup> What Tang means by the philosophical spirit shared by him and Heidegger is the concern of understanding human being not as a thing in the world but from the fundamental existential structure of human Dasein. Tang understands Heidegger entirely from the existentialist perspective.

For Tang, existentialism concerns the problems of human existence. And it is a question of how a human being finds him- or herself at home in Nature, Heaven (God), others and within oneself.<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, human beings derive the meaning of life from these four aspects. However, modern human beings are alienated and estranged from these sources of meaning. Existentialism recognizes this not-at-homeness of the modern human being. He is suspended in the middle of nowhere,

<sup>4</sup> Tang Chun-i, "An Exposition of Heidegger's Existential Philosophy" 〈述海德格之存在哲學〉, trans. Kwun-lam Lo, in *Existentialism and the Problem of Life* 《存在主義與人生問題》, 香港: 大學生活社, 1971, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Tang's note in the reprinted version of *Introduction to Philosophy* 《哲學概論》, 香港: 孟氏教育基金會, 1965: "The English translation was published in 1962. After reading this, I found that my introductory essay written 12 years ago did not contain serious errors despite not being elaborated enough."

<sup>6</sup> Tang, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> See Tang, "Existentialism and Education" 〈存在主義與教育〉 in *Existentialism and the Problem of Life* 《存在主義與人生問題》, 香港: 大學生活社, 1971, pp. 126-127.

finding everything meaningless, absurd and irrelevant. Neither religion, nature, or society nor the inner self can provide the basis for human life. Indeed, modern human being is in an existential crisis. Tang formulates it as “Human being does not exist up in heaven above, does not exist on fields below, does not exist in other human beings outside and does not exist inside himself.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, human being exists inauthentically in everyday life, aimlessly and emptily. The estrangement from the above (God or heaven), the below (nature), the outside (culture and society) and the inside (subjectivity, moral self) constitutes the central problem of human existence. The task of philosophical reflection is, then, to lead human being back home to his original ground of being so that he may achieve an authentic existence. However, it is extremely difficult to find this home-coming way since human being is submerged in his inauthentic everyday existence. Even though he suffers and laments over his meaningless life, he does not recognize the existential crisis as such. According to Tang, modern existentialism seems unable to provide a satisfactory answer to this crisis. He spent his whole life in searching the solution of this “homesickness.” His last great work before his death, *The Existence of Life and the Condition of the Mind* (1977), is an attempt to achieve a true and authentic existence through a Hegelian phenomenological *Odyssee* of the nine spiritual horizons which are constitutive in Western, Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions.<sup>9</sup> Forty years have passed since the publication of this book, yet the significance of Tang’s attempt to integrate these three universal philosophical traditions into a philosophical system is still to be seen in a global perspective.

Here is not the right place to discuss Tang’s philosophical system of human existence. I would like to offer a modest introduction to Tang’s grand philosophical thought. I shall only focus on an essay written in 1955, in which human existence is elucidated in a less systematic but more hermeneutical way. Though there is no direct evidence to show any influence of Heidegger on Tang’s thought in this period, the proximity of his long essay on Heidegger in 1952 and his subsequent works on the existential problem of human existence may suggest a kind of similar existential style of philosophizing.

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<sup>8</sup> 「上不在天，下不在田，外不在人，內不在己。」 *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Tang Chun-i, *The Existence of Life and the Condition of the Mind* 《生命存在與心靈境界》, 2 volumes, 台北：學生書局, 1977.

## The Tragedy of Human Existence

“The Hardship of Human Existence and the Mutuality of Suffering and Joy”<sup>10</sup> is one of the essays Tang wrote in 1954-1961, collected in *The Lived Experience of Human Existence, Supplementary Volume*. Volume I was published twenty years earlier. In the preface of the latter, Tang comments on the difference: “The first volume focuses on the positive side of human existence, hence the thought is more naïve and simple, [...] whereas this book emphasizes on the negative aspects of human existence such as sin, guilt and tragedy. The purpose is to transform all these negative blockages of human existence to a positive and authentic way.”<sup>11</sup> What, then, is “lived experience”? It is the “reflective activity on living experience through which the self comes back to life itself.”<sup>12</sup> Hence it is a hermeneutics of human existence in concrete living experience. Tang does not begin with any speculative ideas of life but with our concrete existential life situations.

Human life begins with mystery and blind bewilderment: we come into this world without our consent and choice. We are born, live and die. “Every human being dies alone, the world does not go with him, and other people do not go with him either. He dies, while the sun and moon shine as usual. [...] Everyone dies his own death; everyone carries his own absolute aloneness into an unknown world of utter loneliness. This is the fundamental blind bewilderment of human existence.”<sup>13</sup> Tang indeed arrives at the thought Pascal had in *Les Pensées*:

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened and astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 〈人生之艱難與哀樂相生〉 in *The Lived Experience of Human Existence, Supplementary Volume* 《人生之體驗續編》. Collected in *Three Books on Life* 《人生三書》, 北京: 中國社會科學出版社, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensees*, trans. W. F. Trotter, 2000, part 3, section 205. <http://www.thocp.net/biographies/papers/pensees3.htm>.

The contingency, uncertainty and finitude of human existence evoke an existential anxiety in each of us. I do not know why I am born; where I am going after death and what is the purpose of my life. Such is the tragedy of my life. However, it is a *factum brutum* that every one of us must accept and from which our lived experience must begin. Various religions ostensibly give answers to this mystery and bewilderment but there is a deeper mystery behind every religious answer, if philosophical questioning asks for the ultimate explanation and justification of every concrete individual existence. There is no answer but to recognize the “Being” in our short span of our finite life. “Being” in this sense is the concrete time and space and life horizon allotted to each of us. We are “thrown” into this finite “Being” of our existence.

What are the most fundamental desires that determine the whole span of human existence? What are the unavoidable wants that fill up the “Being”? Tang does not begin with the existential analysis of human *Dasein* in terms of its existence, but with concrete situations in lived experience. According to Tang, there are seven wants that are constitutive to our life: “the desire for life, for love, for a position, for truth, for good, for beauty and for holiness.”<sup>15</sup> Tang comments, “These wants determine essentially our concrete existence. Whether these wants are to be satisfied or eradicated requires infinite hardship, and as such it is impossible to relieve as long as we live.”<sup>16</sup> The emphasis here is on the unavoidable hardship generated from these wants. To live is to accept the task of living through all these wants and it is not at all easy to accept or denounce them. The tragic sense of life lies exactly in this dilemma. Once we are born we are confronted with such inescapable demands, whether we like them or not. Tang does not contend with a phenomenology of “Being” of human existence, and he would surely endorse Heidegger’s *Dasein* analysis with respect to worldliness and the three-fold Care-structure as well as to temporality, which he finds extremely meaningful for the understanding of human existence. However, Tang’s approach is not from the “structural” or “formal” constitution of human existence but rather begins with the “universal contents” of lived experience.

The first three wants are most common and obvious in everyday mundane life. They are so mundane and ordinary as to be neglected by

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<sup>15</sup> Tang Chun-i, *op. cit.*, p.31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 「即求生存、求愛情、求名位、求真、求善、求美、與求神聖。」

most philosophers. However, underneath the mundaneness there are extremely serious considerations. The will to live is undoubtedly strong but the attempt to commit suicide is another option to such will. We take for granted that our life is contingent and finite. But the contingency of life cannot simply be contemplated *in abstractum*. Tang regards the possibility of removing everything we have in our existence, such as life, wealth, power, health and properties, as real and probable. We can lose everything overnight due to some external uncontrollable natural or social-political event. We are not the master of our life. We are at the mercy of “fate.” But of course we can rebel against it by committing suicide. As Camus pointed out, why we do not commit suicide and why we live unreflectively is surely one of the most important existential questions. But it is extremely difficult for anyone to do it unless he is forced into an irrevocable situation. Tang said: “If we do not commit suicide, then we have to take the responsibility to fulfill the primal will to live which comes from nowhere, to take care of our empty stomach and warm our body. It is hard to commit suicide, even harder to sever the will to live, and it is equally hard to sustain our existence in living. This is the hardship common to all human beings.”<sup>17</sup> For most people the struggle for survival is already an immense task. Tang shows great sympathy for all those people in extreme poverty and poor health, in war time where daily existence is not guaranteed, or in our everyday life where accidents can suddenly strike at any time. Despite the fragility of life, human beings are doomed to live on. Indeed Tang echoes what Zhuangzi has said more than 2000 years ago:

To be constantly toiling all one's lifetime, without seeing the fruit of one's labour, and to be weary and worn out with his labour, without knowing where he is going to—is it not a deplorable case? Men may say, “But it is not death”; yet of what advantage is this? When the body is decomposed, the mind will be the same along with it—must not the case be pronounced very deplorable? Is the life of man indeed enveloped in such darkness? Is it I alone to whom it appears so? And does it not appear to be so to other men?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Chuang Tzu*, trans. Stephen R. McIntyre, 2003, <http://nothingistic.org/library/chuangtzu/toc.html>

The second want comes from sexual love. We are born from the union of two different sexes, male and female, and each one of us can acquire only one natural sex. Whether we are heterosexual or homosexual in orientation is irrelevant to the existential gender of our existence. Sexually speaking, every human being is ontologically inadequate. We need the other sex to propagate. This is the natural order of life. The fundamental meaning of sexual love is to procreate, as Schopenhauer said in the “Metaphysics of the Love of the Sexes”: “The ultimate aim of all love-affairs, whether played in sock or in buskin, is actually more important than all other aims in man’s life; and therefore it is quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it. What is decided by it is nothing less than the *composition of the next generation*.”<sup>19</sup> To be sure, Tang does not go along with Schopenhauer to assert the absolute determination of sexual love. It is because human being is able to abstain from this powerful natural desire. Through celibacy human being can deny his or her sexual nature. Tang regards such acts as heroic and of utmost seriousness. It is however extremely difficult for anyone to live such celibacy. As ordinary people, we are driven in the sea of sexual desire. Yet it is also hard to follow what nature directs us to do. Unhappiness and suffering in love affairs and sexual encounters abound in mundane life. “The most tragic thing in the world and in life [...] is love,”<sup>20</sup> said Unamuno in *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Hence Tang laments this uncontrollable desire in ourselves:

It is indeed rather easy to follow the flow of natural life. But there is also infinite hardship. We all know the suffering and pain of divorce and losing one’s love, the ambiguities of sexual relationship, the sin of passionate murder and adultery. We all know these happen in everyday life. However, there is a deeper reason underneath the occurrence of these affairs, i.e., the possibility of having sexual relationship with virtually anyone and equally the possibility of losing that relationship. This possibility lies rather in the very centre of our existence. Hence all these infinite suffering and guilt root in human existence.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E.F.J. Payne, New York: Dover, 1966, p. 534.

<sup>20</sup> Miguel De Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, New York: Dover, 1954, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup> Tang Chun-i, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

We are again confronted with an existential dilemma: ontologically I am inadequate and incomplete with regard to sexuality and gender. I have to decide whether to follow my sexual nature to seek the "other half," which may result in infinite suffering and frustration, or to step outside this natural impulse to be alone. In either case the hardship of human existence is there.

The third hardship of human existence is once again most ordinary but also most difficult. It is the search for recognition for a place among others. I am not an individual existing independently from others. I am in the web of a complex social relationship. Whether I like it or not I am continuously subjected to judgments by people who are close to me or by anybody around me. I can be judged valuable or worthless, active or passive, good or bad, handsome or ugly looking, pleasant or irritable etc. As long as I am a social being I need to find a place in others and I will be judged as such within the web of values. I am never a neutral human being but always with a certain role to play among other people from whom I receive praise, blame or simply neglect. Independent of whether such praise or blame is justified or not, we exist in this web. To seek recognition and be recognized is such a normal phenomenon that it is taken for granted in our mundane existence. My happiness or sadness depends on how I am evaluated. And in turn I evaluate everyone I know or do not know. Hence the celebrities, the famous, the heroes, the powerful or the infamous, the notorious and the unknown are all hanging together on the ladder of values, in light of which they are ranked. As such, everyone exists as an object in the eyes of others. That is why Sartre said hell is other people. But heaven is also other people. Tang regards this fundamental urge for a place in others as constitutive in human existence. "I do not care what other people think of me" is easy to utter but extremely difficult to live through. The martyr may be abandoned by all his people but he is still convinced that his deeds are accepted by God. He has secured a place in Him. My existence requires acceptance and recognition by others. Of course I can be a hermit, leaving all such praise and blame behind. But to be completely free from others seems to be impossible. Hence we are confronted with another dilemma: whether or not we want the praise or blame of others. There is extreme hardship in either way.

Beyond the three desires in the mundane world there is a world of values, a world of truth, good, beauty and holiness, which is universal, pure and permanent. Tang does not postulate a metaphysical world of ideas. His intention is not to assert the ontological status of truth, good,

beauty and holiness. Phenomenologically these are values shared by every one of us in our lived experience. Unlike my life, owned by me alone, or love shared by me and my lover, or praise and blame for one person, this world of values is public and common to all. There may be disagreement on what exactly these four concepts mean but that there are truth, good and beauty and holiness shared by all of us seems to be a fact taken for granted. We strive for and look upon these four values as the ultimate end of human existence. However, Tang points out that there is a tension between the world of values and the mundane world. Whoever truly strives for truth, good, beauty and holiness is likely to be abandoned by those in the mundane world. On the other hand, he who believes to have possessed truth, good, beauty and holiness, disregards the mundane world. He does not belong to the world of everyday life. Tang names Jesus, Socrates, Bruno as exemplary models who were rejected by their own people.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Tang regards the world of values as higher than the mundane world. But to leave and transcend the mundane for this world of values is hard for a human being of flesh and bone. It is certainly not easy for anyone to attain these four values and it is even harder to sustain the possession of them. Ultimately this is the unbridgeable abyss between the real and the ideal. And it is here where the hardship of human existence lies.

### **The Comedy of Human Existence**

What can we do in the face of the hardship of our existence? We know the inevitability of this hardship as long as we live and there is no escape route from suffering in whichever way we take. However, Tang thinks that there is a way to transform the “mundane” tragedy into a “divine” comedy.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, suffering is inherent in every hardship of our existence, but there is also joy present in that very struggle. Hence there is a mutuality of suffering and joy: both are depending on one another. There is no suffering without joy and no joy without suffering. But how is this apparent paradox possible? The answer lies first in the affirmation of one’s authentic self, i.e., the moral self. However, Tang does not simply postulate an authentic self as such. The moral self must be a result of the resolution to accept our thrownness and the inevitable guilt discovered through the call of conscience. Such

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

formulation is very Heideggerian indeed. In fact, in his essay on Heidegger Tang interprets conscience in the light of Wang Yang-ming and regards resolution as a similar concept in Confucianism.<sup>24</sup>

*Ego cogito* is not the beginning of philosophy and the self is not the residuum of Cartesian methodic doubt or Husserlian phenomenological reduction. “Yes, I am here”<sup>25</sup> is the first affirmation of the self after accepting all that is inevitable. Tang writes:

Wherever I am, I can always say: “Yes, I am here.” Indeed, this *yes* is the infinite affirmation that can include all those given to me by nature, all actual or possible encounters into my forbearance, from which I take full responsibility. Such affirmation is disclosed before my self-awareness and free will. [...] For there are indeed contingent reasons in all those happenings on me, but they are all my destinies. If we follow the *Dao* of the sage, when all these happenings fall upon me, then I recognize that this is my fate, and agree everything and all contingencies become necessities.<sup>26</sup>

Such affirmation of the self will then be followed by my own self-awareness and free will, which point toward what is true, good and beautiful. For Tang this is the way to confront all the hardship of human existence. I am no longer the victim of my destiny. The passivity of the self in the mundane world is changed into the active moral self, the null point for all my activities in the whole life world. Through this resolution I become the master of my lived experience. Tang warns again that it is extremely difficult to sustain such a moral attitude. There is no guarantee for any attainment as there is always an upward and a downward tension. Striving toward holiness is indeed extremely difficult but letting myself fall into evilness is no easy matter either. The affirmation of my moral self is to acknowledge this immense hardship inherent in every step of my existence, whether it is upwards toward holiness or downwards toward evilness. Once I realize the inevitability and responsibility I will understand the true meaning of suffering and joy. Tang explains:

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<sup>24</sup> Tang Chun-i, “An Exposition of Heidegger’s Existential Philosophy” 〈述海德格之存在哲學〉, trans. Kwun-lam Lo in *Existentialism and the Problem of Life* 《存在主義與人生問題》, 香港: 大學生活社, 1971, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The meaning of the mutuality of suffering and joy is to recognize that there are pain and hardship in the curriculum of human existence. Such pain and hardship are not external to myself but exist in my own existence. Accordingly I understand there is nothing upon which I can depend or nothing that I can be proud of. When I truly affirm the necessary presence of all pain and hardship, then all such pain and hardship will be leveled down by the spirit, then all human beings will also be leveled down in front of me. When my spirit is so leveled, then I can have sympathy and mercy to other human beings and have sympathy and mercy also to my own self. And in the midst of mutual help between myself and others because of sympathy and mercy, in mutual appreciation of the effort to overcome hardship, and in mutual congratulations to the gradual diminishing of pain, the door of heaven will be opened, the kingdom of heaven appears. Then there is joy in the depth of every spirit—this is the mutuality of suffering and joy.<sup>27</sup>

For Tang, human existence is both tragedy and comedy. But it can only be so recognized by an authentic self who understands the tragic sense of human life in its deep abyss, realizes the comic joy of all human endeavors, and is ready to act morally in spite of all the contingency, finitude and fragility of human existence.

## Conclusion

As I have mentioned in the opening paragraph, this short chapter can only give a first introduction to the philosophy of Tang Chun-i. His philosophy of human existence is far more profound, complex and comprehensive than I have been able to present. Unfortunately, most of his works have not been translated into English; hence his philosophy has not been systematically studied. After years of censorship in Mainland China, selected works were officially published in Beijing in 2007. His philosophy is now accessible for study and discussion in cultural China. One of Tang's major contributions is surely his systematic re-thinking of Chinese philosophy in its original ground. But Tang is more than a Chinese philosopher. His attempt in integrating Chinese, Western and Indian philosophies into a philosophy of human existence deserves careful examination. His philosophical corpus will surely be a great source of discussion on many of today's burning philosophical issues.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.