

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE:
HOW TO LOOK AT CONTRARIES

AUTHOR MEETS CRITIC:

HARMONY AND COMPLEMENTARITY:
A DISCUSSION WITH BO MOU

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In “An Overall-Complementarity-Seeking Account of How to Look at Contraries,” Bo Mou addresses mainly two issues. First, he further expands his methodological account of contraries, which he calls “overall-complementarity-seeking” account. In doing so, he compares it with, and to some extent incorporates insights from, a Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis model. Second, he presents a commentary on the methodological portion of my Confucian account of harmony, juxtaposing it with his own model. I find Mou’s moves extremely beneficial in helping us think deeper on issues related to harmony. His commentary touches upon important questions on related issues and it is worth serious discussion. In the following, I will first highlight and comment on his approach, before responding to his comments on my work. I will attempt to identify some differences, as sketchy as they may, between his and my approaches.

1. MOU’S *YIN-YANG* APPROACH AND/VERSUS THE HEGELIAN
APPROACH TO CONTRARIES

By his account, Mou’s model is drawn largely on the *yin-yang* philosophy from the *Yi-Jing*. The *Yi-Jing* (usually translated as the *Book of Changes*¹) is among the most important philosophical texts—some would argue, the most important philosophical text—of Chinese philosophy. The *yin-yang* concept is also among the most significant concepts in Chinese philosophical traditions. This very connection places Mou’s

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¹ For an argument that the title of the *Yi-Jing* should be translated as the *Book of Change* instead of the *Book of Changes*, see Li *et al.* (2018), note 2, p. 4. In this essay I follow the usual rendering as the *Book of Changes* for the sake of its general familiarity with readers.

account solidly on the backbone of Chinese philosophy. On the basis of such a *yin-yang* model, Mou's "overall-complementarity-seeking account" holds that changing/becoming and unchanging/being are fundamentally complementary *yin-yang* opposites in harmonious balance in the unified universe. As he characterizes, a key feature of the *yin-yang* model is to seek complementarity within Unity and Reaching Harmonious Balance. Mou notes that, for the *yin-yang* approach,

It would never be the case that *yang* force or *yin* force is always in a dominant position; a *yang*-dominant (or *yin*-dominant) stage or process would change into a *yin*-dominant (or *yang*-dominant) stage or process. As a whole, neither *yin* nor *yang* could claim its dominant priority over the other; they are equal in regard to metaphysical status: they are equally in need in the *yin-yang* unity as a whole. They are interdependent, interactive, and complementary to each other in a harmoniously balanced way. (Mou 2022, 114)

In Mou's view, the forces of *yin* and *yang* are two across-the-board most basic contraries. As such, their constitution and interaction are universal, fundamental, complementary, dynamic, and harmoniously balanced. In specific terms, Mou lists the following 5 features:

- (1) The *yin-yang* constitution and interaction is universal in the sense that *yin* and *yang* together with their interaction exist within all things in the inclusive natural world of which humans are parts.
- (2) The *yin-yang* interaction is fundamental in the sense that their interaction within is considered to be the ultimate source or pushing force for everything's becoming-process (forming, developing, altering, and changing);
- (3) The *yin-yang* interaction is complementary in the sense that *yin* and *yang* are not merely coexisting and interdependent but also mutually supportive and supplementary to each other; they are holistic and united into one thing within rather than separate without;
- (4) it is dynamic in the sense that *yin* and *yang* are in changing process and transform into each other, revealing themselves in the successive stages in the generation of things;
- (5) it is harmoniously balanced in the sense that *yin* and *yang* seek cooperation and harmonious balance in their interaction. (*op.cit.*, 116)

Of these five characteristic features, Mou identifies two as the most important. The first one is complementarity and the second is harmonious balance. He cites the metaphor of the dragon flying high and low in the *Qian*-gua of the *Book of Changes* as an example of such complementarity and harmonious balance. High and low are complementary to each other; flying high and flying low strike a harmonious balance.

To help us better understand his model, Mou places his *yin-yang* model in contrast with a Hegelian model of contraries. The Hegelian model referred to here is drawn primarily from Hegel's dialectical method, but is not entirely confined to Hegel's own description. The model progresses in the form of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis via sublation (*Aufhebung*). In the Hegelian model, the progressive process preserves or incorporates what are reasonable and valuable in the contraries, thesis and antithesis,

into a new and deeper perspective and discards what are not (*op.cit.*, 118-9). Mou elaborates as follows:

According to the Hegelian line, generally speaking, thesis and antithesis are not only co-existent and interdependent but also make their positive and constructive contributions to the existence and development of each other and thus to the identity of both as a constructive whole, though both also have their contradictory dimensions that brings about the tension between them, before the moment when the further development of the tension brought about by their respective contradictory dimensions needs sublation. (*op.cit.*, 120)

Mou notes, the *yin-yang* way of complementarity of contraries differs from the Hegelian model in important ways. Even though they both emphasize the interaction between the contraries, the *yin-yang* way emphasizes cooperation within, while the Hegelian dialectical way stresses opposition without; even though they both emphasize balance, the *yin-yang* way endeavors to reach harmony within the *yin-yang* unity through concordant complementarity, while the Hegelian way endeavors to reach synthesis without or beyond thesis-antithesis through sublation. (*op.cit.*, 122) However, Mou's own model of "overall-complementarity-seeking account" also incorporates certain elements from the Hegelian model. I understand that his own model is an outcome of integrating the *yin-yang* concept of the *Book of Changes* and the sublating process of the Hegelian model, as shown next.

On the basis of his study of the *yin-yang* concept of the *Book of Changes* and the Hegelian model, Mou articulates the rich contents of his own "overall-complementarity-seeking account". By "overall complementarity" he means "an inclusive, pluralist notion of complementarity which is to cover distinct types of complementarity in an inclusively disjunctive way ('either...or...' but possibly '...and...')" (*op.cit.*, 123). Specifically, Mou's "overall-complementarity-seeking account" consists of five schemas. They are:

- The concordant-complementarity-seeking condition;
- The restrictive complementarity-seeking condition;
- The post-sublation-complementarity-seeking condition;
- The critical-reflection-generated complementarity-seeking condition;
- The excessiveness-overcoming condition (*op.cit.*, 123-129).

Working together, his account seeks to achieve three types of complementarity: concordant (harmonious) complementarity (as demonstrated in the *yin-yang* model), restrictive complementarity (as demonstrated in the Hegelian model), and critical-reflection-generated complementarity (*op.cit.*, 129).

In a general way of speaking, Mou's work can be interpreted as an application of the Hegelian model in reworking and supplementing the *yin-yang* concept of the *Book of Changes* and thus generating his own account. In other words, here the traditional the *yin-yang* concept of the *Book of Changes* with a primary emphasis on cooperation serves as the thesis to begin with, the Hegelian model with a primary emphasis on the opposition (contradiction) serves as the antithesis, Mou's own "overall-complementarity-seeking" account is established as the synthesis. Without any doubt,

Mou's account is systematic and extremely sophisticated. It draws on the depth of ideas from the history of philosophy, both Chinese and Western, to generate a refined account that enriches and enhances contemporary philosophical discourse. Expressed in somewhat technical language, its practical implications are broad and await to be further manifested. I believe that, among others, a comparison with other accounts that deal with similar issues will help us draw out the rich fruits of his efforts.

2. COMPLEMENTARITY AND/VERSUS HARMONY

In the second part of his paper, Mou provides a commentary on my view of the Confucian account of harmony, in comparison with his "overall-complementarity-seeking account".

For his understanding of my view, Mou draws on mainly from my book *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (2014). One important question that Mou has raised is whether my account can be appropriately called "Confucian". I identify my account as "Confucian" mainly for the following reasons. First, my account is primarily a reconstruction from Chinese sources, as opposed to works drawing primarily on other cultural traditions such as Native American tradition (e.g., see Noodin 2022) or African tradition (e.g., see Metz 2022). Second, of the two Chinese traditions that have prioritized harmony more than any other Chinese schools, Confucianism and Daoism, my account relies overwhelmingly on Confucian sources rather than Daoist sources. Both early Confucians and early Daoist thinkers drew on the same cosmological theory of the evolution of *qi*, of *yin-yang*, of changing, etc. Their views of harmony can be called "deep harmony" in that harmony is traceable all way back to the beginning of the universe and any specific phase or mode of current harmony is to be understood in such a context (see Li 2014, Ch. 2). My sources are mostly Confucian texts, e.g., the *Zuo Commentary*, the *Yi-Jing (Yi-Zhuan)*, the *Zhong-Yong*, and the *Xun-Zi*. In my view, even though the Confucian idea of harmony and the Daoist idea of harmony have overlapped, they nevertheless differ in that, by and large, Confucians tend to promote active harmony whereas Daoists tend to promote passive harmony. I define active harmony as being characterized by positive engagement in constructive ways by involved parties and by aiming to some form or forms of equity between them. Passive harmony is characterized by peaceful co-existence, without active engagement. The conception of passive harmony is drawn largely from Laozi's philosophy (see Li 2021). My account of harmony as presented in *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (2014) is explicitly a version of active harmony. Of course, it is worth noting that my account of Confucian harmony is presented as a philosophical reconstruction, not as a historical reconstruction. Namely it is a reconstruction that is drawn on both ancient texts and contemporary ideas, one that modern Confucian thinkers can find coherent and tenable, not that ancient Confucian thinkers have already held such a systematic view in a uniform fashion. Furthermore, as ancient resources of Confucianism are vast, one could conceivably do a reconstruction of Confucian harmony that is different from mine. If that happens, it would be beneficial to compare different reconstructions and see which

is more plausible and promising, both on the authenticity of their uses of ancient material and on their relevance to the contemporary world.

Synthesizing ideas from other classics associated with the Confucian tradition, such as the *Yi-Jing (Book of Changes)*, the *Zhong-Yong*, and the *Xun-Zi*, my concept of harmony as reconstructed from Confucian sources comprises the key elements of “heterogeneity, tension, coordination and cooperation, transformation and growth, and renewal” (Li 2014, 9-10). Specifically, I have identified the following characteristics of active harmony from a Confucian perspective:

- (1) Heterogeneity. Harmony presupposes two or more co-existing parties. These parties are not uniform and they possess varied dispositions.
- (2) Tension. Various parties interact with one another. Tension of various levels arises naturally from difference.
- (3) Coordination and Cooperation. While tension may result in conflict, it also places constraints on parties in interaction and generates energy to advance coordination. In coordination, involved parties make allowances for one another and preserve their soundness.
- (4) Transformation and Growth. Through coordination, tension is transformed and conflict is reconciled into a favorable environment for each party to flourish. In this process, involved parties undergo mutual transformation and form harmonious relationships.
- (5) Renewal. Harmony is achieved not as a final state, but as stages in an ongoing process. It admits of degrees. A harmonious relationship is maintained through continuous renewal. (Li 2014, 9)

Even though Mou and I articulated our accounts differently, I would like to think that my harmony account and Mou’s “overall-complementarity-seeking account” overlap in important ways. His features of being universal and fundamental are not part of my definition of harmony in itself. However, I have argued that Confucian harmony as a process exists at every level of existence in the universe, in cosmogeny, in nature, as well as in human society. It is thus a “deep harmony” in the sense that harmony penetrates every level of existence in the world. Thus, in such a sense one can also say that Confucian harmony is both universal and fundamental. Mou’s characterization in terms of being dynamic can find traces in my understanding of Confucian harmony as I emphasize explicitly the process aspect of harmony. In my view, *he* 和 is to be understood primarily as a verb, an action term. Framed on the Chinese term of *he* 和 rather than on the Western term of “harmony” as it is usually understood, Confucian active harmony differs profoundly from the meanings of “harmony” usually used in English (for a study of the lexicon definitions of harmony, see Oxford 2022). Thus, it is dynamic harmony, which takes place in the process of harmonization. Furthermore, I would like to think that Mou’s idea of concordant complementarity overlaps with the “coordination and cooperation” aspect of my account, and Mou’s “restrictive” and “critical-reflection” elements overlap with the parts of tension, transformation, growth, and renewal in my account. On my account, heterogeneity implies difference and difference can lead to tension. Components of harmony in tension generate limitations on one another in the process; there is a restrictive dimension. Working with tension

and restrictions leads each component to transform itself, which can lead to critical reflections when human persons are part of the harmonization process.

My account also differs from Mou's account in a number of aspects. First, Mou's characterization in terms of "critical reflection" suggests that his account is framed within the context of human agency. Even though my account of Confucian harmony includes human agency capable of critical reflection, it is not limited to human agency. The kind of harmony that I have reconstructed also includes harmonies without human agency, and hence without critical reflection. On my account, for example, the world has come through a process of harmonization, from the primordial state of *qi*, to the interactive play of the forces of *yin* and *yang*, further to the evolution of various species on Earth, all prior to the emergence of humanity.² The emergence of humanity is an outcome of prior harmonization processes. After it came to existence, humanity became a major force in generating harmonies in the world. Thus, "critical reflection" is important for making human efforts towards harmony in the world.

Second, whereas Mou's account is framed in terms of contraries, my account of harmony is framed in terms of differences. "Contrary" usually means being opposite in nature, direction, or meaning. In logic, two propositions are contrary to each other if both cannot be true at the same time. Contraries implies difference. Difference can include contraries. However, difference covers a broader domain than contrary does. My understanding of harmony is about different things coming together and working together to generate a larger and richer whole. Different constituents of a harmony may be contrary to each other, but they do not have to be. For instance, when two students work on a team for a term project, even though sometimes they can become contrary to each other, they can work together congenially without being contrary to each other. Furthermore, in its usual sense, "contraries" suggests a binary structure, limiting involved parties to two, for instance, one as *yin* and the other as *yang*. In contrast, "differences" can exist in a harmony of more than two parties. In the original metaphor of making a rich soup for harmony (*he*) in the *Zuo Commentary*, fire and water can be characterized as contraries, but it is not the case with all food ingredients contributing to generating a harmony. It would be hard pressed to identify contraries out of such ingredients as vinegar, sauce, salt, and plum (see Li 2014, 26). The characterization in terms of "contraries", however, may not be central to Mou's account. They could serve as a metaphor with general applications. Understood loosely, it could be taken to cover broadly *yin-yang* contraries, thesis-antithesis contraries, distinct perspectives, differences, tensions, conflicts, and so forth.³ If so, Mou's use of "contraries" does not constitute a meaningful difference between his and my models.

Third, whereas Mou's account is framed in terms of complementarity, my account of harmony is more than complementarity. To be complementary usually means mutually supplying what each other lacks. While my account of harmony includes complementarity in that sense, it is not limited to complementarity. We may find complementarity in the process of "coordination and cooperation" in my definition of

² For a detailed account of this view, readers can see Li (2014), Chapter 2.

³ Mou indicated this broad understanding during our panel discussion.

harmony. However, my account of harmony also includes transformation and growth, and renewal. For a couple, when the husband is talkative or assertive whereas the wife is quiet or submissive, they may complement each other. But they do not constitute a harmony on my account. Dynamic harmony requires active engagement and mutual transformation in their harmonizing process. In other words, when “harmony” is understood in the way I reconstructed from the Confucian tradition, it includes complementarity as a component but is a broader concept than complementarity. It demands more than complementarity.

Fourth, the harmony model presents a multi-partied, multidimensional, and multilayered process. In comparison, the Hegelian model focuses more on a linear developmental process, as I understand it. Julie E. Maybee writes, “a contradictory process between ‘opposing sides’ in Hegel’s dialectics leads to a linear evolution or development from less sophisticated definitions or views to more sophisticated ones later” (Maybee 2020).⁴ Thus understood, the Hegelian model follows a three-stepped rhythm of “thesis to antithesis to synthesis” through sublation (*Aufhebung*) before reaching a synthesis. Each step along the way is a phase in the process of unfolding of the *Geist*. The harmony model does not have a pre-determined *Geist*, nor does it ever culminate in a final realization of an entity, *Geist* or otherwise. Mou’s *yin-yang* approach does not presuppose a *Geist*, nor is it explicitly linear in presentation and in process, but it nevertheless maintains largely a binary structure. His model is framed in terms of complementarity, which usually implies only two involved parties. The harmony model includes *yin-yang* interaction, but it is not confined to *yin-yang*. Nor is the harmony model confined to one *yin* party versus one *yang* party in the process. Harmony takes place not only between two parties; it can take place among multiple parties, penetrating multilayers of existence and interaction, and achieving mutuality and cooperation at more than one dimension. As described in the *Zuo Commentary*, a cook mingles a variety of ingredients in making a harmonious soup. While some of the ingredients may be characterized in terms of *yin* and *yang*, others may not be without stretching their symbolic meanings.

Fifth, while the concept of *yin-yang* also plays an important role in my account (see especially Li 2014, Chapter 2), my understanding of *yin-yang* relation may be different from Mou’s. I now propose a flexible *yin-yang* model for understanding relations in the world. Alison Black has stated,

It must be remembered that *yin-yang* terminology is always relational. *Yang* and *yin* themselves have no fixed meaning, unless one goes back to their early etymological meanings, which included the ideas of light and shade. Metaphysically, they permit a highly flexible organization of the world in overlapping polarities. (Black 1989, 175)

My approach goes one step further and takes *yin* and *yang* not merely as terminology, but also as qualities in an ontological sense. That is, these pertinent

⁴ Here I draw on Hegel’s philosophy for my understanding of the Hegelian model. Mou may or may not include this linearity in his formulation of his Hegelian model, which he has stated may not be exactly as Hegel’s philosophy.

qualities are not merely *labelled* as *yin* and *yang*; they are *yin* and *yang* qualities. Perhaps, that is what Black meant when she said that, metaphysically, *yin* and *yang* permit a highly flexible organization of the world in overlapping polarities (*ibid.*). I understand *yin* and *yang* as relation-based qualities rather than entity-based qualities. An entity-based quality defines the quality of an entity by itself. For example, a dog has four legs. This four-leggedness as an entity-based quality goes with the dog, regardless of where it is and in what relation it is with regard to other things. In contrast, whether a dog is large is not an entity-based quality but a relative quality. A Border Collie may be large in comparison with a Chihuahua, but it may be small standing next to a Great Dane. A Chihuahua can be large in comparison with another. In these examples, “large” and “small” are not used as mere labels. Their meanings are not merely nominalist. They refer to qualities of the animals. Their respective uses are grounded on corresponding qualities. On such a view, *yin* and *yang* are relative qualities rather than entity-based qualities. A relative quality exists only in relation to other things; nothing is *yin* or *yang* in and by itself. A man may be *yang* in relation to his son but is *yin* in relation to his father. A woman is *yin* in relation to her mother but is *yang* in relation to her younger sister. For such a model, therefore, one important step to take is to delink the fixed association of one entity with *yang* and another entity with *yin*. Accordingly, harmonization includes role-changing in the process. Furthermore, since relations may exist between things or people in multiple dimensions, their *yin-yang* relations may vary across these dimensions. According to this understanding, harmonies between things or people are not only more than those between contraries or a matter of complementarity, but they are also multi-dimensional.

I have argued that, in realizing a harmonious way of life, it is important to develop a harmony outlook. An outlook is a mentality that disposes a person toward acting in a certain pattern. A harmony outlook manifests an understanding of the ultimate value of harmony and deploys people toward harmonization (Li 2014, 167). That is the main purpose of this harmony discourse. So, what difference would it make if we adopt the Confucian harmony approach?

First, we will be able to see the world from the perspectives of harmony. We will understand processes in the world as harmonies and disharmonies. In other words, harmony will become a major concept in understanding and experiencing the world. What we have become now is already results of previous harmonizing processes and what we will be depends largely on how we will be transformed in the future processes.

Second, we will value harmony; harmony as a value implies that we will value working together, with one another or each other, with other groups and communities, other races and other countries, with the environment, etc. It brings us together, builds common grounds, and enables us to join forces in the world to move forward.

Third, we recognize differences in the world, between you and me, between us and other groups, and so forth. Absolute uniformity should not be our goal. Such an understanding requires tolerance and accommodation.

Fourth, as far as human society is concerned, we will be prepared to adjust ourselves when appropriate as we attempt to change others. In this regard, David Wong’s 2020 article is particularly illuminating as he tells how people on the opposite

sides of an issue can learn and transform each other to produce a harmonious community (Wong 2020). This feature of mutual transformation and growth is especially significant when some people have taken harmony to mean that an authoritarian government can silence different voices by suppressing people. On my account, an authoritarian suppressive government and a submissive population do not constitute a harmonious society. It is contrary to harmony.

In closing, let me thank Bo Mou for sharing his innovative work on complementarity and for his discussion of my work on Confucian harmony. From a harmony perspective, this kind of exchanges is in itself a process of generating harmony—in the sense of harmony as understood in the Confucian conception. While I think his view and mine may be contraries and can complement each other, I also hope we can become harmonized in that, through this kind of engaged discussion, we learn from each other and generate a more harmoniously balanced view—a goal we both share. Moreover, hopefully this type of exchange can also help all of us in advancing philosophical inquiries in our times.⁵

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