

Introduction

For more than 2500 years, the teachings of Confucius have been debated and developed as times have changed. New social or political circumstances and new knowledge have meant that Confucianism itself has continually been in a process of renewal. A recent moment in this development took place in the spring of 2017, when the U.S.-based Confucian philosopher Stephen C. Angle took part in a series of dialogues with Chinese Confucians in Beijing. The dialogues engage with topics like the relation between Confucianism and modernity; its status as philosophy, religion, and/or chief ingredient in a distinctively Chinese culture; the status of pivotal modern Confucians like Kang Youwei and Mou Zongsan; and more generally, the prospects for what Angle calls “Progressive Confucianism.” The present book offers translations of those dialogues into English. In this introduction, the co-editors give some background and context that will help readers make sense of the issues debated here and emphasize why it matters that these texts originated as dialogues, rather than simply as separate statements of contrasting views of Confucianism’s future.

I. The Path to these Dialogues

The collapse of imperial Chinese institutions around the turn of the twentieth century meant that the values and practices of Confucianism would need to evolve if they were to survive into modernity. Confucianism over the last century has become what the eminent historian Yu Ying-shih called a “wandering soul” searching for a new body.¹ As educational, social, and political institutions in China have developed — often fitfully, entwined with the revolutionary changes rocking the country — so too have Confucianism and its proponents. Serious attention to Confucian teachings is now most often found in classrooms of universities and in the writings of their professors. Many of these experts in Confucianism identify with the discipline of “philosophy” — a category that did not even exist in Chinese until the late nineteenth century. As the high tide of Maoist ideology receded beginning in the late 1970s, philosophers in mainland China began to revisit a question that Chinese thinkers outside of the People’s Republic had already been asking for several decades: what is the meaning of Confucianism in the modern world?

¹ Ying-shih Yu, *Modern Confucianism: Past and Future* [現代儒學的回顧與展望] (Beijing: Sanlian Publishing 2004), 58.

Meanwhile, a second shift was taking place outside of Confucianism's East Asian homelands. Scholars based primarily in North America began to move beyond just trying to understand the texts and histories of Confucianism to actually engaging with Confucian values and ideas in something like the manner that Western philosophers have long grappled with the legacies of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant. Just as we take these thinkers to be speaking to all of humanity rather than just to Athenians or Prussians, so too might Kongzi and his heirs have things to say to us, today, wherever we might live. A lively intellectual discourse developed in English over the meaning and significance of Confucian philosophy. Did it offer critiques of liberal individualism that we might learn from today? Might its models of self-cultivation inspire those looking for better lives? Perhaps its stress on rituals rather than rights could offer correctives to our litigious ways?

One of the two co-authors of this introduction, Stephen Angle, got caught up in these twin sets of developments back in the 1980s. He studied with Yu Ying-shih as an undergraduate, spent time in Nanjing and Taipei, and then earned a Ph.D. in Chinese philosophy from an American university. Since the mid-1990s he has taught in the United States but regularly travelled to East Asia, learning from and engaging with counterparts there. The other co-author, Yutang Jin, is currently a postdoctoral research associate at Princeton University. He grew up and went to college in China before moving to the UK for his graduate studies. His research works to reconcile Confucian intellectual and cultural heritage with conditions of modernity in East Asia, which closely resonates with crucial themes of this book.

Over the last two-and-a-half decades, Angle has been developing key pieces of what we now call "Progressive Confucianism." Its method is "rooted global philosophy," an idea that Angle honed in conversation with Chinese colleagues and first published in a Chinese-language essay.² Rooted global philosophy means to work within a particular live philosophical tradition—thus its rootedness—but to do so in a way that is open to stimulus and insights from other philosophical traditions—thus its global nature. Engaging with Confucianism from the perspective of rooted global philosophy means seeing Confucianism as live, developing, vulnerable to critique but also capable of offering insights to anyone. One sense of "Progressive Confucianism" is therefore that the tradition has and will continue to develop (or progress) over time, responding to new circumstances, challenges, and opportunities. To do this successfully it must balance

² Stephen Angle, "Chinese Philosophers and Global Philosophy" [中國哲學家與全球哲學], *Chinese Philosophy and Culture* [中國哲學與文化] 1, no. 1 (2007). The text of that essay only uses the term "global philosophy," though the substance of the idea is there; adding "rooted" emerged as a suggestion from Prof. Xia Yong at a 2005 conference where Angle presented an earlier version of the paper.

attention to the historical and textual legacy of the tradition, to the distinct socio-political contexts in which Confucian philosophers now operate, and to the demands of philosophical justification. Such a balance means avoiding exclusive attention to either Sinophone or Anglophone discourses, each of which can contribute to any of the three spheres of attention.

Progressive Confucianism is not just a methodology; as Angle and others have engaged in the practice of rooted global Confucian philosophizing, he has argued that Progressive Confucianism has a fairly specific content as well, and in certain ways this content resembles what we often call “progressive” ideas within other traditions. At the core of Angle’s Progressive Confucianism — recognizing that others might well endorse the methodology but come to different conclusions about what content is entailed — is a deep inter-relationship between an individual’s “inner” development and their “outer” socio-political engagement. Confucians have long referred to this topic as the “inner sage – outer king” relationship. To be a Confucian is to make a commitment to cultivate the best parts of yourself, very much including your relations with others in your family and community. It means to grow into a more moral, more engaged person. In addition, Angle has leveraged the inter-connection between inner and outer aspects of this growth to argue that modern Confucians must oppose various types of oppression and advocate for expansive political participation, among other things.³

II. The Lay of the Land

Confucianism, we have already suggested, underwent some dramatic changes over the last century and a half. In order to understand the state of play today, it will be helpful to quickly review how we got here.⁴ Even a quite radical Confucian reformer like Kang Youwei (1858–1927) still wrote memorials to the emperor in the 1890s, whereas by the 1920s prominent Confucian thinkers were almost invariably college professors, mostly in philosophy departments, within a polity that was at least nominally a republic. We use the term “New Confucians” to cover the intellectually diverse—though almost entirely male—spectrum of thinkers who work in these new circumstances, many of them also deeply influenced by various strains of Buddhist and Western philosophy.

³ See in particular Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (London: Polity, 2012); Stephen Angle, *Growing Moral: A Confucian Guide to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁴ This section draws in part on Stephen Angle, “The Adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism,” 49, no. 2 (2018).

One significant group of these New Confucians are Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), Tang Junyi (1909–1978), and their followers. Both studied philosophy in Chinese universities, both taught philosophy in universities prior to the Communist Revolution, and both left mainland China during the revolution to spend the rest of their lives in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The teachings of Mou, Tang, and their collaborators and students came to be labeled “Contemporary New Confucianism” (*dangdai xinrujia*) by many, and more recently have been called “Hong Kong/Taiwan New Confucianism” by some in Mainland China. Mou and Tang both focus on what they call the “learning of the heartmind and (human) nature” (*xinxing zhi xue*), which emphasizes the importance of personal moral and spiritual cultivation; we will often render this as “moral Confucianism.” Mou and Tang have much to say about the Confucianism of the classical era, but in many ways their ideas — and especially the “learning of the heartmind and nature” — resonate with the teachings of what we generally label in English as “Neo-Confucianism.” Neo-Confucianism refers to the revival of Confucian thought and practice that began in the eleventh century C.E. and continued to the eighteenth century.

More recently, a loose grouping of Confucians based in the People’s Republic of China has emerged and begun identifying themselves as “Mainland New Confucians.” The details and debate around this term need not detain us here⁵; for our purposes, it suffices to say that the earliest stage of a distinctively Mainland New Confucianism was dominated by one man, Jiang Qing (b. 1958). In various works, Jiang emphasizes a differentiation from the New Confucianism of Mou and Tang.⁶ He argues that twentieth-century New Confucianism, basing itself on the “moral Confucianism” of Mengzi and the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians, focuses primarily on inner self-cultivation; insofar as these New Confucians paid attention to politics and institutions, Jiang says they used convoluted logic to justify grafting Western liberal democracy onto their Confucianism. In contrast, Jiang advocates a “political Confucianism” based on the “Gongyang learning” prominent in the Han dynasty. Where Mengzi and the later Neo-Confucians stressed human perfectibility based on their belief in a good human nature, Gongyang Confucians deemphasized the pursuit of inner perfection and focused on creating institutions that would sustain political order.

Over the most recent decade, an increasingly diverse range of thinkers has begun to take up the mantle of “Mainland New Confucianism,” including many of the main

⁵ For more on the emergence and current status of “Mainland New Confucianism,” see Angle, “The Adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism.”

⁶ Qing Jiang, *Political Confucianism: The Changing Direction, Particularities, and Development of Contemporary Confucianism* [政治儒學：當代儒學的轉化、特征與發展] (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian (Harvard-Yenching Academic Series), 2003).

participants in the dialogues contained in the present book. At the same time, Jiang Qing's views have been subjected to withering criticism both in Chinese (within the mainland and without) and in European languages. In almost every case, these arguments are framed as criticisms of Jiang Qing and his individual positions, rather than being directed at Mainland New Confucianism more generally. While we do not want to leave the impression that Jiang has been defeated and retired from the field — and indeed, the importance he places on Han Dynasty sources and on political institutions has been lasting — nonetheless many of Jiang's most distinctive proposals (for example, concerning the threefold nature of political legitimacy and his resulting advocacy of a tricameral legislature) are no longer at the center of Mainland New Confucian discourse.

Several scholars who self-identify as Mainland New Confucians took part in the dialogues assembled in this volume, chief among them being Chen Ming from the Philosophy Department of Capital Normal University, who played a key role in organizing the dialogues. Professor Chen (b. 1962) is a scholar of Chinese religion and philosophy, and in his essays and books, he has articulated various ways that a revitalized Confucianism might help to preserve and strengthen the Chinese nation, including arguing that Confucianism should be understood today as a “civil religion” (drawing on the ideas of Robert Bellah and others). Chen Ming's approach has also been aptly described as “bottom-up,” as compared to Jiang Qing's “top-down” manner: Jiang often takes himself to speak authoritatively for Confucianism, whereas Chen Ming's journal *Exploring the Way* features a variety of voices.⁷ This openness to exploring and contesting what Confucianism can and should mean in China and in the contemporary world more broadly is precisely the spirit animating the whole dialogue series.

III. Why Dialogue?

While the method and contents of Progressive Confucianism have from the first been developed in conversation with scholars on both sides of the Pacific, Angle's 2016-2017 year at Tsinghua University in Beijing gave rise to some of the most sustained and serious conversations between US-based and China-based Confucian philosophers that have taken place to date. Throughout the spring of 2017, Angle engaged in a series of extended, Chinese-language dialogues with Chinese colleagues on a range of topics related to the recent past, present, and future of Confucianism — especially in China. These dialogues, which make up the substance of the present book, showcase what is possible when Confucian thinkers work to communicate across the linguistic and cultural discourses that usually divide us. The dialogues were a unique opportunity to further develop

⁷ Tony Swain, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 235.

Progressive Confucianism, better accounting for Mainland Confucian views and enlarging the scope of the sometimes narrow canon of the Anglophone debates. They also offer an unparalleled window onto both the contents and the methodologies of a wide range of contemporary Chinese Confucian views.

The unusual fact that the views collected here were presented as dialogues bears emphasizing. The main speakers were seated across the table from each other, explicitly engaging with one another and responding to points each had raised previously, either in print or during that very dialogue. This helped to throw into sharp focus some of the crucial themes that are relevant to the future of Confucianism. The format and sustained nature of the debates — with some participants present for most or all of them — also pressed each side to take the other seriously and charitably, as opposed to just reporting their own views without really thinking about the challenges being raised. Contrast this with the result of the several written critiques of Jiang Qing's work that are published together with translations of Jiang's own essays in a 2013 volume: the critiques completely fail to move him to make any revisions to his views in the response included at the end of that volume.⁸ The dialogue format allows participants to realize where new arguments are needed and where topics have been ignored (or answers taken for granted) within a given discourse community. Indeed, one outcome toward which the dialogues at least hint is the possible creation of a broader, cross-cultural, and multi-linguistic community in which we are each concerned with the issues that matter from all the others' perspectives.

To the extent that Confucians have previously been involved in dialogues, the prominent examples are dialogues between Confucianism and some alternative standpoint. For example, the influential modern Confucian scholar and advocate Tu Wei-ming has taken part in numerous dialogues with the likes of Francis Fukuyama, Charles Taylor, and representatives of many of the world's religious traditions.⁹ These dialogues certainly have their significance, but what we present here falls into a different category, that of "internal criticism." In defense of internal criticism, Michael Walzer argues that such internal critiques bear the potential for radical change because they can call into question and displace existing moral maxims by exposing their internal tensions and contradictions.¹⁰ In contrast, critiques from without, though capable of transferring the

⁸ Qing Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁹ See e.g., A Conversation between Charles Taylor and Weiming Tu, *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* (Institute for Human Sciences), Vienna, Austria, June 11th, 2011 (Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3-ZnkCC0Jc&feature=related>).

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 46.

debate to new terrain, always fall short in their engagement with a tradition's rich intellectual resources and the nuances of why and in what way problems and solutions ought to be seen as such. The unwitting result of confining oneself to external engagement is that social criticism can easily lose steam as the initial excitement around new ideas dwindles away.

IV. Confucianism and the challenges of modernity: Mou Zongsan and contemporary issues

The dialogues took place in the spring of 2017, all but one of them on the campus of Renmin University in Beijing. The format remained constant throughout, and each has a distinct theme that was established in advance. One professor — in most cases, Chen Bisheng — chairs the session and begins with an introduction. The first half of the session is divided between remarks by Angle and remarks by one or two main interlocutors; the second half contains briefer remarks by other colleagues followed by wrap-up comments by the speakers from the first half. All the dialogues took place in Chinese and were recorded and then transcribed; each speaker then had an opportunity to edit their remarks, clarifying where needed. Beginning in the summer of 2020, these transcripts were then translated into English, most of the initial drafts done by Wesleyan University undergraduates under Jin's supervision. Jin and Angle then reviewed and revised the material both to ensure accuracy and, where needed, concision and focus.

The dialogue we begin with in this book, on "Contemporary" Confucianism, was not the first dialogue to take place chronologically, but the editors feel that it does the best job of framing the issues at hand. Unlike the other dialogues in which Angle leads off the conversation, here Chen Ming opens with an analysis of three different lenses through which China's last two centuries can be viewed and an argument that New Confucians like Mou Zongsan were stuck in a Eurocentric narrative of "enlightenment" that Confucians today should be able to transcend. This is especially important in the context of the dialogue because Angle's Progressive Confucianism both draws on Mou Zongsan and is committed to an idea of "progress" that might depend on a particular, modernist narrative of what counts as progress. Chen argues that in a post-Cold War context in which the ideologies of liberalism and communism — together with their attendant narratives of enlightenment and revolution — no longer dominate, Chinese thinkers can elaborate a narrative based around Confucian values to re-center Chinese cultural self-understandings. One way Chen puts this is to advocate a "return to Kang Youwei" (for more on Kang, see below) and Kang's slogan of "preserve the state, preserve the nation, and preserve the religion."

At the core of Angle's response to Chen is the idea that notwithstanding the various contingent reasons for the rise (and perhaps fall) of different Eastern and Western experiences of modernity, there are nonetheless key ideas and values associated with modernity that Confucians have good reasons to preserve. Angle asserts that Progressive Confucianism involves the "critical acceptance of modernity": rejecting or modifying some aspects but retaining what he calls the "inner logic" that defends a new "outer kingliness" (i.e., democracy and so on) on the basis that it protects the ability of people to seek Confucian ideals, unhampered by interference from powerful people pursuing their own agendas. In the subsequent discussion, participants regularly return to Chen Ming's connection between contemporary Confucianism and the preservation of China as a political entity led by the Chinese Communist Party. For some, criticism of Western-centered ideas of modernity goes hand-in-hand with rejecting the value of institutionally protected minimal values, while others disagree and from their own standpoints embrace legal and constitutional protections, albeit emphasizing that such "negative liberties" must not be seen as the whole substance of Confucian aspirations.

Mou Zongsan, who already appeared several times in Dialogue I, is the main topic of Dialogue II. (In fact, Dialogue II was chronologically the first of all the dialogues.) Angle begins by noting Mou's polarizing status within contemporary scholarship: one finds a great deal of hagiographic appreciation and an equal amount of uncharitable rejection, but relatively little careful, critical engagement with Mou's ideas. Angle takes both himself and his main interlocutor in the dialogue, Professor Tang Wenming of Tsinghua University, to be exceptions to this generalization. In the balance of his remarks, Angle explains what he takes to be Mou's most important contribution: namely, his argument for an "indirect" connection between moral value and political value, mediated by the concept of "self-restriction." This concept lies at the heart of key aspects of Angle's Progressive Confucianism, and he summarizes his own argument — inspired by Mou but going beyond anything Mou himself said — for the Confucian credentials of institutions (like rights and laws) that protect our ability to engage in the socio-political realm.

Tang Wenming replies, drawing in part on his book *Secret Subversion: Mou Zongsan, Kant, and Originary Confucianity*.¹¹ While Tang is critical of many of Mou's specific arguments, Tang is even more worried about those who think that Mou is outdated and no longer relevant. To the contrary, Tang says that Mou's philosophical approach to the Confucian tradition, which builds on the distinctive philosophy of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, is vital to the depth of Confucianism today — and to universalizing Confucian thinking

¹¹ Wenming Tang, *Secret Subversion: Mou Zongsan, Kant, and Originary Confucianity* [隱秘的顛覆：牟宗三，康德與原始儒家] (Beijing: Sanlian Publishing 2012).

across different cultures, which Tang agrees with Angle in endorsing. The bulk of Tang's remarks then summarize four key themes from his book in which he engages critically with Mou, focusing on morality, autonomy, ontology, and human relationships. Chen Ming is the third main speaker and he offers his own understanding of Mou's significance, arguing that Mou's contributions lie more in his metaphysical and historical/genealogical views and less in his distinctive methodology or his political philosophy (which Chen suggests is overly-fixated on democracy). For Chen, Mou is simply a "transitional figure." The dialogue concludes with some spirited conversation, much of it focusing around the degree to which contemporary Confucianism needs to follow the methods of "philosophy."

V. Progressive vs. Rightwing Confucianism: Kang Youwei, Confucian religion and Classical Studies

The liberal tone struck by the notion of progressivism may readily invite skepticism from Mainland Chinese Confucians, and in Dialogues III to V, we will encounter what can be seen as "rightwing" backlashes against the interpretation and reconstruction of Confucian thought along progressive lines. It should be noted that the Mainland Confucians' engagement with progressive Confucianism is not a targeted response but plays out through their exchange of arguments on such topics as Kang Youwei, Confucian religion, and Classical Studies. Among many early Confucians whom Mainland Confucians invoke, one central figure is Kang, whose works such as *Forged Classics*, *Confucius as a Reformer*, and *Book of the Grand Union* profoundly shaped the categories in terms of which subsequent generations of Confucians revive and preserve the Confucian tradition.

In Dialogue III, Angle sets the stage for discussing Kang by discussing four ways of understanding Confucianism. The first approach is localism, which takes Confucianism as a cluster of indigenous thoughts, habits, and rites not relevant to outsiders. The very opposite of localism is universalism, which attempts to replace Western-centric philosophy by uncovering the universal aspects of Confucianism. The next approach is what he calls "emergent cosmopolitanism," which envisions a new global community as the site of philosophical reflection and theorizing based on a convergence of different languages, categories, and assumptions. Angle's preferred approach is what he calls "rooted global philosophy," which firmly grounds Confucian philosophical thinking on its own soil while holding that Confucianism needs to avail itself of Western concepts and categories instrumental to its own progress. Against this conceptual map, Angle thinks that it is certainly possible to think of Kang as doing rooted global philosophy in his own way, but Kang's own argument (such as his dismissal of family) and textual

interpretation (such as his idiosyncratic reading of Confucian Classics) may raise questions about his own work and the rooted global philosophy with which he can be associated.

In response, Chen Bisheng thinks what Kang was doing is closer to universalism than to rooted global philosophy as he took up the Three Ages Theory of the Gongyang School and transformed it into a theoretical framework capable of explaining the entire human history. Kang's universalist tendencies notwithstanding, Chen believes that returning to Kang, far from a conservative turn, is a proper way of understanding the cultural identity of China—what China is, how China came to be the way it is, and where China is heading. Zhang Guangsheng disagrees that we can retrieve from Kang a cultural identity of China. Rather, Zhang claims that a return to Kang is a return to the problems he framed and confronted, rather than to the answers he gave. Kang points us to the survival of China as a civilization state (contra the nation state) under the idea of “all-under-Heavenism,” and intellectuals such as Mou Zongsan and Jiang Qing can all be seen as responding to the problem that Kang sharply discerned. Disputing the idea of the civilization state, Chen Ming emphasizes Kang's slogan of “protecting the state, the nation, and the religion” as the most relevant legacy that he left to contemporary China.

The approaches of religion and Classical Studies, which are already nascent in Kang's thought, are two central topics of the subsequent dialogues. In Dialogue IV, two issues—the religiosity of Confucianism and Confucianism as a civil religion—structure the conversation on Confucian religion. Participants debate not only the extent to which a religious reading of Confucianism is spurred and tainted by Western influence, but also whether it is helpful to cast it as a civil religion. Acknowledging the importance of not using Western categories of religion to distort Confucianism, Angle distinguishes between religion and religiosity, and primarily uses the latter in an effort to clarify exactly what is at stake. He argues that central to traditional Confucianism is not religious faith to the exclusion of other beliefs, nor the existence of transcendental God on a par with God in Christianity, but an attitude of reverence for Heaven and the values that it embodies, which opens up its unique way of modernization and progress. The religiosity of Confucianism is also related to contemporary Confucianism as modern society needs to find a way to accommodate it—either as a state religion, civil religion, a background culture, or an individual ethics. Finally, Angle problematizes the relationship between the Classics and religion, asking how it is possible to connect the Classics up to Confucian (civil) religion in a way that is not trapped in dogmatic textual disputes.

All Chinese Confucians participating in the dialogue agree that Western categories do not fit neatly into an understanding of Confucian religion. Further, Chen Ming, a vociferous advocate of Confucian civil religion, makes a distinction between Confucian

religion, which adopts its traditional format, and Confucian civil religion, which is focused on Confucianism's historical and cultural functions and its practical (contra theoretical) role in sustaining the unity and stability of Chinese society. Lu Yunfeng and Wang Qingxin share the view that Confucianism as an indigenous form of religion is still tacitly shaping the moral sentiment of the Chinese, though, as Wang says, they are not "conscious of it." While Lu emphasizes the need to recognize diverse ways in which Confucian religion manifests itself, which include both elite beliefs and folklore, Wang specifically targets Chen's civil religion account as he believes that the narrowing down of Confucianism to its functional utility undermines the very religiosity of Confucianism—or its "external transcendence," as philosophers tend to call it. Drastically different from Angle and Chen, who see a sharp conflict between religion and modernity, Zhao Feng and Cheng Guangyun take divinity as indispensable to all great civilizations, which, in turn, calls for more of an effort to religionize Confucianism and broader Chinese culture.

In Dialogue V, scholars dispute a second key aspect of Kang's thought, which is the Classical Studies approach. The dialogue primarily features a conversation among Angle, Chen Ming, Chen Bisheng, and Zeng Yi with the latter two spearheading the Classical Studies approach to studying Confucianism in China. Chen Ming claims that the values of the classics have already been embodied and acted on by ordinary Chinese in their quotidian life. Studying classical texts, however, can help us understand the cultural identity of the Chinese along with the political issues of state building that undergird it, which is the contemporary value of Classical Studies, and the genealogy of how China came to be a successive whole as it is known today, which is its historical value. Drawing a bigger picture of comparison among civilizations, Zeng Yi compares the historical narratives of Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism and discusses their intricate relationships with regime types of theocracy, monarchy, and democracy. Zeng addresses Confucius's aborted ambition of building up the Confucian Lu state in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and explores the possibility of fitting Confucianism, which never directly wielded political power, into a theocratic state structure.

Chen Ming is skeptical of the Classics approach. He accuses Chen Bisheng of relegating China into a cultural-anthropological entity falling short of political innovations, while being equally critical of Zeng Yi's goal of reviving Confucian classicism in an Islam-inspired, theocratic regime, which he takes to be detached from reality. From a progressive perspective, Angle offers a more systematic critique of Confucian classicism. Against a taxonomy of different ways of reading classics, he points out a discrepancy in Chen Bisheng's account between his attachment to ancient texts and commitment to philosophical justifications. According to Angle, Chen Bisheng's own arguments undermine the distinction between Classicism and philosophy. Similarly, Angle casts

doubt on a dichotomy in Zeng Yi's reasoning between following the tradition and wholesale Westernization, which leaves out many options that can otherwise be intelligible in Classical Studies. Further, in terms of political institutions, Angle militates against narrowing down the focus of Classical Studies to the texts in the Han and Tang dynasties, as Song Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi, who is well-known for his study of the heart-mind, is equally, if not more, concerned with political and social order.

VI. Progressive vs. Leftwing Confucianism: Marxist, Liberal, and Constitutional Confucianism

Triggering culturally conservative responses from Mainland Confucians does not mean that progressive Confucianism has firmly posited itself on the leftwing of the political spectrum. In fact, the labelling of "leftwing" and "rightwing" is a matter of fierce and ongoing dispute. One of the sources of the dispute comes from their different connotations in the Chinese and Western contexts. In Dialogues VI to VIII, we see different strands of Confucian thought coming from what can be loosely called "leftwing" in relation to progressive Confucianism. Dialogue VI focuses on how Confucianism relates to the Marxist-Socialist tradition. It opens with Angle's discussion of "leftwing Confucianism" by reference to Zhang Guangsheng's book, *Returning to the Past for the Future: New Text Confucianism and the Unity of Confucian Religion and Politics*. According to Angle, leftwing thinkers such as Zhang often have distinct, dual commitments to Confucianism and to Marxism, which do not always overlap. For example, state unity based on the idea of race and quasi-theocracy emphasized by leftwing Confucians such as Zhang presupposes homogeneity, while Confucians put a great premium on harmony which attempts to reconcile, rather than suppress, diversity and difference. In addition, Confucians bear a responsibility to think more about institutional accountability, which is a hallmark of progressive Confucianism, while leftwing Confucianism has greater faith in elite leadership at the expense of rule constraints.

Recognizing the definitional issue of the "left" and the "right," Zhang traces the genealogy of leftwing Confucianism back to the tradition of classic studies and modern figures of Xiong Shili and Liang Shuming, those earlier generations of Confucians who chose to stay in Mainland China after the communist takeover. Although Confucianism and Marxism are different political animals, their difference is one of scope rather than kind. According to Zhang, Confucians have always been concerned with the broad stroke of historical continuity and change while losing sight of detailed political and economic proposals. Against this backdrop, Zhang argues that leftwing Confucianism supports the welfare state because of its concern with economic equality, as traditional Confucians did,

and further that the welfare mechanisms should be supervised by a theocratic state based on the unity of state and religion, which differs meaningfully from the nation state which was born out of the threat from the church peculiar to Western experience. Chen Ming joins the discussion by pointing to the inherent problem of trying to find a universal definition for the “left” and the problematic nature of Zhang’s civilizational state, which tends to undermine the unity of the state. Gan Chunsong, in his turn, addresses the tension between leftwing and rightwing in the context of Chinese intellectual thought, which pivots around tensions first between Confucianism and Legalism, and second within the Confucian tradition itself between Wang Anshi and the Cheng Brothers in the Song dynasty.

Given progressive Confucianism’s embrace of human rights and basic freedoms, the closest normative position to progressive Confucianism is so-called liberal Confucianism, which is another sense in which Confucianism can be rendered leftwing in a way that is not Marxist. However, disputes arise both from an interpretive perspective (whether Confucianism can be read in terms of liberal values) and on normative grounds (to what extent Confucianism needs to accommodate liberal concerns). Angle objects to the idea of “liberal Confucianism” for several reasons. For one, it brings in an inherent tension structured by dual commitments to liberalism and Confucianism and does justice to neither of them. For another, construing Confucianism in liberal terms is not only conceptually confusing (since Confucianism is much broader in scope than liberalism), but also too easily susceptible to the critique of doctrinaire Confucians who already accuse progressive Confucians of betraying the tradition in favor of liberal values. Instead, Angle emphasizes the Confucian value of “self-fulfillment” (*zide*), rather than the liberal value of freedom (*ziyou*).

Defenders of liberal Confucianism put forward different arguments disputing Angle’s position. Ren Jiantao believes that the notion of progress is equally, if not more, confusing because progress denotes a static destiny toward which Confucianism evolves, which is subject to reasonable dispute. Further, according to Ren, a recognition of freedom is a precondition for all cultures pursued by all human beings, and so the *idea* of freedom, if not concept thereof, is nascent in the Confucian tradition. Different cultures may have different forms and social norms for expressing human freedom, but their ultimate goal should be seen as the same. Liang Tao and Zhao Xun, however, are more skeptical that Confucianism has already adopted freedom; instead, both of them believe that Confucianism needs to do more to incorporate the idea of freedom. For Liang, however, this does not mean that contemporary Confucians should follow Mou Zongsan’s path of self-restriction, but that they should keep traditional Confucian thinking about institutions including rites and legal codes while rendering them more egalitarian. Zhao, on the other hand, distinguishes between thick and thin Confucianism. Thick

Confucianism refers to a comprehensive package of Confucian metaphysics, epistemology, and moral and political philosophy, while thin Confucianism only bears on political arrangements in the public sphere. For Zhao, any prospect of Confucianism today lies in its providing a public background culture for Chinese society, resembling liberal background culture's role in Rawlsian liberalism.

The topic of the dialogue concluding this section is Confucian constitutionalism. Participants disagree on the meaning of the constitution, its role in Confucianism, and how it should be applied to the contemporary context. For Angle, constitutionalism should not be confined to its meanings in the West and looking at Confucianism can help us grasp various ways in which it is interpreted. Nevertheless, he believes that one central function of the constitution lies in limiting political power. For Angle, however, Confucians have Confucian reasoning to adopt the constraint of political power, namely, that, by limiting the power of the elite, ordinary people can freely develop their own agency for moral perfection. The creative tension between perfectionism and the check on political power lies at the center of progressive Confucianism.

While also acknowledging the rich sources of constitutional thinking in traditional Confucianism, Ren Feng, an advocate of "conservative constitutionalism" in China, puts forward a different vision. His version of Confucian constitutionalism is directly opposed to a culture and political zeal for democracy, which is no panacea to the needs of Chinese society today. For Ren, what China needs is a conservative constitution that makes the best of mechanisms of checks and balances traditionally available in a grand historical narrative of Confucianism and updates it under contemporary conditions. The lesson from Chinese history is that Confucian constitutionalism prioritizes the Sagely Way over the Kingly Way, ritual governance over legal codes, political governance over the choice of regime types, and finally educational functions of the government over exacting public recognition from ordinary people. Chen Ming disputes Ren's approach on all four fronts. First, the distinction between the Sagely and Kingly Ways presupposes an artificial rupture between them, which never existed. Second, traditional China was governed by political and legal institutions more than it was by rituals. Third, infusing Confucian values with politics is about the regime structure, not just about governance. And finally, Confucianism's role in Chinese history was not only served as moral codes educating the people, but also constituted the civil religious spirit of Chinese society.

VII. Conclusion: Progressive Confucianism as the Middle Way

The volume concludes with two Epilogues in which the co-editors each take a turn reflecting on what we can learn from the dialogues. Jin argues that though one key matrix

structuring the dialogues is conservatism vs. progressivism, Mainland Confucians are misguided about what they are set to conserve, thereby seriously undermining their criticism of progressive Confucianism. He first distinguishes between two senses in which the Confucian tradition is conservative. One can be doctrinally conservative in an attempt to restore the lost ideal and political order codified in past texts and practice. Alternatively, one can be pragmatically conservative in seeking piecemeal social change, which Jin takes to be a disposition shared by ancient Confucians (Mencius and Xunzi) and British conservatives (Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott). He goes on to identify mainland Confucianism as falling into the trap of doctrinal conservatism and being detached from reality. He suggests studying and reforming Confucian thought by connecting it with the values shared by the Chinese public and acting on piecemeal change by trial and error, which is the most compelling strategy to engage with, and respond to, progressive Confucianism.

For his part, Angle begins by lamenting the political repression in China that could already be felt in 2017 and has only ratcheted up in the years since, one minor casualty of which was the planned Chinese-language version of the present volume. Parsing the effects of political surveillance on the views expressed in the dialogues is complicated, but there is no question that open, public debate over some of our topics was and remains impossible within China, and even poses some kinds of risks outside of China's borders. This makes the liminal, insider/outsider standpoint and platform of someone like Angle all the more interesting but also very delicate. Angle cannot presume to speak for others — to claim that this is what they would have said, if only they could — because this tramples on their agency. But he can endeavor to speak as a Confucian (and not simply or only as an American), taking seriously the need to balance the conservation of tradition with the progress of that same tradition. From this perspective, he summarizes the sense in which Progressive Confucianism can be seen as a hopeful "Middle Way" for the future of Confucianism.

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