Summary of Thesis

The thesis is a study of syncretism of the three teachings in the philosophical thought of Fang Yizhi (1611-1670). Fang, a late Ming literati with a jinshi degree, was a prolific scholar with academic contributions in philosophy, literature, etymology, numerology, medicine, astronomy, natural sciences and others. This was evident in his two important works of an encyclopedic nature, the Comprehensive Refinement (Tong Ya) and his Notes on Principles of Things (Wuli Xiaoshi). He was regarded as one of the immediate progenitors of “Qing thought”, which has its grounds rooted in evidential studies.

This thesis examines his scholarly pursuit, the syncretism of the three teachings, which became very much his main concern and purport, in his latter years as a Buddhist monk and abbot of a monastery. Although syncretic-mindedness of late Ming scholars was not unusual, Fang’s syncretism in the three teachings has a eclectic dimension. As did many of the scholars of his time, Fang’s syncretism was that of non-compartmentalisation. But unlike his counterparts, he did not engage in concept-matching of the various doctrines embodied in the three teachings, in order to show that they eventually converge into the path of Confucianism, or the other two teachings. Rather, he held a non-hierarchical attitude towards the three, which he believed parochial followers of each doctrine had failed to accomplish. As such, rather than applying the formula of “different path – same ending”, he advocated his
own philosophy of a dialectical approach, thus transcending the three teachings.

Although sources of his philosophical thought, especially that of his syncretic vision is difficult to trace, its main foundation lies in the numerology of the Book of Changes, as well as its idea of birth and death in the rhythmic operation of the Way. The Buddhist element of influence is also significant, especially in his doctrine of "Unity of :." (Yuan Yi San Dian), which draws inspirations from the "One Mind – Three Vipasyana" concept as well as the "Unity of the Three Dogmas", advocated by the Tian Tai Buddhist school.

On the Taoist front, Fang has shown an inclination towards Zhuangzi’s philosophy rather than Laozi. He held a rather unconventional view that Zhuangzi was a disciple of a direct line of descent from Sages Yao, Shun, Duke Zhou and Confucius, but had "sought refuge" in the Taoist school in times of great upheaval. This was largely influenced by Fang’s Zen Master, Juelang Daosheng, who was also an advocate of the Three-in-One teachings, and was adamant that Zhuangzi’s philosophy had close affinities to Confucianism.

The thesis consists of six chapters. The first is a critical biography of Fang while the second examines his intellectual affinities. The following two chapters expound his most important philosophical works, including the Dong Xi Jun and the Monk Yaodi Roasts Zhuangzi (Yao Di Pao Zhuang), in an attempt to elucidate his rationale and ideals behind the syncretism of the three teachings. A critical analysis of Fang’s
syncretic vision is given in chapter five, drawing with it a conclusion in the final chapter.