Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy
Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy
Toward Progressive Confucianism

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Almost twenty-five years ago I fell in love with a young Jewish-American woman, a fellow student of Chinese at the Inter-University Program for Chinese Language Studies in Taipei. This book is certainly not the most important outcome of that event, but in a curious way my coming to write as a Confucian philosopher does stem, at least partly, from the relationship that began in Taipei. The recipient of a brief and forgettable Episcopalian religious education as a child, I became and remain an atheist. The importance of Judaism to Debbie and her family, though, meant that Jewish rituals began to enter my life. First, High Holiday services and Passover, then joining a synagogue, observing and sometimes participating in my daughters’ religious educations, and the splendid ceremonies as each of my daughters became a Bat Mitzvah. As all this was going on, my own reading and teaching of Confucian texts led me to reflect on the importance of ritual in our lives – and to see that the Jewish rituals in which I now participated were in fact only one of many types of ritual that inform our lives today. And rituals were not the only facet of my life where I was finding resonance between Confucianism and my own life. It is only as adults that we can become truly aware of the importance of our parents and family in shaping who we are, and also become aware of our own roles in helping to sustain these crucial relationships. Participation in the local community also emerged as something to which I was drawn, and about which I found tremendous insight in Confucian writings. Gradually, I began to wonder: am I a Confucian? What would that even mean, here in Middletown, Connecticut?

I continue to wrestle with these questions. Certainly whatever Confucianism means today – and, as we will see, it has many different dimensions and interpretations – it is more than a vague commitment to ritual, family, and community. It is both broader and more specific. Broader, in that almost any version of Confucianism will also emphasize an on-going commitment to moral growth and a serious involvement with a textual tradition, and many types of Confucianism will add an effort to
balance our concern for one another with an apt concern for the environ-
ment we inhabit. This is more specifically, both because Confucian ways
of valuing family and so on are going to differ, to one degree or another,
from other ways of doing so; and also because within the Confucian tradi-
tion itself, there are disagreements about the details. So, figuring out what
exactly it means to be a Confucian in the contemporary world is complex.
In addition, as I will discuss in Chapter 1, in the last hundred years
Confucianism has faced greater challenges than ever before, and also has
become more global than at any time in its history. It teeters on the verge
of possible irrelevance and yet is studied in new ways and in new places.
Both within China and without, various interpretations of Confucianism
are starting to gain traction as philosophy, as political theory, and as
religion – and many of the scholars and practitioners who have been pur-
suing these Confucianisms are now my friends and interlocutors. If I am
a little unsure of whether I am a Confucian, I am confident that I am part
of exciting conversations about contemporary Confucian philosophy, and
venture in this book both to describe what Confucian theorists have been
saying and to prescribe what Confucian theorists should say.

In 2009 I published a book called *Sagehood: The Contemporary Signifi-
cance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. *Sagehood* has two goals: to offer an interpreta-
tion of the central philosophical project of Neo-Confucianism – namely, the
ethical, metaphysical, psychological, and educational theories surrounding
the search for sagehood – and to put these theories into critical dialogue
with relevant ideas from contemporary Western philosophy. The hypoth-
esis is that each side can be stimulated by and learn from the other. My
main Chinese sources in *Sagehood* are two great Neo-Confucian philoso-
phers, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529). I believe their
theories in the areas I have mentioned to be fascinating and well worth our
attention. In the last two chapters of *Sagehood*, though, I turn to the topic of
Neo-Confucian political philosophy, and there I find the approaches of Zhu
and Wang to fall significantly short. There are still things we can learn from
them but, as I pursued the question of how sages and politics should mix, I
found myself drawn to the radical ideas of a twentieth-century Confucian
philosopher, Mou Zongsan (1909–95). As I explore briefly in these closing
chapters of *Sagehood*, Mou argues that notwithstanding all the insights of
the Confucian tradition in many areas, Confucians can only realize their
deepest aims if they adopt a different understanding of law and of political
authority than had been generally accepted within the tradition. (Mou does
note that some of his pre-modern predecessors made moves in this direc-
tion, but never in a consolidated way.)
Sagehood, in short, offers a broad view of one version—an attractive and intriguing one, it seems to me—of Confucian ethics, but only some tantalizing hints at what a satisfactory Confucian political philosophy might look like. It left me wanting to think through more thoroughly what such a political philosophy would entail, and wanting to explore what other Confucian philosophers today had to say about these subjects. The opportunity to do this arrived sooner than I ever expected, as I was invited to deliver the inaugural Tang Junyi Lectures at the University of Michigan in the Spring of 2009. Those lectures, collectively titled “Contemporary Confucian Virtue Politics,” are the direct ancestors of Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 7 of the present book. I thus owe a considerable debt to Donald Lopez and his colleagues in the Asian Languages and Literatures Department for inviting me, to the appreciative and challenging audiences for the lectures, and to the many old friends and teachers with whom I was able to reconnect (especially Don and Anne Munro). It was then my good fortune to be able to take a year’s sabbatical from my teaching and administrative responsibilities at Wesleyan which, coming so close on the heels of the Tang Lectures, provided the perfect setting for building a full book on the foundation already laid in the lectures.

Many friends and colleagues have offered their help over the time I have been writing this book. Daniel Bell did me the great favor of reading over the whole book manuscript and offering many comments, corrections, and suggestions. I am grateful to audiences who responded to portions of the manuscript-in-progress at the 2010 APSA Conference, the Columbia Comparative Philosophy Seminar, Connecticut College, Haverford College, the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the 2010 Nishan Forum, and Soochow University. My thanks to Routledge for granting permission to use material from my essay in Deborah Mower and Wade Robison, eds, Civility in Politics and Education (2012), which overlaps substantially with Chapter 6 of the present book; and also to the editors of 《中國哲學與文化》 [Chinese Philosophy and Culture] for permission to use material from my article in their issue 8 (2010), which is a predecessor of Chapter 3. The following generous people each contributed to my work on one or more chapters: Sebastien Billioud, Fred Dallmayr, Loubna El-Amine, David Elstein, Fan Ruiping, Gu Hongliang, Huang Yushun, Leigh Jenco, Sungmoon Kim, David Little, Kai Marchal, Emily McRae, Deborah Mower, Peng Guoxiang, Marty Powers, Hagop Sarkissian, Sarah Schneewind, Michael Slote, Anna Sun, Sor-hoon Tan, Justin Tiwald, Sean Walsh, Wang Jue, Kathleen Wright, Xiao Yang, and Zhao Tingyang. They all have my sincere thanks.
anonymous referees gave helpful feedback on my initial book proposal, and two of them read and commented on the entire manuscript. The book has benefitted greatly from their challenging engagement, for which I am extremely grateful. Finally, Emma Hutchinson and her staff at Polity Press have been extremely supportive and responsive; Emma’s guidance and good humor have meant a lot to me. With all this help, one hopes that any remaining deficiencies are few and far between, but I suppose they are inevitable, and they are solely my own responsibility.
Introduction: Contextualizing Progressive Confucianism

The title of this book is meant to be at least a little bit provocative. More than 2,500 years after the death of Confucius (551–479 BCE) – not to mention more than six decades after the Chinese communist revolution – is there anything alive and “contemporary” about Confucianism? You might also wonder about both “political” and “philosophy.” Confucianism is best known as an ethical teaching advocating benevolence and filial devotion, and its classic texts, which are filled with aphorisms, stories, and dialogues, might seem more like religious tracts or handbooks for spiritual practice than philosophical arguments. As if this weren’t enough, the subtitle asserts that the book will articulate something called “progressive” Confucianism. But everyone knows that Confucianism is conservative, looking back to a lost golden age, concerned to revive the rituals and values of an antique era. How can it be progressive?

Let us start with the idea of Confucianism itself. Or perhaps I should say “Confucianisms,” because there have been many, even competing, ways in which the legacy of Confucius has been developed over the centuries. As we will see in a few moments, distinct approaches are also proliferating today. As I use the term in this book, Confucianism refers to the broad and dynamic tradition of practice and reflection that includes all of these competing Confucianisms. This means that at any given moment, it may be controversial what the exact parameters of the tradition are. Even seemingly major issues, like the question of whether Confucius is in some sense divine, often divide Confucians. What they agree upon is that the texts and vocabulary of classical Confucianism are a critical source of their own values and practices. In this book I will be diving into some of the current debates about how to best capture and develop the spirit of Confucius and other Confucian masters. To some degree, these arguments are based on historical evidence and textual interpretation, but in a more fundamental sense they are prescriptive rather than descriptive: what are the best, most valuable, most robust insights at the core of the tradition? As I will explain below, I join those who believe that this core should be centered around
the ideal of all individuals developing their capacities for virtue – ultimately aiming at sagehood – through their relationships with one another and with their environment.

I am the first to admit that Confucianism spent most of the twentieth century on life-support. And just as China and the world in the twenty-first century are dramatically different from how they were in the nineteenth century, so contemporary Confucianism must successfully remake itself if it is to again be significant. The goal of this introductory chapter is to sketch the context within which the refashioning of contemporary Confucianism is already underway. We will see that while Confucianism today is certainly not only a philosophy, philosophy is an important element of contemporary Confucianism: among other things, it is the most international aspect of Confucianism. The philosophers I will introduce in this chapter are from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore; and also from the United States and Canada. Some are ethnically Chinese and some are not; some write primarily in Chinese and some in English. Most of these Confucian philosophers are sure that political philosophy is an important part of Confucianism, though they also acknowledge that this is an area in which contemporary Confucianism faces significant challenges.

What, finally, of “progressive”? I mean this word to function in two different ways. On the one hand, it helps to describe the core Confucian commitment to individual and collective moral progress, and many of the other Confucian philosophers to whom I will refer would agree that this kind of progress is critical to Confucianism. On the other hand, it is meant as a label for the particular approach to Confucian political philosophy that I will be advocating throughout this book. “Progressive Confucianism” bears certain similarities to other contemporary “progressive” social and political movements, and I will argue that some contemporary Confucians are mistaken in not adopting these progressive values and institutions. A key part of my argument will aim at convincing readers that Progressive Confucianism is indeed “Confucianism.” As we will see, I build on the foundation begun by Confucian philosophers in the twentieth century, and especially on the work of Mou Zongsan (1909–95). My ultimate goal is showing that Progressive Confucianism has much to both teach and challenge us today.

**A Difficult Century**

The twentieth century was difficult for Confucianism. In 1905, a last-ditch effort to reform a floundering empire led to the abandonment of the ubiq-
uitous civil-service exam system, around which higher education in China had been based for centuries. Since the exams were based in large part on mastery of Confucian classics, the end of the exams marked a major challenge to the significance of Confucian learning. This was followed, in 1911, with the collapse of the last dynasty itself. In 1915 Chinese intellectuals inaugurated a “New Culture Movement” that sought fundamental changes to Chinese values, practices, and even the Chinese language. In many ways this movement was a more pervasive “cultural revolution” than the later Maoist movement of that name. The values of “modern civilization” were on the rise and older traditions like Confucianism were roundly criticized. Confucianism did not die, but after the first decades of the twentieth century, it would need to find new ways to be relevant in Chinese society.

After this unpromising start, the twentieth century continued to pose obstacles to any rebirth of Confucianism. Some political leaders tried to manipulate it as a shallow ideology of loyalty to power. Chinese intellectuals increasingly were drawn to either liberalism or Marxism as they endeavored to work out what a “New China” should look like. The rhetoric and values associated with science were hugely popular and widely seen as incompatible with traditional Confucianism. As Mao pushed Communist ideology in increasingly radical directions, the space for Confucianism shrank even further, reaching its nadir during the 1973–4 “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” campaign. Mao’s goal was to wipe Confucianism completely from the hearts of China’s citizens.

Admittedly, there were some important exceptions to this bleak picture. In 1921, a young scholar named Liang Shuming (1893–1988) generated considerable discussion with the publication of his *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies*, which argued for the continued value of a reformed Confucianism and pointed toward problems with Western materialism. The early 1920s also witnessed a spirited intellectual debate sparked by Zhang Junmai (1886–1969)’s criticism of his contemporaries’ unthinking endorsement of science as a solution to all problems; Zhang drew on Confucian ideas to argue for the importance of humanistic values.

Another important figure in this era is Xiong Shili (1885–1968). Like Liang Shuming, Xiong was intrigued by Buddhist metaphysical theories, but gradually developed an influential critique of Buddhism, on the basis of which he articulated his own understanding of Confucian metaphysics. Although when in his twenties Xiong had been involved in the republican movement to overthrow the Qing empire, most of Xiong’s career was spent as a college professor. Liang and Zhang, by contrast, balanced their