My Progressive Confucian Journey

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Abstract

This essay examines the engagement between Progressive Confucianism and Mainland China in three steps. I begin with a narrative of how I came to be someone who identifies as Confucian and advocates Progressive Confucianism. Part II examines an especially important phase in this evolution: the series of ten dialogues I held with Mainland Chinese Confucians in the Spring of 2017. I give an overview of the topics we debated, themes that cut across individual dialogues, and indicate some of the diversity of views among Mainland Confucians—and how all this relates to Progressive Confucianism. The essay concludes with some reflections on the dialogues, including notable points of agreement and disagreement, key areas in which I felt that I had learned from the conversations, and some thoughts about the future of Progressive Confucianism in China.

Keywords: Progressive Confucianism, philosophy, Mou Zongsan, Mainland Confucianism, global philosophy

Moje napredujoče konfucijansko popotovanje

Izvleček

Ta članek v treh korakih obravnava razvoj naprednega konfucijanstva na kitajski celini. Začenjam z opisom, kako sem postal nekdo, ki se identificira kot konfucijanec in zagovarja napredno konfucijanstvo. Drugi del preučuje še posebej pomembno fazo te evolucije: vsebuje namreč niz desetih dialogov, ki sem jih izvedel s kitajskimi konfucijanci s ce-line spomladi leta 2017. Predstavim pregled tem, o katerih smo razpravljali, pri čemer se osredotočam na tiste, ki se prepletajo med posameznimi dialogi. Zatem nakažem nekaj razlik med stališči posamičnih celskih konfucijancev in razložim, na kakšen način se vse to povezuje s progresivnim konfucijanstvom. Na koncu se posvetim bolj konkretnim refleksijam omenjenih dialogov; v tem okviru prikažem tudi nekaj pomembnih stičnih točk in nesoglasij, preko katerih sem se iz teh pogovorov tudi sam naučil marsikaj novega. Članek zaključim z razpravo o možnostih bodočega razvoja naprednega konfucijanstva na Kitajskem.

Ključne besede: napredno konfucijanstvo, filozofija, Mou Zongsan, celinsko konfucijanstvo, globalna filozofija

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Introduction

From my first encounter with Confucianism in the classroom of Prof. Yu Ying-shih, I have always understood it to be dynamic. Prof. Yu introduced me to early debates (Mengzi versus Xunzi) and to later developments (Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming). He also made clear that the status of Confucianism in the East Asia of the day—this was 1985—was complex and contested. Eight months after that class ended I had my first opportunity to travel to China and witness for myself some of those complexities. In the almost four decades since, my knowledge of and relationship to Confucianism have grown and changed, but two constants have been my understanding of the Confucian tradition as something that has value insofar as it makes sense to people in their own contexts—it is not just an abstract system of ideas—and my belief that the experiences of people in Mainland China play a special role in any overall assessment of Confucianism today. This is not to say that Confucianism can have no role outside of China, but simply that as the nation with the longest history with Confucianism, and as the largest nation in the world, we ignore the ways that Chinese citizens view Confucianism at our peril. As I gradually came to see that something I called “Progressive Confucianism” was a particularly attractive way to develop the tradition, therefore, learning from Mainland Chinese interlocutors has been extremely important. This essay examines the engagement between Progressive Confucianism and Mainland China in three steps. I begin with a narrative of how I came to be someone who identifies as Confucian and advocates Progressive Confucianism. Part II examines an especially important phase in this evolution: the series of dialogues I held with Mainland Chinese Confucians in the Spring of 2017. I conclude with some reflections on those dialogues and thoughts about the future of Progressive Confucianism in China.

Part I: The Path to “Progressive Confucianism”

I arrived at Nanjing University to study abroad in the spring of 1986 with a decent foundation in Mandarin and a few courses on Chinese history and politics, but no real sense of what I was about to experience. I had never even eaten Chinese food before. One question that I would be asked repeatedly as I met new Chinese friends can sum up some of the challenges I faced: “Are you from the city or the countryside?” This dichotomy made sense in China at the time, and a memorable visit to the Jiangsu village in which my Chinese roommate had grown up helped to make the distinction real to me. But which category did my suburban US upbringing put me in? I had no good answer to the question, but it helped
me to dig deeper into the many differences between my background and those of
my Chinese classmates and acquaintances. Discussing these differences was also
good for my Chinese! Another crucial realization took place after a conversation
with someone I met while travelling on a train. We had gotten beyond the “city
or countryside” issue and I explained that I was interested in Chinese philosophy.
“Oh,” he replied, “you mean Marx and Lenin?” Over time I discovered that this
man’s view—that Confucian thought was outdated, “feudal”, and best left behind
—was widespread, even if peoples’ ideas about China’s future were increasingly
diverse.

Still, from my studies back in the US I was increasingly intrigued by Confucian-
ism. I wrote my Senior Essay on the populist tendencies of Wang Yangming and
his followers in the later Ming dynasty under Prof. Yu’s supervision, and applied
for a Fulbright fellowship to Taiwan to both continue my Chinese studies and
learn more about Confucianism. In the meantime, while I had decided I wanted
to pursue a PhD after my Fulbright year, it took me some time to decide which
discipline made the most sense: history, religious studies, or philosophy? Prof.
Yu was an historian. Unlike the way I was engaging with Western thought in
my philosophy classes, my approach to Chinese thought under Prof. Yu’s tute-
lage was primarily descriptive. Rather than challenging the ideas, we tracked
the ways that ideas changed, largely as effects of broad social processes. Two
important lessons that I learned from Prof. Yu were to appreciate the diversity
and dynamism of the Confucian tradition, and to see that Chinese philosophi-
cal texts were not produced in a vacuum of pure speculation, but were produced
by political and social actors with many, complex motives. These lessons have
stayed with me, but ultimately I decided that instead of tracing the develop-
ment of Chinese ideas, I was most interested in trying to take them seriously in
their own right. This led me to study for a PhD in philosophy at the University
of Michigan.

I found in Prof. Donald Munro at the University of Michigan a mentor who
sought to interrogate Chinese “philosophy” in just the way that intrigued me.
Through Prof. Munro, I learned of a global community of scholars who were de-
v eloping this project of “Chinese philosophy”, including great modern Chinese
thinkers like one of Prof. Munro’s own teachers, Tang Junyi. Perhaps the most
important lesson that I learned from Prof. Munro was that while it was possible,
albeit with considerable effort, for us moderns (and Americans) to access the mil-
 lennia-old teachings of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, we must be care-
f ul to note the ways in which their concerns and methods are not identical to our
own. This was not a matter of insuperable incommensurability, but the differences
that did exist meant that we could not safely expect the pre-existing categories
and questions from the Western tradition to fit neatly onto Chinese debates. Prof. Munro saw that early Chinese philosophers were less interested in explicit, abstract questions about truth than their Greek contemporaries; he also showed that by attending to the metaphors Zhu Xi employed, we could understand that Zhu Xi’s core concepts did not match with those of the Western rationalists with whom he was sometimes compared. I ended up writing a PhD dissertation that used Liang Qichao’s writings about “general virtue” (gongde 公德) and “personal virtue” (side 私德) as a case study to examine cross-cultural ethical differences and the ways that ethical discourses did and did not change (Angle 1994). Liang saw himself as learning from Western thinkers like Kant but also from Chinese thinkers like Wang Yangming to synthesize a new Chinese ethic. I admired his efforts to think openly and creatively about the relevance of Chinese traditions to the rapidly changing world that he inhabited.

By the Fall of 1994 I had finished my PhD and taken up a position in the philosophy department at Wesleyan University. My new colleagues and I quickly learned that in addition to the new courses I was offering, other changes to the department’s curriculum were needed. After all, the standard course on “Classical Philosophy” included Plato but not Kongzi, and “Early Modern Philosophy” featured Descartes but not Wang Yangming. We thus re-named several history of philosophy classes to make clear that there are distinct philosophical traditions, and also made some efforts to bring ideas from these distinct traditions into conversation with one another (for example, in a team-taught course on “moral psychology”). I also experimented with ways to teach Chinese thought as philosophy. Part of this, I felt, was to encourage students to inhabit the ideas, to try them out, to appreciate but also to challenge them. This seemed to work; after a class session in which I had asked students to discuss how using Zhu Xi’s idea of Pattern (li 理) might illuminate a conflict they had with a friend or roommate, one student came up to me and said that she was finding my course “the most relevant” of anything she had taken in college. It wasn’t that she was becoming a Neo-Confucian, exactly, but rather that in our classroom she was being pressed to think in a systematic and yet accessible way about values for the first time, and she was finding this to be extremely meaningful.

During my first few years at Wesleyan I was working on my first book — what would become Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry (Angle 2002). This book was a kind of evolution of my dissertation: Liang Qichao still played a role, but now instead of looking in detail at Liang’s ethical thought, I focused on what he had to say about rights (quanli 权利) and looked at the whole evolution of Chinese rights discourse. This meant going back into the Neo-Confucianism of the 16th–18th centuries, to see how those philosophers responded
to changing social-economic realities; 19th century thinkers who may or may not have identified as “Confucian”; then Liang and some of his key contemporaries; and ultimately reaching the debates about rights and human rights in late-20th century China. For many of these latter theorists, their theoretical touchstones were Marxist, Liberal, or other philosophers who lived and wrote in Europe or North America, and indeed, the argument of my book was not that Chinese rights discourse is purely Confucian. Still, Confucians have played roles and some Confucian themes continued to resonate with modern Chinese theorists. Most striking to me was a reaction that I witnessed on multiple occasions while attending conferences in China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In a session reserved for Chinese-speaking scholars that was attached to the otherwise-Anglophone “International Conference on Political Philosophy” in Beijing in 2001—I was the only foreigner in the room—several people emotionally lamented the absence of Chinese sources and Chinese traditions from the discussions at the conference. “Are thousands of years of Chinese thought just to be abandoned as not relevant to modernity?”, wondered one scholar. A few others agreed, calling on one another to work to reclaim and build upon Chinese ideas. In the years to come, Chinese scholars shouldering this task would be crucial interlocutors as I explored some of the same territory myself.

I will return to my engagement with Mainland Chinese scholars shortly, but it is worth emphasizing that I never understood the task of developing Confucian philosophy to be strongly culturally, geographically, or even linguistically delimited. I read Robert Neville’s book *Boston Confucianism* (Neville 2000) soon after it was published, and very much appreciated Neville’s insistence that Confucianism could be a “portable tradition”, influencing but also adapting to new environments like Boston (or, I was beginning to think, Middletown). I therefore felt that the book’s success would ultimately be measured by the degree to which Confucianism lived up to Neville’s hopes for it as a dynamic, fruitful tradition. This idea that Confucianism needed to be “dynamic”—that is, developing in new ways in response to the challenges of the modern world—was also a central theme of a seminar I taught in the Fall of 2000 called “Challenging Confucianism”. My students and I read both Confucian texts and critiques of Confucianism in the areas of politics, society, and gender. Could Confucianism respond? It was in this context that I first began to read works by Mou Zongsan and other 20th-century “New Confucians”.

During a visit to Beijing in 2003, a friend recommended that I read the newly published 《政治儒學》 (*Political Confucianism*) by Jiang Qing (Jiang 2003), which I promptly purchased and began to read on the plane home. What a fascinating book! Here was someone not undertaking intellectual history but instead
looking to develop Confucianism in creative ways, very much in response to his perceptions of contemporary challenges. Jiang engages in detailed criticism of Mou and others, draws on the somewhat neglected Han dynasty emphasis on political institutions, argues for a distinctive kind of Confucian methodology of reading and justification, and puts forward dramatic, even outlandish proposals for political change. It was clear to me why Jiang was getting a lot of attention, because this was new Confucian philosophizing. I also felt there were real problems with some of Mou’s arguments. I developed these ideas in a 2005 lecture called “中國哲學家與全球哲學” (Chinese Philosophers and Global Philosophy) that was ultimately published in a Hong Kong journal (Angle 2007). I saw Jiang, like Mou and others, as engaged in what I was coming to call “rooted global philosophy”, which was exciting; but I also criticized Jiang for calling for a Classics-based methodology that seemed designed to insulate his Confucianism from external assessment and critique. The biggest problem with this methodology was that Jiang himself manifestly did not use it in Political Confucianism! I returned to Jiang somewhat later in a review of the English translation of some of his essays (Angle 2014); if anything, I am even more critical in the later review. Jiang is important because he played a major role in opening up the idea that mainland Confucians could have a distinctive voice, different both from mainland Marxists and Liberals but also from Confucians like Mou who lived outside of the mainland after 1949. But Jiang is certainly not definitive of what Mainland Confucianism can be.

The next stage in this narrative is centred on academic year 2006-2007, which I spent in Beijing on a Fulbright fellowship affiliated with Peking University’s philosophy department. Leading into this year I had been reading Thomas Metzger’s deeply researched and provocatively argued A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash Between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today (Metzger 2005). Three things about Metzger’s book struck me most forcefully. First, he offered detailed, charitable readings of modern Chinese political writers that were unlike the work of any other Anglophone scholar I knew. It seemed that Metzger had read not just everything his subjects had written, but everything they had read! I was extremely impressed by his immersion in Chinese-language political theorizing. Second, Metzger identifies weakness with both mainstream Chinese and Western discourses and seeks (though does not find) a way to draw creatively on the best each has to offer. In other words, he is not just an historian but also an innovative philosopher. Third, I felt that although his emphasis on holistic discourses led to many insights, it also ultimately limited him to seeing “continuity” even where there might have been some crucial breakthroughs. The way out of the “seesaw problem” that he identified might already have been
found, I thought, in some of Mou Zongsan’s key insights. I discussed these points in a review of *Cloud* (Angle 2006) but more importantly, they helped me to solve a problem that had been bedevilling me as I worked during my Fulbright year on the manuscript that would become *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Angle 2009). *Sagehood* is two things: a synthetic account of core Neo-Confucian ideas focused mainly on Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, and a philosophical engagement with these ideas that draws on contemporary Western theorists, especially virtue ethicists. My problem was that while I felt confident that the Neo-Confucians could hold their own in the areas of moral psychology, virtue theory, and moral education, I also planned to discuss issues like politics and law in the last part of the book, and here I felt very constrained by the fact that no Neo-Confucian ever imagines an alternative to monarchy. What sort of dialogue is then possible, if today monarchy is a non-starter? Metzger catalysed me into viewing New Confucians like Xu Fuguan and especially Mou Zongsan as much more viable dialogue partners, which of course also meant beginning an on-going process of reading and engaging with their work; at this point it was Mou’s *《政道與治道》* (Mou 1991) that had the most impact on me.

The final two chapters of *Sagehood* were the launching pad for Progressive Confucianism but they were not yet Progressive Confucianism itself. That came a little later, when I was invited to deliver the inaugural Tang Junyi Lecture Series at my alma mater, the University of Michigan in 2010. My mentor, Donald Munro, had by this time been retired for several year but was actively promoting Chinese philosophy and had raised the money to fund the lecture series. It was an extraordinary honour to return to Ann Arbor in this way. The four lectures I delivered became the nucleus of a book I would publish two years later, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Angle 2012a). The lectures and book had three related goals: to offer an overview and introduction to various contemporary approaches to Confucianism, to engage critically with some key thinkers, and to defend an approach to the modern development of the tradition that I now began calling “Progressive Confucianism”. In brief, Progressive Confucianism is an understanding of the Confucian tradition as dynamic, continually developing in response to new situations, challenges, and information. Its attitude toward modernity is one of critical acceptance: not denying the changes modernity has variously brought to our societies and seeking to turn back the clock, but also not abandoning the deep insights of the Confucian tradition as we seek to grapple with these changes. At the core of Progressive Confucianism is the idea that the healthy growth of moral selves (which we can also think of as the development of
virtue) is intimately related to our actions with and for others in the wider world. Individuals and societies “progress” together, neither at the expense of the other. That idea is often labelled within the tradition as “inner sageliness—outer kingliness” (內聖外王) and it is a key to my arguments for political and social inclusiveness. Because of the dependence of virtue and socio-political opportunity on one another, Progressive Confucians must identify and critique all forms of oppression.

In the process of preparing the lectures and then book, I realized that I was presenting myself more explicitly than ever before as not just a scholar of Confucian philosophy, but as a Confucian philosopher. I was seeking in my own limited way to contribute to the on-going life and growth of Confucianism. This led naturally to the question of whether I identified as a Confucian. I grappled with this question in the Preface to the book, landing squarely on an answer of “maybe”. As I wrote there,

whatever Confucianism means today, … 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 environment we inhabit. More specific, 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 tradition itself, there are disagreements about the details. So, figuring out what exactly it means to be a Confucian in the contemporary world is complex. (Angle 2012a, vii‒viii)

Now, more than a decade later, I feel more confident in asserting that yes, I identify as a Confucian, in part because of the ways in which a range of other self-identified modern Confucians (in China and elsewhere) have accepted me, even as we debate with one another what the best way forward for Confucians might be.

In the Tang Lectures and then in Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy, I sketched a vision of Confucianism that drew in significant ways on Mou Zongsan and other 20th-century New Confucians, but also developed beyond anything that they had said. Throughout, I make clear that while the perspectives and arguments of Euro-American and Chinese liberals, socialists, feminists, and others all served as catalysts for my work, I nonetheless saw myself as offering
Confucian answers to problems that could be framed in Confucian terms. At its core, my argument is simple. All people have the ability to grow in the direction of sagehood—that is, to become better people. The central objective of Confucianism is to support such growth, and so all social and political structures need to be assessed in terms of how well they contribute to this objective. I criticize authoritarian politics, rejection of human rights, and patriarchal oppression—among other things—as making it harder instead of easier for groups of people to develop their virtue. There are many ways in which the resulting picture differs from contemporary liberalism, such as in my emphasis on the roles of rituals, deference, and certain kinds of state perfectionism, but there are also many ways in which this differs from the institutional and social reality of traditional, pre-modern Confucianism. Progressive Confucianism is a development of Confucianism and remains consistent with the deep commitments of the tradition, but looks very different on the outside.

In the subsequent decade the engagement between my understanding of Progressive Confucianism and various strands of Mainland Confucianism have grown ever deeper. A splendid translation of Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy into Chinese by Han Hua was published in 2015 (Angle 2015), which together with excellent translations of Human Rights Across Cultures in 2012 and Sagehood in 2017 allowed my work to reach new audiences in China (Angle 2012b; 2017). I continued to speak on topics related to Progressive Confucianism at conferences and other fora in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. And then in academic year 2016–2017, thanks to a fellowship from the Berggruen Institute, I was able to spend a year in Beijing affiliated with the Tsinghua University philosophy department. By this time I had come to realize that although I did discuss some Mainland Confucians in Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy, I was too narrowly focused on certain early representatives of “Mainland New Confucianism” like Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang. There were now many more self-identified Mainland New Confucians with a wide range of fascinating views. My goal for the year was to learn more and to find ways to engage with these important theorists. And thanks in particular to the enthusiastic interest of Chen Ming of Capitol Normal University, the year surpassed my hopes, culminating in the series of dialogues with Mainland Confucians that is the subject of most of the rest of this essay. Before turning to that, I will close this section by noting that as I understand it, Progressive Confucianism is not just a matter of socio-political philosophy. It is a comprehensive approach to the modern Confucian tradition, very much including matters of individual moral development. This is the focus of my most recent book, Growing Moral: A Confucian Guide to Life (Angle 2022) and we can find a similar, expansive approach to Progressive Confucianism in Chenyang
Li’s recent book, *Reshaping Confucianism: A Progressive Inquiry* (Li 2023). I believe that the next stage of growth of Progressive Confucianism must include many Mainland Confucians engaged in a similarly wide-ranging reflection on the tradition’s meaning today.

**Part II: Dialogues on Contemporary Confucianism**

I took part in ten dialogues with Chinese Confucians in the spring of 2017. Two took place in Shandong’s capital city of Jinan; the other eight were in Beijing, all but one of these on the campus of Renmin University. The format for the Beijing dialogues remained constant throughout and each had a distinct theme that was established in advance. One professor—in most cases, Renmin University’s Chen Bisheng—chaired the session and began with an introduction. The first half of the session was divided between remarks by me and remarks by one or two main interlocutors; the second half contained briefer remarks by other colleagues followed by wrap-up comments by the speakers from the first half. The two Jinan dialogues were somewhat more wide-ranging, one-on-one conversations. 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. The Jinan dialogues have each been published in China (Angle and Huang 2017; Angle and Guo 2017). It has proven more difficult to publish the Beijing dialogues in China, and so colleagues and I have translated them into English and their publication is now underway (Angle and Jin, Forthcoming).

The organization of these exchanges as dialogues—which was Chen Ming’s suggestion—bears emphasizing. In each of the Beijing dialogues, the main speakers were seated across a 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 (Jiang 2013). 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 get a sense of how these dialogues developed, it makes sense to begin with the Beijing dialogue on “Contemporary” Confucianism. Unlike the other Beijing dialogues in which I lead off the conversation, here Chen Ming opened 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 my 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 argued 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-centre Chinese cultural self-understandings. One way Chen put this was to advocate a “return to Kang Youwei” and Kang’s slogan of “preserve the state, preserve the nation, and preserve the religion”.

At the core of my response to Chen was 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. Progressive Confucianism involves the critical acceptance of modernity: rejecting or modifying some aspects but retaining 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 returned 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-centred ideas of modernity went hand-in-hand with rejecting the value of institutionally protected minimal values, while others disagreed and from their own standpoint embraced legal and constitutional protections, albeit emphasizing that such “negative liberties” must not be seen as the whole substance of Confucian aspirations.
Mou Zongsan was the main topic of a second dialogue. In this one, I began 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. I believe both myself and my main interlocutor in the dialogue, Tang Wenming of Tsinghua University, to be exceptions to this generalization. In the balance of my remarks, I explained what I took 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 Progressive Confucianism, and I summarized my 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 replied, drawing in part on his book 《隐秘的颠覆: 牟宗三, 康德与原始儒家》 (Secret Subversion: Mou Zongsan, Kant, and Originary Confucianity) (Tang 2012). 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 said 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 across different cultures, which Tang agreed with me in endorsing. The bulk of Tang’s remarks then summarized four key themes from his book in which he engages critically with Mou, focusing on morality, autonomy, ontology, and human relationships. Chen Ming was the third main speaker and he offered his own understanding of Mou’s significance, arguing that Mou’s contributions lay more in his metaphysical and historical/genealogical views and less in his distinctive methodology or his political philosophy (which Chen suggested was overly-fixated on democracy). For Chen, Mou is simply a “transitional figure”. The dialogue concluded with some spirited conversation, much of it focusing around the degree to which contemporary Confucianism needs to follow the methods of “philosophy”.

The liberal tone struck by the notion of progressivism can invite skepticism from Mainland Chinese Confucians, and in the next few dialogues, I encountered what can be seen as “rightwing” backlashes against the interpretation and reconstruction of Confucian thought along progressive lines. This critical engagement with progressive Confucianism played out through 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 profoundly shaped the categories in terms of which subsequent
generations of Confucians revive and preserve the Confucian tradition. When we discussed Kang, I set the stage by discussing four potential 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 I called “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. Lastly, my preferred approach was “rooted global philosophy”, which firmly grounds Confucian philosophical thinking in its lengthy tradition of texts and practice while still holding that Confucianism needs to avail itself of foreign concepts and categories instrumental to its own progress. Against this conceptual map, I argued that it is possible to think of Kang as doing rooted global philosophy in his own way, but Kang’s own arguments (such as his dismissal of family) and approach to 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 argued that what Kang was doing was closer to universalism than to rooted global philosophy, based on his use of the Three Ages Theory of the Gongyang School and his transformation of it into a theoretical framework capable of explaining all of human history. Kang’s universalist tendencies notwithstanding, Chen believed 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, another professor from Renmin University, disagreed that we can retrieve from Kang a cultural identity of China. Rather, Zhang claimed 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 (as opposed to a 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 problems that Kang sharply discerned. Disputing the idea of the civilization state, Chen Ming then emphasized 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, were the central topics of two subsequent dialogues. In the first, two issues—the religiositas of Confucianism and Confucianism as a civil religion—structured the conversation on Confucian religion. Participants
debated the extent to which a religious reading of Confucianism is spurred or tainted by Western influence. Emphasizing the importance of not using Western categories of religion to distort Confucianism, I downplayed the question of “is Confucianism a religion” and instead asked what kinds of religiosity Confucianism values and displays. I argued that central to traditional Confucianism was not religious “faith” nor the existence of transcendental God, but an attitude of reverence for Tian 天 (Heaven) and the values that it embodies, which opened 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 ethic. Finally, I problematized 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 agreed that Western categories do not fit neatly into an understanding of Confucian religion. Further, Chen Ming made a distinction between Confucian religion and Confucian civil religion, the latter of which is focused on Confucianism’s historical and cultural functions and its practical (rather than theoretical) role in sustaining the unity and stability of Chinese society. Lu Yunfeng (Peking University) and Wang Qingxin (Tsinghua University) shared the view that Confucianism as an indigenous form of religion is still tacitly shaping the moral sentiments of the Chinese though, as Wang said, they are not conscious of it. While Lu emphasized the need to recognize diverse ways in which Confucian religion manifests itself, which include both elite beliefs and folklore, Wang specifically targeted 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 he called it. Drastically different from Chen and myself, who both saw a sharp conflict between religion and modernity, Zhao Feng (Central Party School) took divinity as indispensable to all great civilizations, which, in turn, called for more of an effort to religionize Confucianism and the broader Chinese culture.

In the next dialogue, we disputed a second key aspect of Kang’s thought, which is the Classical Studies approach. The dialogue primarily featured a conversation among Chen Ming, Chen Bisheng, Tongji University’s Zeng Yi, and myself. Chen Bisheng claimed 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 both 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 compared the historical narratives of Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism and discussed their intricate relationships with the regime types of theocracy, monarchy, and democracy. Zeng addressed Confucius’s aborted ambition of building up the Confucian Lu state in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and—partly through a comparison with Shi’a Islam—explored the possibility of fitting Confucianism, which never directly wielded political power, into a theocratic state structure.

Chen Ming was sceptical of the Classics approach. He accused Chen Bisheng of relegating China into a cultural-anthropological entity incapable of political innovations, while being equally critical of Zeng Yi’s goal of reviving Confucian classicism in an Islam-inspired, theocratic regime, which he took to be detached from reality. From a progressive perspective, I offered a more systematic critique of Confucian classicism. Against a taxonomy of different ways of reading classics, I pointed out a discrepancy in Chen Bisheng’s account between his attachment to ancient texts and commitment to philosophical justifications. I maintained that Chen Bisheng’s own arguments undermined the distinction between Classicism and philosophy. Similarly, I cast 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, I discouraged us from 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.

Triggering culturally conservative responses from Mainland Confucians does not mean that Progressive Confucianism has firmly posited itself on the left-wing of the political spectrum. In fact, the labelling of “leftwing” and “right-wing” 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 the last three of the Beijing dialogues, we see different strands of Confucian thought coming from what can be loosely called “leftwing” in relation to Progressive Confucianism. One of them focused on how Confucianism relates to the Marxist-Socialist tradition. It opened with my discussion of “leftwing Confucianism” by reference to Zhang Guangsheng’s book, *《返本开新：近世今文经与儒家政教》* (*Returning to the Past for the Future: New Text Confucianism and the Unity of Confucian Religion and Politics*) (Zhang 2016). I maintained that 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-governed constraints.

Recognizing the definitional issue of the “left” and the “right”, Zhang traced the genealogy of leftwing Confucianism back to the tradition of classical studies and modern figures like 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 very different politically, Zhang said their difference is one of scope rather than kind. According to Zhang, Confucians have long been concerned with the broad strokes of historical continuity and change while losing sight of detailed political and economic proposals, which Marxism helps to supply. Against this backdrop, Zhang argued that leftwing Confucianism supports the welfare state because of its concern with economic equality, just 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 the Western experience.

Chen Ming joined 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. Peking University’s Gan Chunsong, in his turn, addressed 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 arose 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). I objected 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 favour of liberal values. Instead, I emphasized the Confucian value of “self-achievement” (zide 自得), rather than the liberal value of freedom (ziyou 自由).

Defenders of liberal Confucianism put forward different arguments disputing my position. Ren Jiantao from Renmin University believed 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 the 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 (see also Ren 2013). Liang Tao (Renmin University) and Zhao Xun (Hong Kong University), however, were more sceptical that Confucianism has already adopted freedom; instead, both of them believed that Confucianism needs to do more to incorporate the idea of freedom. For Liang, however, this did 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, distinguished 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 for 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 final Beijing dialogue was Confucian constitutionalism. Participants disagreed on the meaning of the constitution, its role in Confucianism, and how it should be applied to the contemporary context. For me, constitutionalism should not be confined to its meanings in the West; looking at Confucianism can help us grasp various ways in which it is interpreted. Nevertheless, I argued that one central function of the constitution lies in limiting political power. Confucians have Confucian reasons to adopt the constraint of political power: by limiting the power of the elite, ordinary people can freely develop their own agency in the direction of moral perfection. The creative tension between perfectionism and the check on political power lies at the centre of Progressive Confucianism.
While also acknowledging the rich sources of constitutional thinking in traditional Confucianism, Ren Feng, a professor at Renmin University and an advocate of “conservative constitutionalism” in China, put forward a different vision. His version of Confucian constitutionalism was directly opposed to a culture and political zeal for democracy, which is no panacea for 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 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 disputed 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 not only served as moral code educating the people, but also constituted the civil religious spirit of Chinese society.

Before turning to some reflections on what we might make of all this back-and-forth, let me sum up the two Jinan dialogues. The first, with Shandong University’s Huang Yushun, worked similarly to the Beijing exchanges with the exception that only the two of us spoke (until the end, when there was time for audience questions), and we had exchanged a general outline of topics and questions we wanted to pose to one another in advance. The result of this format (which Huang had proposed) was perhaps the highest level of mutual understanding among all of the dialogues. Among other things, it became clear that I had been mistaken when in a previous publication I had characterized his “生活儒学” (Life Confucianism) as synthetic, drawing equally on Confucianism and on Heidegger. For his part, Huang—who had been willing to have his political thought characterized as “liberal Confucianism,” or even “Confucian liberalism” (Huang 2016)—granted that both these labels and some of the substance of his view moved too quickly from the recognition that modern Confucianism needs substantial modification of its “external politics” (or waiwang 外王) to the conclusion that liberal democracy is the answer. Another critical point of overlap between us was our mutual recognition that structural oppression is a problem that Confucians need to face. As Huang put this, our current life possibilities are the product of past structures (xingxia 形下). We also had a valuable discussion of the comparative roles of the general lifeworld versus explicit traditions in shaping how we
think and value. My “rooted global philosophy” buts more emphasis on the latter, whereas his “Life Confucianism” puts more emphasis on the former. By distinguishing between what happens when (or to the extent that) we are explicitly doing theoretical reflection and when we are just going about our lives, we were able to arrive at a shared understanding.

My final dialogue, with Guo Ping (Shandong University) in Jinan, also revealed a significant degree of consensus. We discussed methodological issues such as the differences between “synthetic” views that draw independently on Confucianism and on another, distinct tradition (such as liberalism or Marxism), on the one hand, and rooted global philosophy on the other, with both of us characterizing our own views as the latter. We discussed the degree to which pre-modern Confucian ontological categories can still be helpful and relevant today. One important area in which there may have been some disagreement concerned the degree to which modern Confucianism should be recast with the “individual” at its core, and the related issue of how strictly we Confucians should distinguish between public and private realms. In the conversation and even more in her book, 《自由儒学的先驱：张君劢自由观研究》 (The Harbinger of Liberal Confucianism: Research on Zhang Junmai’s Concept of Liberty) (Guo 2017), Guo emphasized the role of an individual’s legitimate self-care as the source of broader Confucian ideas of humanness and virtue. While agreeing with Guo that it was a mistake to lean too far in the direction of collectivist or purely role-based ontologies, I argued that we still cannot abandon the relationality which is so central to Confucian selfhood. Even here, I suspect our views overlapped much more than they diverged.

Part III: Reflections on the Dialogues

In order to get some perspective on all of these dialogues, let me take you back to the spring of 2017. Donald Trump had just begun his term as President of the United States; Xi Jinping was still in his first term as President of the People’s Republic of China. Xi’s regional ambitions were growing, with China launching its first home-built aircraft carrier; Trump’s “America First” agenda led him to ban travel from many Muslim countries, though his initial efforts to do this were rejected by the U.S. court system. Domestically, contrasts manifested in different ways. As anti-Trump protests proliferated in the U.S., in China internment camps were established in Xinjiang and increasing limits imposed on political expression more generally. As I prepared for the dialogues to commence, I knew that some theorists in China who were already suspicious of democracy saw the election of Trump as confirmation: meritocratic systems were superior to systems which
left leadership to the whim of the masses. I was not so sure, as even in the early months of Trump’s presidency we were seeing ways in which the constitutional framework of checks and balances was limiting his mischief.

In the China where I was living, surveillance (even in college classrooms) and self-policing of the written and even spoken word was at the highest level I had experienced in thirty years of visiting (and periodically living in) the country. Surveillance and censorship have only increased since 2017, one minor casualty of which was the planned Chinese-language version of the Beijing dialogues. As I reflect now on where my interlocutors and I found common ground, where we differed, and what I learned, I want to begin with the twin matters of censorship and my own role. 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. I cannot presume to speak for others—to claim that such-and-such is what they would have said, if only they could—because this tramples on their agency. But I can endeavour 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. My aim in these dialogues was to participate as one Confucian theorist in conversation with others, beholden to the same tradition of moral responsibility and textual learning. And I sought to take seriously the sociopolitical context of contemporary China. Ren Jiantao—whom I had never met before our encounter in the dialogue on “liberal Confucianism”—lumped me together with William Theodore de Bary. While in another context being compared to a great historian like de Bary would be tremendously flattering, Ren meant to suggest that we were both purely outsiders investigating Confucianism for purposes disconnected from the reality of China, which I believe is a mistake. In the same dialogue, Chen Ming suggested that I be seen not as an “Edgar Snow” reporting on Confucianism for an outside audience, but as a “Henry Bethune”. This is undoubtedly an exaggeration—Bethune was a heroic doctor who was praised by Mao Zedong for his service to the Communist cause in 1938 and 1939—but it gets at something of my desire to engage with Chinese colleagues in a deeper way than mere academic exchange. Even despite whatever familiarity I have with modern Chinese history, I must of course acknowledge that my position gives me options, concerns, and perspectives that are quite different from those of my Chinese colleagues. I to have tried to use my liminal, insider/outsider standpoint and platform in ways that are both sensitive to its limitations but also constructive.

Over the course of the dialogues we identified quite a bit of largely common ground, though the diversity of the Chinese participants ensured that there would
always be an outlier or two. First, there was pretty general agreement that Confucianism today cannot be viewed just as philosophy in a narrow sense, but neither can we Confucians set aside philosophy. Ever since the advent of Western-style research universities in China, philosophy has been the primary institutional home of Confucian studies, though more recently other categories like “religion”, “classicism”, and “political theory” have also been important—as we discuss in the dialogues. These institutional innovations build on the academic arguments that have been made for decades concerning the relation of pre-modern Confucianism to categories like “politics”, “ethics”, “philosophy”, and “religion” (for example, see Huang 1983; Yu 2004). It is simply obvious that the pre-modern practice of Confucianism was much broader than the contemporary practice of philosophy, especially if we confine ourselves to the practices of current university professors and their students. There has recently been some important broadening in university philosophical practice, much of it under the banner of “philosophy as a way of life”, but even so Confucianism will continue to overflow the banks of philosophy. Most participants agreed, nonetheless, that holding onto the core philosophical practice of critical, creative reason-giving is essential. I took this to be the key up-shot of the dialogue on classicism: both Chen Bisheng and Chen Ming, in their own ways, agreed that “classicism” as a methodology did not mean abandoning the need to give reasons and make arguments. In the dialogue on religion I introduced the idea of “rooted global philosophy,” and by the end I think it is fair to say that all participants in the conversation had endorsed the need for both rootedness in the Confucian tradition and the “global” aspiration to listen to the reasons of others and offer up one’s own reasons for consideration.

A second area of common ground was the need to rethink the modernist and Eurocentric narratives that have structured thinking about China’s present and future. The details here were much debated, and at various points over the dialogues I was taken to be stuck in a kind of mid-century modernism with Mou Zongsan; I will come back to our differences in a moment. But to one degree or another, we all agreed that contemporary Confucians should advocate a re-framing of our concerns that is less structured around distinctive Euro-American categories and questions. Third, almost everyone in these dialogues felt that significant room needs to be made for some type of “religious” understanding and/or practice of Confucianism, with Huang Yushun—who is very suspicious of what passes for “Confucian religion” these days—being a notable exception. Most of us were not sympathetic to Jiang Qing’s model of “state religion” in which Confucianism is re-imagined along the lines of a monotheistic, church-and-clergy-based religion, with Zeng Yi’s striking remarks about and equivalence between Confucianism and Shi’a Islam as an extreme exception. Instead,
there was interest on all sides both in some sort of public, ritual role for Confucianism along the lines of a “civil religion”, as well as in some of the more profound sides of human religiosity—although again there was disagreement here on the details, as well as on how civil religion and individual relationships to ultimate meaning might be combined.

A final area on which there was much discussion and quite a lot of agreement was the need for contemporary Confucianism to pay attention to both “inner sagesness” and “outer kingship”—and, according to many of us, to the interrelationship between inner and outer. Some participants focused primarily on the outer side (often calling this “political philosophy”); Ren Jiantao argued that we simply cannot evaluate another person’s character. But elsewhere in that dialogue Liang Tao argued at length for the importance and interconnection of inner and outer, basing himself in part on his readings of Mengzi and Xunzi; and Zhao Xun offered some very provocative thoughts about the need for Confucianism to be sufficiently “thick” without becoming doctrinaire or exclusivist. For my part, I replied to Ren that even though it is indeed hard for bystanders to judge to what degree one’s virtue has progressed, we can objectively analyse the conditions that better enable people to develop their virtue. Growing more moral is ultimately one’s own responsibility, but Confucians should seek socio-political arrangements that make such growth more common.

So much for common ground. What were the key points of dispute? They can be grouped into three areas: (1) details about how common the common ground really is; (2) the strength and explicitness of constitutional checks on the power of the state, and other matters relating to the role and expanse of the state; and (3) social issues, especially related to feminism and the role of women. One thing that was not in dispute was the legitimacy of my participation in the dialogues in the first place. There was almost no patronizing, explaining-to-the-foreigner what Confucianism really was. I was sometimes lumped together with old-fashioned, modernist Confucians and occasionally called a “White lefty” but never written off as just a Western liberal. This almost certainly was the result of the extended, iterative nature of the dialogues with several of the same people participating repeatedly. In fact, I’d had a number of dinners with the some of the same cast of characters in the fall of 2016, out of which emerged the idea for the dialogues in the first place.

Even where I have said there was common ground, there was often disagreement on the details. For example, what did it mean to re-narrate Chinese and Confucian modern history? For me, one key was balancing the usefulness of certain widely used, Euro-American-derived concepts with an effort to avoid importing
unnecessary assumptions whose roots lay in contingent European experiences. Let’s keep “philosophy” and “religion”, say, but avoid understanding the latter primarily through the lens of “faith” or even “belief”, because these ideas are not particularly central to Confucian religiosity. To one degree or another the Chinese participants were sympathetic to this stance, but for them the re-narration had a different centre of gravity. They might say: whereas the May-Fourth-obsessed, mid-century Confucians like Mou Zongsan had taken primary inspiration from Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, let’s look instead to the way that Kang Youwei provides a fulcrum that can both skip over the Song back to the “institutionalist” focus of Han-Tang Confucianism, and skip forward (over May Fourth) to the present day. (For their part, both Huang Yushun and Guo Ping were quite a bit more comfortable with the May Fourth narrative.) Beijing participants’ reasons for desiring a re-narration had a lot to do with the imperative of state-and-nation building, which I will discuss next, but we also debated to what degree the caricature of Neo-Confucianism as inward-focused could be maintained. Many participants argued that it was critical to draw on the political/institutional insights of Gongyang Confucianism and of Dong Zhongshu, in particular, though it is worth noting that my main interlocutor in the last Beijing dialogue, Ren Feng, has built his reputation on studying the institutional or even “constitutional” aspects of Song dynasty Confucianism. But in any event, the real crux of a narrative emphasizing institutions lies in what sorts of institutions those are.

At various times throughout the dialogues the subject of a minimal, bottom-line morality came up. We all agreed that this was not the full extent of Confucian thinking on morality or ethics, and furthermore that having some sort of bottom line was a good thing, but for some of us figuring out how to ensure that bottom-line morality was adhered to was more important than for others. In particular, was this a key function of political “institutions”, or did the main function of such institutions lie elsewhere (for example, in encouraging or even ensuring conformity with state policies or national identity)? Xie Maosong of the Central Party School was startling clear in his view: the contemporary Chinese Communist Party is the second coming of Confucius; being a good Confucian means following the Party’s directives. I consistently argued, in a way that I readily acknowledge builds on Mou Zongsan, for the need for legal, constitutional checks on government and respect for human rights. Most of the other participants lay somewhere in between: not comfortable, perhaps, with Xie’s wholesale endorsement of the Party but also worried about the effects of true democratic contestation and selfish, rights-based litigiousness on China’s huge and fractious society, among other things. There were hints of concern with the effects of unchecked state power here and there. It was unclear how confident
participants really were that China’s “next thirty years” will not return to the “first thirty years” of the Mao era. Chen Bisheng’s pointing out, in response to Zhang Guangsheng’s narrative of leftist Confucianism, that Xiong Shili’s post-1949 works were done under the influence of political power might be a gesture at some of the dynamics in play today. Let us not forget that a few weeks after I departed China that spring, the cultural critic, political activist, and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo died in prison.

Sex and gender did not serve as a topic for a specific dialogue, but these issues came up periodically—or I should say, I brought them up periodically. I think they are not on the radar of most contemporary Confucians. Most of the participants would not go as far as Jiang Qing, who published an infamous interview titled “只有儒家能安顿现代女性” (Only Confucians Can Make a Place for Modern Women) that argued for a return to traditional gender roles on the basis that they are “natural” (Jiang 2015; see also Jiang 2019). But I am not sure that they viewed Jiang’s piece as shocking in quite the way I did. Only two women participated in the dialogues: the Singaporean scholar Tan Sor-hoon, whom I invited to join us when she happened to be in Beijing, and Guo Ping in Jinan. Ren Jiantao—among the most explicitly “liberal” of the participants—tried to set feminist concerns aside as rooted in and relevant exclusively to Western experiences, arguing that Du Weiming’s pioneering engagement with feminism “must strike real Confucians as something alien and strange”. I take exception to this sentiment, which strikes me as blind to the realities of contemporary China—and, in particular, to the experiences of contemporary Chinese women. Instead, we contemporary Confucians need to pay careful attention to our societies and grapple with the resulting challenges by deploying in new ways resources that are internal to Confucianism, insofar as this is possible.

So far I have focused on areas of agreement and disagreement, but the point of a dialogue is not just to clarify existing stances but to learn from one another. So what did I learn over the course of these dialogues? Most basically: it is crucial for anyone interested in the future of Confucianism to take the diverse and evolving voices of “Mainland New Confucians” seriously. I did not do this sufficiently in my earlier book *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (published in 2012) but have been working on it since. As I have put it elsewhere (Angle 2018), Mainland New Confucianism has now moved beyond its earliest stage, dominated by Jiang Qing, to enter a more disparate “adolescence”; in characterizing this period as adolescence, I am adverting to the fact that none of the thinkers who participated in the dialogues would assert that they have everything figured out. Jiang Qing was exciting because he was creative, provocative, and offered some good arguments (but also some bad ones) to back up his claims. Today’s Mainland New
Confucians are his heirs in these ways, but most of them are less interested in the inflammatory and unrealistic extremes that he sometimes reached. The most interesting and innovative reflection on Confucianism that is taking place in the Sinitic world today comes from Mainland New Confucians.

It's also important to recognize the validity of their concerns with “state- and- nation building”, and to value open-minded thinking about what shape a future China might take. As I have noted, it is impossible to have entirely open conversations in today's China about political matters, including about the literal shape of the country (whether it does or should include Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and so on), but that does not mean that outsiders should dismiss the desire for a unified, flourishing Chinese state as mere “nationalism”. I also admire the creative thinking about methodology, disciplinary frameworks, and justification that one finds in some of the talk about classicism, for example. In a recent PhD dissertation, Wei Shi does an exemplary job of appreciating but also engaging critically with the somewhat similar methodology (“using the history of philosophy to do philosophy”) employed by another contemporary Confucian, Chen Lai (Shi 2022, 74; and see Chen 2014). It is very important that “classicism” not become an excuse for a rigid, unquestioning attitude toward the classics—which after all would have been rejected by the great Confucian classicists of the past—but neither need Confucian reasoning perfectly mimic the ahistorical style of analytic philosophy.

Another thing I learned was how challenging it is to pinpoint the right level of generality at which to pitch “Progressive Confucianism”. Is it just the idea that Confucianism is a developing (“progressing”) tradition, which rules out some approaches but not many? Or is it much more specific, requiring commitment to activism against oppression and to explicit constitutional constraints on power? I found Zhao Xun’s reflections on the importance of being thick, but not too thick, to be extremely relevant here. To borrow his key term, what would a public culture capable of endorsing Progressive Confucianism look like? Here I would call attention to a recent book by Kwon Kyung Rok in which Kwon offers the most realistic understanding of pluralism in contemporary East Asia of any theorist writing on Confucianism today. Kwon explains how the right kind of Confucian leader will help non- or even anti-Confucian citizens “acknowledge a Confucian leader as the partner of political cooperation” (Kwon 2022, 113). I believe we might be able to draw together these ideas and others from the dialogues, including much that is said about Confucianism's role in a civil religion, to sketch an approach to Confucianism that is more robust than Ren Jiantao's anything-goes approach but not exclusivist in the sense that Zhao warns us against.
Conclusion

No one person gets to decide what Confucianism means today. Neither detailed arguments nor bold assertions stand on their own; what is critical is that a community comes to be persuaded by and endeavours to implement a given perspective on the tradition. In a plural and changing society like China’s, it is inevitable that different groups will find different visions of Confucianism to resonate with their life experiences, with still other groups questioning or even rejecting the tradition. After all, over its long history Confucianism has not just been dynamic—as I have been emphasizing—but also diverse and contested. My own journey has led me to embrace Progressive Confucianism as an inspiring path forward, but its future depends on continued engagement among scholars and citizens both in China and around the world.

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