

Modern Confucianism and Chinese Theories of Modernization

Jana S. Rošker*

University of Ljubljana

Abstract

The Confucian revival, which manifests itself in the modern Confucian current, belongs to the most influential and important streams of thought in contemporary Chinese philosophy and represents a crucial part of the new prevailing ideologies in P. R. China. Although many books and articles on this topic are available in Chinese, academic studies in Western languages are still few and far between. The present article aims to introduce this stream of thought which is grounded in the conviction that traditional Confucianism, understood as a specifically Chinese social, political, and moral system of thought can, if renewed and adapted to meet the conditions of the modern era, serve as the foundation for an ethically meaningful modern life. Simultaneously, modern Confucian philosophers also aim to provide a spiritual antidote to the alienation which is seen by them as a collateral effect of the capitalistic glorification of competition and the single-minded pursuit of profit. The scholars belonging to this stream sought to reconcile 'Western' and 'traditional Chinese' values, in order to create a theoretical model of modernization that would not be confused or equated with 'Westernization'.

1. Historical Background

The crisis of Confucianism as a leading state doctrine of pre-modern China was part of the much more general crisis of the Chinese state on the threshold of modernity. This crisis was a result of the Chinese technological backwardness, its widespread poverty, and the impact of the Western imperial powers that have used military, political, economic, and cultural means of oppression, so that China has gradually become a semi-colony. All these factors have led to the failure of the political system to adapt to the actual conditions of society.¹

The specific circumstances of the 19th and 20th centuries demonstrated unconfutably that Confucianism, which had functioned as the central state doctrine and ideological basis of traditional Chinese society for two millennia, could no longer serve as an ideological basis for 'modern' society. The most significant critique of Confucianism appeared on threshold of the 20th century in the form of the May 4 movement, which combined a patriotic reaction against the Japanese and Western imperial powers with a sweeping criticism of the ossification and destructive social consequences of the traditional state doctrine. However, the Chinese 'new intellectuals', who initially identified the cure for the crisis of this outdated system in the assimilation and adaptation of certain aspects of Western thought, were forced to rethink their uncritical idealization of the European 'way' after the catastrophe of World War I and the widespread economic crisis which followed. These intellectuals, who had already witnessed the bankruptcy of European political theories, would also be influenced by the crisis of modern European philosophy. All these factors dampened considerably the Chinese enthusiasm for 'progressive' European thought, and many who had once considered it the highest stage of human development were shaken in their previous convictions.

Faced with this impasse, the gradual revitalization of the complex traditions of Chinese philosophical thought began to assume growing relevance and significance in the neo-conservative

circles of Chinese intellectuals. Modern Confucianism is one of the most prominent streams of thought within this general revival of classical Chinese philosophy. This current first appeared at the turn of the 20th century, and its main intellectual guidelines can be found in the works of many of the leading modern Chinese philosophers who were searching for ways to renew the methodological and theoretical aspects of the Chinese tradition and especially of the pre-modern philosophy which followed the Neo-Confucian revival.²

In International Sinology, this line of thought is translated with various, sometimes colorful terms that range from *Neo-Confucianism* or *Contemporary* or *Modern Neo-Confucianism*, through *New Confucianism* to *Modern* or *contemporary Confucianism*. The first group, which includes the term 'Neo-Confucianism', is impractical because it is often confused with the term that, in Western sinology, generally denotes the reformed Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming periods (*li xue* or *xingli xue*). The term *Modern Confucianism* therefore appears as most appropriate, given that we are dealing with philosophies, social theories, and ideologies belonging to and concerned with Chinese modernity.

The revival of Confucianism was given a considerable impetus by the famous *Debate on science and metaphysics* (*Kexue yu xuanxue*) in 1923, in which a group of young theoreticians led by Zhang Junmai challenged the naïve and superficial enthusiasm for Euro-American models of modernity with a series of closely reasoned counter-arguments and objections.

Unlike the People's Republic of China, where Confucianism was stigmatized as the 'ideology of outdated feudalism' until the 1980s, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, both of which were defined by post-colonial discourses, a growing number of intellectuals began expressing their opposition to the rapid Westernization of their societies already in the 1950s. John Makeham (2003, 2) establishes that prior to the 1970, new Confucianism could not be described as a specific philosophical movement, for it lacked a degree of integration and coalescence. Since the 1980s, however, it successfully transcended the geographical and political boundaries between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, where today new Confucianism continues to develop as a vital enterprise of philosophic reflection. A broad consensus has been reached between scholars from all Chinese speaking areas that the modern Confucianism was a movement that could be traced to the early 20th century that it boasted distinct phases of development, a cohort of representative thinkers and clearly defined lineages of intellectual transmission (Makeham, 2003; 2).

In addition to Xiong Shili (1885–1968) and Feng Youlan (1895–1990), who were the most important precursors of this movement, other leading exponents of the so-called first generation³ of modern Confucianism include Liang Shuming (1893–1988), Zhang Junmai⁴ (1886–1969), and He Lin (1886–1969). Fang Dongmei's⁵ (1899–1977) contribution is likewise important, even though he never openly adhered to the modern Confucian movement and considered himself, in his innermost convictions, to be not only a Confucian, but also a Daoist and a Buddhist. A similar dilemma occurs, according to Thierry Meynard (2011, XII) when labeling Liang Shuming as a Confucian or as a New Confucian. Such readings often prevent a comprehensive understanding of his thought and life that would articulate, in a meaningful way, both Confucianism and Buddhism. Here, we could also mention Serina Chan's (2003, 146–149) need to firmly establish the fact that Mou Zongsan's thought is, in essence, Confucian, 'despite its liberal appropriation of Buddhist paradigms and Kantian terminology'.⁶ All these debates lead us to the presumption that the modern Confucian current cannot be viewed as solely depending on classical Confucian thought in a strict sense. The expression 'ru xue' is translated as 'Confucianism' (also in the term 'modern Confucianism'), and thus automatically connotes Confucius (*Kong fuzi*, *Kongzi*) and the various historical phases of the Confucian teachings. But 'ru xue' actually signifies 'the teachings of the scholars', which means that this expression does not exclude a priori any of the major influences on the history of Chinese thought.⁷

Furthermore, the Neo-Confucian thought that underlies modern Confucian philosophy was itself determined by the latent but significant integration of certain methods and concepts deriving from Daoist and Buddhist teachings. It is well-known that the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming Dynasties, who created the theoretical framework that underpins modern Confucianism, formally distanced themselves from Daoism, Buddhism, and similar, more mystical, less rational traditions, even going so far as to view the proponents of these systems as their philosophical ‘enemies’. At the same time, however, one of the greatest theoretical shifts in Neo-Confucian philosophy was due precisely to the integration of many important Daoist and Buddhist concepts and methods into the framework of classical Confucianism.⁸

Modern Confucianism as the discourse, which most clearly expressed the rehabilitation of traditionalism, was officially announced on the first day of 1958, when a group of Taiwanese and Hong Kong intellectuals published the celebrated *Declaration of Chinese Culture to the Scholars of the World* (*wei zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan*). The Declaration, which joined an anti-communist glorification of Western style democracy with a vibrant call to patriotism and the preservation of traditional values, was the fundamental manifesto that defined the goals and contents of the modern Confucian current. According to Bresciani (2001, 22), this document became the Magna Carta of the whole New Confucian Movement, expressing in a very concentrated form their beliefs, ideals, and plans. While this claim might appear exaggerated (Makeham 2003, 28–29), some of its contents are still widely seen as implying certain central ideas of the modern Confucian movement.

The Declaration was drawn up by the philosophers Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang, 1887–1969), Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), Tang Junyi (1909–1978), and Xu Fuguan (1903–1982). These scholars are still regarded as the founders of modern Confucianism as a system that aimed at a more systematic re-interpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy and culture, based on a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Western philosophy, especially the thought of Plato, Kant, and Hegel. As opposed to the members of the aforementioned ‘1st generation’ of modern Confucianism, who even after 1949 continued to be active primarily on the mainland,⁹ this group of scholars lived and worked primarily in Taiwan and Hong Kong and became known in modern Sinology as the ‘2nd generation’ of modern Confucianism.

The third generation is composed of contemporary scholars and, according to most categorizations, includes the philosophers Cheng Chung-Ying (1935), Liu Shu-hsien (1934), Tu Weiming (1940), and Yu Yingshi (1930). Because most of these Chinese scholars live and teach in the USA, some critics (e.g. Dirlik 1995) claim that contemporary modern Confucianism is actually not located in China, but in America, and that it was structured as a discourse by Western ideologies in order to defend the modern capitalistic system and aid East Asian societies adapting in to their new socio-economic situations and contradictions.¹⁰

As already mentioned, the last three decades have seen intense research and an increasingly open debate regarding the postulates and discourses of the new Confucianism philosophy also in the People’s Republic. Academic groups such as *Research into the intellectual current of Contemporary New Confucianism* (*Xiandai Xin rujia sichao yanjiu*), which was founded in November 1986 by the philosophy professors Fang Keli 方克立 and Li Jinqian 李錦全, have been especially active and influential in this area. Following the period of gradual liberalization, numerous brilliant new Confucian scholars appeared in P. R. China, who focused on many previously neglected or overlooked aspects of original Confucian thought while also developing new approaches for its modernized integration into contemporary Chinese society (Makeham 2003, 2). These scholars include important figures, such as Guo Qiyong, Chen Lai, Zheng Jiadong, Li Zehou, Tang Yijie, Zhang Liwen, Meng Peiyuan, and Mou Zhongjian.

Concerning the contemporary streams of Confucian thought in mainland China, however, we cannot ignore ideas like Jiang Qing’s Political Confucianism, which mainly follows the

Confucian belief that both virtue and talent have a rightful place in a Confucian democracy. Similar to many other contemporary mainland scholars, Jiang (2012) has criticized the Taiwanese modern Confucianism for deviating from the original Confucian principles and being overly influenced by Western liberal democracy. These scholars have proposed constitutional Confucianism (also known as political Confucianism, or institutional Confucianism) as an alternative path for China, within the trilateral parliamentary framework. Jiang's model, which has been analyzed and interpreted by Daniel A. Bell (2011), recently became subject to many heated debates among political theorists dealing with modern China. Sor-hoon Tan (2009, 537), for instance, argues that the community ideal of Confucian democracy, if it is to work in East Asia, would do better to eschew elitism for historical as well as pragmatic reasons.

Despite these controversies, the revival of Confucian philosophy in the PRC, together with increasing interaction among philosophers in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, has the potential of contributing enormously to the reintegration of Chinese philosophical life after the politically conditioned divisions of the latter half of the 20th century. Furthermore, Confucian thought, from its origins to contemporary interpretations, offers both new areas of possible convergence or fusion with Western thought and a platform from which Western philosophy can be constructively criticized. Indeed, the modern Confucian current primarily grew out of the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional East Asian thought, in order to elaborate a system of ideas and values capable of resolving the sociopolitical problems of the modern, globalized world. The scholars belonging to this stream sought to reconcile 'Western' and 'traditional Chinese' values in order to create a theoretical model of modernization that would not be confused or equated with 'Westernization'. Because they viewed modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they explored their own tradition for authentic concepts that were comparable to certain Western paradigms deemed essential for modernization.

These thinkers thus proceeded with a dual approach: on the one hand, reformulating certain key approaches of traditional (Confucian) thought which they believed were capable of transcending the prevailing ideological trends, thereby preserving Chinese cultural identity, while at the same making their own original contributions to the development of a philosophical and theoretical dialogue between Euro-American and Chinese cultures.

2. *Modernization Theories*

If we try to analyze the modernization process from the 'general' (i.e. Western) theoretical premises of modernity and at this attempt to recall the central paradigms that have – in the Euro-American sociological, cultural, and ontological discourses – decisively influenced philosophical reflection, we also have to look at the classical definition, which was established by Hegel, and further developed through the socio-theoretical assumptions of Marx and later expanded upon by Weber, early Lukács, and older representatives of the Frankfurt school. These discourses did not remain merely focused on the explanation of a specific social situation (which usually manifests itself as criticism of reason; Habermas, 1998: 195), but rather on the terminological scope of modernity, which also includes the connotations of the 'conscious discontinuity of the new from the old' or the 'modern' from the 'traditional'.

When discussing modernization processes in China, we also need to know that we are dealing with a series of consecutive phases that lasted for a few decades each and were – each in their own way – connected either to the specifics of Chinese tradition or to the problems of accepting and transforming 'non-Chinese' forms of production, reproduction, and lifestyles.

The revitalization of the Chinese tradition remains one of the most important theoretical currents in contemporary Chinese theory. Because of its potentially stabilizing social function and its harmonious compatibility with capitalism, many scholars¹¹ see it as the Asian equivalent of

Max Weber's 'protestant ethic'.¹² In modern Sinology, this view is known as the 'post-Confucian hypothesis,' according to which Confucianism has not only facilitated economic development in East Asian countries but also has enabled these countries to create a different kind of capitalism and take a different path to modernity than the West (Kwon, 2007: 55). The representatives of the second generation of modern Confucianism were generally convinced that the successful development of modern East Asian societies was due primarily to a specific modernization model, known as 'Confucian capitalism' (e.g. Kahn, 1979 and Vogel, 1979). This model is characterized by a strong state leadership with a well-developed administrative structure, a hierarchical social structure,¹³ familism and a well-developed network of social relations, and with strong emphasis on education.

It also stresses virtues such as diligence, reliability, and persistence, together with cooperation, loyalty, and a strong sense of affiliation to one's own community or organization.

Tu Weiming is a third generation scholar who has published a number of important studies on Chinese modernization and its links with the modern Confucians. As Heiner Roetz points out, Tu's analysis of modernization is not based on a negative critique of the ethics of the Enlightenment; he concedes that any ethics that wishes to build on something other than its exploitability by authoritarian regimes must come to terms with the standards of the Enlightenment. In this context, here is no possibility of a 'radically different ethics' (Roetz, 2008, 367). What modern Confucian philosophers instead criticize in Western Enlightenment models is their excessive reliance on individualism and instrumental rationality (Tu 2000: 207). In their view, these two 'fundamental pillars' of modernization are responsible for the estrangement from nature and the human alienation which prevails in modern societies. Tu Weiming sees a possibility for influencing a renewed conceptualization of the modern era in the Chinese, especially Confucian traditions and supports his argument with the concept of 'multiple modernities'.¹⁴ This concept also confirms his belief that Chinese modernization should not be equated with Westernization. In fact, 'modernity' is no longer antithetical to 'tradition'; on the contrary, traditions constitute the essential meaning of current modernities. According to most modern Confucians, the Confucian tradition, understood as a form of atheistic religion (i.e. based on subjective morality), is definitely capable of creating a model of modernity that would not produce the social alienation and determination that characterizes Western models of modernization. In this context, however, David Elstein (2014, 60) exposes that in their theoretical efforts, modern Confucians focused primarily on the areas of metaphysics, philology, and classical Chinese texts, as well as the sociology of culture. Its contributions to the theories of the cultural conditionality of modernization were thus limited to abstract debates on the main concepts of the transformation of modern society. No member of this group formulated (or even projected) a critical social theory in which these new concepts could provide constitutional elements within modern Asian social systems. Here, we should mention Lin Anwu, who proposes a development of a 'Post New Confucianism (Hou xin ru jia, 後新儒家; see Lin Anwu 2006)', which should pay more attention to the social issues and to a subject as a concrete existing moral being; the real experiences of human beings should thus represent a new basis for the further development of Confucian philosophical discourses. A similar critique can be found in the works of the mainland scholar Zheng Jiadong (2001, 192–194, 406–407), who reproaches modern Confucians for an exaggerated intellectualization of Confucianism to the detriment of social and political praxis. For a good analysis and a detailed introduction of these critiques, see Zheng Jiadong (2001, 192–194, 406–407).

In its 'broad humanistic spirit', they see the possibility for an economic development that can co-exist with state-building (institutionalization), social stability, and cultural identity. The arrogance of Western culture, which conceives of 'its own' present as the future for all other cultures, is not only in bad taste but also completely misplaced. For them, the fact that the

Chinese tradition never succeeded in developing the conditions for industrialization and a modern economic system do not preclude it from doing so in a different historical context.

Some Western scholars point out the problematic nature of these suppositions (see for instance Roetz 2008: 371). Bearing in mind that original Confucianism had a negative view of the concept of pure benefit or profit (li), the East Asian ‘economic miracle’ acclaimed by most modern Confucians is best exemplified in the explosive development of P. R. China. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that China’s rapid rise as a global superpower was also due to certain factors, such as a ruthless capitalism governed by an autocratic political system and development policies that ignore any legal or ethical standards, and which have resulted in a series of ecological disasters. All this hardly resembles the Confucian ideal of ‘moral rule’ based on ‘self-cultivation’ and the harmonious unification of ‘inner sage and external ruler’.¹⁵ On the contrary, the dominant ideologies in the contemporary Chinese state are founded on a pure, unconditioned neo-liberalism, which is rooted in turn in the very concepts that have always been criticized by the modern Confucians.¹⁶ In fact, these elements are viewed as typical products of the Western modernization model, which is based on excessive individualism and instrumental rationality.

3. Basic Theoretical Approaches and the Concept of the Moral Self

John Makeham (2003, 33) points out that while the works of the modern Confucian theorists certainly have important implications in the area of cultural philosophy (wenhua zhexue), it is quite evident that their primary focus is on a number of underlying metaphysical issues. Despite the ambivalence of some writers, most of the modern Confucian scholarship during the 1990s focused on the identity of the movement as a philosophical school (John Makeham, 2003: 33).

Modern Confucians have viewed modernization essentially as a rationalization of the world. In their search for its philosophical foundations, they mainly focused on questions related to ontology, which could help them clarify the difference between external (waizai chaoyuexing) and internal (or immanent) transcendence (neizai chaoyuexing), with the latter being one of the typical features of Chinese philosophy. In this context, they pointed out that the Confucian Dao of Nature, which is simultaneously ‘transcendent and immanent’, is diametrically opposed to the basic model of Western religions, which are ‘transcendent and external’ (Lee Ming-Huei, 2001: 118). In order to illustrate the ethical–political approaches of the modern Confucians, we can refer to the traditional ideal of the ‘inner sage and external ruler (neisheng waiwang)’. For the modern Confucians, the exemplary Confucian nobleman (‘junzi’), who embodied the union of personal morality (‘inner sage’) with a more general social ethics and a successful life (‘external ruler’), offered a possible paradigm for mastering the impenetrable social complexity of the modern world. In this context, Stephen Angle (2012, 399) points out, that in traditional China, the political problem was actually that by conceiving politics as ethics-writ-large, meaning that Confucians were in a particularly difficult situation when rulers turned out not to be sages. This is the route from the sage-ideal to despotism, which has been ‘a well-trodden route in Chinese history, both ancient and modern’ (Angle, 2012: 399).

However, for most modern Confucians, the solution to the present global crisis is to be found in placing morality at the center of human concerns. The main problems of human existence cannot be resolved by exclusively ethical, organizational, or contractual methods and approaches; instead, humanity must also find solutions that are rooted in a deep individual awareness of the importance of the ethical conditionality of human life. Hence, the present survey will focus upon the introduction of its theoretical basis and will thus introduce the modern Confucian elaborations of the traditional Confucian idea of the moral self.

The four theorists who represent the core of the 20th century modern Confucianism all focused on ethical problems and the metaphysics of morality in their works. With the exception of Fang Dongmei, they were all former disciples of Xiong Shili, who left an indelible trace in their philosophies.

For Xiong, the development of the concept of the moral self, in the sense of an innate moral imperative (*xingti*), was one of the key contributions of Neo-Confucian philosophy, and he stressed that this moral self was not a hypothesis but a reality (Xiong Shili 1956: 251).

While Fang Dongmei refused the notion of the subject as useless for his purposes, the other three members of this group tried to find a concept within their own tradition that could serve as an onto-axiological bridge for a Chinese model of modernization. Ultimately, this led to them all elaborating somewhat different interpretations of the traditional Confucian moral self. They all accepted Xiong's basic platform, developing it in different ways in their own discourses. Xu Fuguan explored the development of the idea of the moral self throughout the history of Chinese philosophy and focused on questions linked to the concrete realization of this abstract concept in the social and political sphere. Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi instead developed their own philosophical systems based on this concept.

Tang Junyi equated this notion with the Confucian 'original heart-mind' (*ben xin*), arguing that the key feature of the moral self was its freedom, in the sense of the ability to overcome itself. He argued that the moral life requires us to be self-consciously self-governing. For him, this is also the reason why we must take full responsibility for ourselves and believe that we are free, for 'only a free and self-governing moral activity is essentially the activity of transcending one's actual self' (Chan, 2002, 306). In ontological terms, the moral self also represents the spiritual reality. Hence, Tang Junyi saw it as the common source of any human activity, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. These activities include the most basic human impulses, such as the instinct for self-preservation, which Tang defines as 'a call of human beings for future life'. Ultimately, all human activities are of a spiritual nature (Tang Junyi 1985, 142). He thus refers to Mencius' thesis on the innate goodness of human nature¹⁷ as a necessary precondition for human refinement. Moral evil is rooted in the limitations of the moral self which, in itself, always has the ability to surpass such limitations (Lee Ming-Huei, 2001:60). Because of this ability, human beings can transcend their empirical (or actual) selves (Chan 2002:306). Tang thus distinguished between a real and moral self, affirming the truth of the latter (Tang Junyi, 1985:54–55).

Mou Zongsan also proceeds from a concept of the subject, which is rooted in the moral self. The moral self manifests itself through the innate moral substance (*xingti*), which unites in itself everything found in Kant's concept of practical reason, including free will. Moral substance is rooted in original heart-mind (*ben xin*), which manifests itself as a phenomenal form of infinite heart-mind (*wuxiande zhixin*) and is an elaboration of the Neo-Confucian concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi*). This elaboration is the basis of moral performance; it is transcendent and infinitely universal. As a form of infinite heart-mind, it is a precondition for the actual realization of the categorical imperative which is also infinite. Mou's understanding of free will as a constitutive element of the moral subject is thus rooted in the view that this will represent the basic reason for any action. In this respect, it is the equivalent of Divine consciousness and thus absolute and infinite. Mou agrees with Kant's premise that the nature or essence of morality lies in the autonomy of the will and the moral subject. But he argues that the philosophical meaning of this postulate cannot be fully developed within the framework of Kant's ethics, which presupposes a dualistic division between rationality and feelings within the acting subject. This division means that the moral subject (or free will) can, at best, act as the 'principlium dijudicationis',¹⁸ and not as the 'principlium executionis'.¹⁹ The moral self, however, cannot merely be an object of faith (Mou Zongsan, 1975, 38).

Kant's subject is thus incapable of self-realization; being unable to set laws for itself, its autonomy is purely formal. For Mou (1975), Kant's metaphysics remain trapped in a 'metaphysics of rituality'; Mou Zongsan finds a prototype of a 'moral metaphysics' in Confucian philosophy, specifically in Mencius' concept of *xin*,²⁰ which he considers to be the foundation of the moral self. Mou's analysis of the Gaozi chapter confirms that, through his principle of the inherent morality (*renyi neizai*) possessed by the moral subject, Mencius attributes autonomy to that subject. Within the framework of Confucian philosophy, the Mencian moral subject was transformed into the concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi*), understood as a moral compass intrinsic to every individual. In this context, Mou – similar to most of the other modern Confucians – stresses the importance of the cultivation of personality.²¹ Like Xu Fuguan, he uses the concept *gongfu* to illustrate this point, although he is certainly more famous for his ambitious metaphysical speculation than for the sophistication of his self-cultivation theory (Billioud, 2012, 197).

Most of the 20th century Confucians confirm that traditional Chinese philosophy is much more suitable for the theoretical elaboration of a truly autonomous subject than modern Western philosophy, which, in essential terms, is incapable of establishing the moral self. Indeed, they point out that Confucianism has, in the course of its development from the *Book of Changes* or the discourses of Confucius and Mencius, to the mature moral philosophy formulated within the framework of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties, offered a more or less unified discourse, in which the substance of heart–mind (*xingti*) provides the basis for (but is also the result of) a conscious moral practice.

This constitutes the conceptual core which – through the unity of the cosmic and moral order – makes it possible to elaborate a morality that unifies the substance of heart–mind with the substance of the innate qualities (or nature) of human beings.

Modern Confucians thus tried to formulate an articulated and advanced concept of the traditional moral self which in the new global philosophies was meant to assume the function of a 'truly' autonomous subject. In this sense, 'true' autonomy means that this subject is both particular and universal. It acts as an individual, necessarily forming part of the social community but is ennobled by an infinite heart–mind, which enables it to be aware of its unity with the cosmos. Through free will, it derives its freedom from its own inborn moral imperative, which is likewise infinite. Nevertheless, this infinite nature is not defined by the existence of God but by the organic, structurally defined wholeness of the subject (in the sense of the moral self) with all physical and metaphysical elements of being.

Despite their skepticism regarding the existence of God, the modern Confucians never denied absolutely the possibility of his/her existence. However, they were never particularly interested in this 'higher instance', which they considered an issue that was marginal, if not utterly redundant. In their view, the issues with which every human being should be engaged were instead primarily linked to the self and to the quality of human existence. In their philosophical world, free will, autonomy, and the immortality of the soul (like intellectual intuition and infinite heart–mind) were not abstract theorems or empty clichés but authentic elements of real human life. They all form part of human existence, which is a priori moral, and endows every individual life with meaning and subjectivity. This new, moral, and simultaneously infinite, limitless subject, which represents an elaboration of the 'traditional' Confucian concept of the moral self, can potentially become an active personality capable of sustaining the idea of modernization. Because its reason, as a tool of intuitive, concrete bodily comprehension is unlimited, it is not contingent or dependent upon any kind of spiritual connection between the world and itself. This moral subject or its self is truly autonomous, for its autonomy has not been determined by anything external to itself.

4. Conclusion

As noted, the modern Confucian current arose from various attempts to synthesize Western and traditional Chinese thought, in what was a period of crisis for both systems. From the very beginning, the modern Confucian efforts were thus not limited to revitalizing or rehabilitating their own cultural or traditional ideals, as it was evident to them that Confucian modernization could only be realized based on ideas ‘imported’ from those very cultures which had given rise to modernity. Even today, they are not only intent upon rescuing their own tradition but also on resolving the problems of this foreign intellectual tradition, which had clearly become entangled in its own philosophical knots. Proceeding from the notion of the so-called ‘vacuum of values’ that determines the alienation which defines modern post-capitalist societies in the global world, it is thus important to analyze the question whether such a modern Confucian model of onto-morality is really on its way to generate a non-individualistic version of modernity; because if so, then the previously ‘inevitable’ or ‘inherent’ relation between modernity and individualism would have proven itself to be nothing more than an outcome of specific (i.e. Western) historical paradigms.

Short Biography

Prof Jana S. Rošker is the founder and Head of the Chinese studies at the University in Ljubljana (Slovenia). Her main academic interests include Chinese epistemology, Chinese logic, and modern Confucianism in East Asia, and she has published several books and numerous articles regarding these research areas. She is the chief editor of the journal *Asian Studies*, which has been published by her department since 1998. Prof Rošker is also the founder and current president of the *European Association of Chinese Philosophy* (EACP).

Notes

* Correspondence: Department of Asian and African Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia.
Email: jana.rosker@ff.uni-lj.si

¹ In 1905, when the Chinese Empire abolished the system of official state examinations, Confucianism, which had served as the official state doctrine since the Han Dynasty, lost its institutional foundations. This has led Yu Yingshi (1988, 1) to describe all subsequent Confucian discourses as those of a ‘wandering ghost’ (you hun), a term, which was later translated as ‘lost soul’ by John Makeham (2008). Han Qiang and Zhao Guanghui (1994, 274), instead called Confucian philosophers of the modern era the ‘lonely new Confucians’ (jimode xin rujia), due to their reformulations of the Chinese tradition and its syntheses with Western idea, and within a context which differs totally from the many centuries in which traditional Confucianism dominated the whole of Chinese culture, because of its being firmly rooted in state institutions. Modern Confucianism can thus no longer be seen as a state-building, national ideology comparable with the traditional discourses, which for almost two thousand years had, to a great extent, determined the social and moral codes, as well as the political and economic paradigms of the mighty Chinese Empire. However, it was precisely this domination of traditional Confucian state doctrine that, together with other factors, contributed to the stagnation and lack of innovative flexibility, which led to its inglorious demise in the first years of the 20th century. The new position in which Confucian thought found itself after the collapse of the official Confucian state doctrine can thus be seen as an opportunity for its revitalization and further development, in the sense of establishing new philosophical foundations for the modern and post-modern era.

² Neo-Confucianism (in Chinese: li xue or xing-li xue) is an ethical and metaphysical elaboration of original Confucian teachings. It originated in the Tang Dynasty (618–907) with Han Yu (768–824) and Li Ao (772–841) and became prominent during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) Dynasties. Its most influential representatives were Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), Cheng Hao (1032–1085), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Wang Yangming (1472–1529), and Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1192). Although the Neo-Confucianists were critical of Daoism and Buddhism,

Modern Confucianism

these two streams of thought doubtless had a strong influence on this philosophy, and the Neo-Confucianists borrowed terms and concepts from both. In general, however, Neo-Confucianism can be seen as an attempt to elaborate and develop rationalist and secular elements of the Confucian teachings. The Neo-Confucian philosophers used metaphysics as a guide for developing a rationalist ethics.

³ The categorization into ‘generations’ follows a long tradition in Confucian scholarship, which is ultimately rooted in classical Confucianism and still applied by most scholars (i.e. Makeham 2003, 3). Although slightly different categorizations exist in present-day China, I have chosen to apply the following one:

First generation: Feng Youlan (1859–1990), Xiong Shili (1885–1968), Zhang Junmai (1886–1969), Liang Shuming (1893–1988), and He Lin (1902–1992).

Second generation: Fang Dongmei (1899–1977), Xu Fuguan (1903–1982), Tang Junyi (1909–1978), and Mou Zongsan (1909–1995).

Third generation: Yu Ying-shih (1930), Liu Shu-hsien (1934), Cheng Chung-ying (1935), and Tu Wei-ming (1940).

⁴ Also known as Carsun Chang.

⁵ Also known as Thomé Fang.

⁶ His research was not limited to Confucianism but also included Daoist and Buddhist thoughts, especially their epistemologies. (Clower 2010, 2).

⁷ We should thus bear in mind that the term Confucianism (*ru xue*) often denotes early Chinese thought in general: Tu Weiming, a prominent member of the third generation of modern Confucianism, has described this in the following way: ‘The scholarly tradition envisioned by Confucius can be traced to the sage-kings of antiquity. Although the earliest dynasty confirmed by archeology is the Shang dynasty (18th–12th century BCE), the historical period that Confucius claimed as relevant was much earlier. Confucius may have initiated a cultural process known in the West as Confucianism, but he and those who followed him considered themselves part of a tradition, later identified by Chinese historians as the *rujia*, “scholarly tradition”, that had its origins two millennia previously, when the legendary sages Yao and Shun created a civilized world through moral persuasion’ (Tu, 2014, 1). In addition to Tu, many other scholars have noted the wider connotational scope of the term *ru xue*. Roger Ames, for example, has shown how this notion refers to a general classical ‘scholarly tradition’ (Ames 2014, 5). This, of course, does not mean that Daoist and Buddhist texts were included in the Confucian canon but only confirms how inextricably intertwined these three major idea systems were. In most forms of Confucian state orthodoxy, e.g. the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, the term *Ru* basically signifies an expert in the Five Classics. In her book on Confucianism and women, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee also writes: ‘The concept of *Ru* 儒... denotes the inexact Chinese counterpart of the term Confucianism used by Jesuits in the 18th century... The ambiguity of its semantic origins in ancient, pre-Confucian times obscures the connection between *Ru* as an intellectual discipline and Confucius, as its most prominent spokesperson. Unlike the term Confucianism – its secularized and simplified representation in the West – the complex term *Ru* can only be approximated as the teaching of the sages and the worthies wherein the ethical teaching of Confucius – the Supreme sage and the First teacher – forms a part, but an important part nevertheless’ (Rosenlee, 2006, 4).

⁸ For example, the concepts of the subject and object of recognition (*neng – suo*), originating in Buddhist epistemology, which were often applied even by the most rationalistic philosophies within the School of Structure (*li xue*). Even Zhu Xi, the leading figure in this school, incorporated several Daoist ideas and procedures into his own philosophy (e.g. the idea of the ultimate pole or *taiji* and the concept of non-action, or *wu wei*), whereas the theories of the more idealistic current (‘The School of Mind’, *Xin xue*) were practically based upon Buddhist and Daoist onto-epistemologies.

⁹ Zhang Junmai is the exception here; he was the only representative of the first generation of modern Confucianism to flee to the USA after 1949, where he remained until his death in 1969.

¹⁰ Of course, we have to take into account that the main tasks of modern Confucianism are not only connected to the issue of evolving new contemporary values from the Confucian tradition but also to the fact that his tradition as such has to be adapted to fit into the axiological framework of capitalistic values. Still, the conspiracy theory which presupposes a massive Western (especially American) support for the stream of modern Confucianism seems to be a little exaggerated. We must namely not forget that one of the main declarative goals of this current was the creation of syntheses between Western and traditional Chinese thought on the one side, and introduction and explanation of the specific features of traditional theoretical and methodological foundations of Chinese philosophy to the Western world on the other. To be honest, we have to admit that such a task can be best accomplished by Sino-American (Hua Qiao) scholars who are completely fluent in Chinese and English languages, and by those who are very well educated in both philosophical traditions. This holds true for all the aforementioned adherents of the so-called third generation.

¹¹ For example, see Feng Yaoming, 1992, Wang Hui, 2000, Tu Weiming 2000., Peter Berger 1988, Keedon Kwon 2007, and Lee Hong-jung, 2003.

¹² Weber also wrote extensively on Asia, especially China and India, concluding that Asian cultural and philosophical or religious traditions were ill-suited to modernization.

¹³ David Elstein (2011, 391) and other scholars, however, draw attention to the debate concerning the hierarchical structure implied in the so-called 'five relations' (wu lun) and exposes that it is an overstatement to say that they provide templates for all social relations even in Confucian thought, and much less in Chinese culture in general. The argument of understanding all relations in terms of such paradigms comes not from Confucian texts, but instead from those texts conventionally known as legalist.

¹⁴ A new post-modern concept, introduced by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (2000).

¹⁵ This phrase (in Chinese 'neisheng waiwang') traditionally denotes the relation between the transcendental and empirical subject.

¹⁶ While personal cultivation cannot be accomplished in isolation, the contribution of others must come in the form of efficacious communication. Any attempt to 'force people to be free' or to determine through coercion or indoctrination a person's semiotic structures and consequent behavior would be self-defeating as a means to liberty. It is only when cultivated relational individuals ritually communicate and participate in joint endeavors with virtuous liberty that there is Confucian community (Tan 2004, 65).

¹⁷ The term 'ren xing', which is generally translated as 'human nature', actually implies all innate human qualities and impulses, as opposed to those that are acquired through education and socialization. These a posteriori properties are called 'artificial' (wei).

¹⁸ This is a principle of moral valuation which determines the admissibility or obligatory nature of the performance or omission of a certain act.

¹⁹ This principle offers incentives for the performance of acts, determined by the principium dijudicationis (Lee Ming-Huei, 2001, 72).

²⁰ Heart and mind, a consciousness connecting reason, feelings, and values.

²¹ Like all advocates of tradition, Mou was convinced that the world of pragmatic action and politics should always be closely linked to the self-cultivation of individuals. This meant that the solution to all social problems was to be found in a higher level of moral awareness or maturity. These new-found convictions led him to focus again on classical Chinese philosophy (Clower 2014, 2).

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Modern Confucianism

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